

MICHAEL COPPEDGE

Venezuela: Democratic despite Presidentialism

VENEZUELAN HISTORY appears to contradict this volume's thesis that presidential democracies are prone to breakdown. Despite its presidential system, Venezuela has held seven consecutive fair and competitive elections from the inauguration of the regime in 1958 until the present. Four of these elections resulted in the transfer of executive power between the two largest parties, the center-left *Acción Democrática* and the center-right *Copei* (Christian Socialist party). These are characteristics of a well-institutionalized democratic regime, one that has lasted at least a generation and can be expected to survive until it faces some new and unsolvable crisis.

Venezuela's historical stability does not, however, invalidate the arguments against presidentialism. In fact, the Venezuelan presidential system manifests the same tendencies toward executive-legislative conflict and circumvention of the congress that have been observed in other Latin American countries. The fact that these problems have not brought about the breakdown of the regime during a thirty-four-year period must be credited to the country's unique advantages—uncommon leadership, unusually strong political parties, and extraordinary oil wealth.

Venezuelan Exceptionalism

The democratic regime that was launched in 1958 has survived the guerrilla insurgency of the sixties, the wave of authoritarian rule that swept the continent in the sixties and seventies, and, as of this writing (January 1993), the debt crisis of the eighties. This resilience qualifies Venezuela as the most successful democracy in contemporary Latin America, with the possible exception of Costa Rica. Its survival is quite remarkable in contrast to the experiences of other developing countries. What accounts for this stability?

Oil

The plausible connection between oil wealth and democracy has been noted many times by scholars, pundits, and armchair theorists. Simply put, oil is a lubricant that eases the social frictions that arise in a democracy. It lessens the need for hard choices. Under conditions of scarcity, politics tends to be a zero-sum game: one group gains only at the expense of another. But the larger the earnings from oil exports, the fewer losers there are. There is enough to go around.

This simple argument was best summarized for Venezuela by Terry Karl:

In the short run, petrodollars financed an emergency plan that calmed the atmosphere during the transition to democracy. In the long run, petroleum provided the fiscal revenues upon which democratic administrations depended to maintain the ambiguous, and expensive, situation of fomenting the growth of a private sector while simultaneously granting favors to the middle and working classes. Concretely, each government granted extensive subsidies, contracts, and infrastructure to entrepreneurs while charging the lowest taxes on the continent and allowing some of the highest profits. At the same time, democratic governments could afford to support collective bargaining for the highest wages on the continent, price controls, huge food subsidies, and an agrarian reform.¹

It is impossible to deny and easy to confirm that Venezuela has had an unusually large pie to share. As shown in table 12.1, Venezuela has ranked far ahead of any other Latin American country in terms of per capita gross domestic product since at least 1960. This sustained high level of economic prosperity cannot be ignored in any explanation of the stability of Venezuela's democratic regime. However, table 12.1 itself provides evidence that stable democracy does not depend on economic prosperity alone, for the second most prosperous country (by this measure) is Argentina, which is notorious for its failure to build a lasting democracy.

Furthermore, there are numerous ways to demonstrate that oil and democracy do *not* mix: (1) While Venezuela is wealthy, the unequal distribution of its wealth should intensify, rather than lessen, social conflict. (2) Venezuela's transition to democracy succeeded even though it took place during an economic slump, and the regime has survived more than a decade of economic stagnation or decline since 1979. (3) No other major oil exporter (including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Indonesia, Nigeria, Mexico, Ecuador, among others) is known for its success with democracy. (4) The volatility of international oil prices has created extreme boom-and-bust cycles that may be more threatening to democratic government than moderate but steady growth, as in Colombia.

These arguments are rather crude, but so is the "obvious" argument that oil helps democracy. At this crude level of analysis, the only sustainable conclusion is that oil wealth helps a great deal in some ways but hurts in others; overall, it is not absolutely necessary for stable democracy, and it is certainly not sufficient.²

Table 12.1. Per Capita GDP for Latin American Countries (1988 dollars)

	1960	1970	1980	1988
Venezuela	3879	4941	5225	4544
Argentina	2384	3075	3359	2862
Uruguay	2352	2478	3221	2989
Mexico	1425	2022	2872	2588
Chile	1845	2236	2448	2518
Panama	1264	2017	2622	2229
Costa Rica	1435	1825	2394	2235
Brazil	1013	1372	2481	2449
Peru	1233	1554	1716	1503
Colombia	927	1157	1595	1739
Nicaragua	1055	1495	1147	819
Paraguay	779	931	1612	1557
Dominican Republic	823	987	1497	1509
El Salvador	832	1032	1125	955
Ecuador	771	904	1581	1477
Bolivia	634	818	983	724
Honduras	619	782	954	851
Haiti	331	292	386	319

Source: Inter-American Development Bank, *Economic and Social Progress in Latin America: 1989 Report* (Washington, D.C., 1986), p. 463. Countries are listed in order of their average rank for these four key years.

Political Learning by Wise Leaders

Democracy succeeded after 1958 largely because party leaders learned from the mistakes they had committed during Venezuela's first attempt at democracy, the 1945–48 Trienio.³ All observers agree that Acción Democrática (AD) governed arrogantly during the Trienio, decreeing far-reaching reforms without consultation of the opposition and abusing its control of the government for partisan purposes.⁴ The AD-led junta zealously (some say overzealously) prosecuted corrupt figures associated with the Medina government and thereby angered some conservatives. Despite some power sharing at the very top levels of government, such as the early appointment of Copei leader Rafael Caldera as attorney general, most hiring and firing in the bureaucracy was based on strictly partisan criteria, to AD's exclusive benefit, and the Labor Ministry used its resources to help AD solidify its control of the union movement.⁵

Most importantly, the junta and the Gallegos government embarked on a rapid expansion of public education and proposed various measures designed to assert

state control over private schools, including their curricula, examination system, and teacher training. These measures antagonized the Catholic schools and the church in general, which then mobilized fierce opposition to the Trienio government. When Gallegos was overthrown in 1948, church officials publicly praised God for “divine” intervention, and the leaders of the two largest opposition parties offered their support to the new military government.⁶

AD’s majoritarian governing style was clearly an obstacle to the consolidation of this first Venezuelan democratic regime. There is nothing undemocratic about majority rule in a consolidated democracy; indeed, democracy is often *defined* as majority rule. But AD erred in basing the legitimacy of its actions on democratic procedures when the legitimacy of the democratic procedures themselves was in dispute.⁷ Democracy could not be consolidated until all important players agreed on the rules of the game, and these players would not consent to any rules that did not guarantee respect for their core interests.⁸

In effect, Venezuela suffered from a symptom of presidentialism—abusive majoritarian rule—before having a severe bout with the disease itself.⁹ This experience turned out to be very useful ten years later, because the failure of the Trienio taught the leaders of AD and Copei to avoid majoritarian rule until a consensus on the rules of the game had been achieved. The experience of the Trienio helped immunize Venezuela from the harmful consequences of presidentialism.

When junior officers within the military finally overthrew the Pérez Jiménez dictatorship in 1958, AD leader Rómulo Betancourt and Copei leader Rafael Caldera led their parties toward the center of the political spectrum—AD to the right, and Copei to the left. Before 1958, the Venezuelan party system was polarized; by 1963, little ideological distance was left between the two main parties. To accomplish this rapprochement, Betancourt and Caldera negotiated a pact to ensure that the polarization of the Trienio would not occur again. They also provided assurances to the church, the military, and business leaders that their core interests would be respected.¹⁰

This pact, the Pact of Punto Fijo, contained three key provisions. First, the three presidential candidates in the 1958 election agreed that they would respect the results of the election and that the winner would form a government of National Unity, regardless of the election results. Congressional leadership posts and all appointive positions, including cabinet ministries and governorships, would be divided among the three signatory parties (AD, Copei, and the Democratic Republican Union, or URD). Second, all three candidates subscribed to a Common Minimum Program that would guide the policies of the first democratic government. And third, party leaders agreed to moderate their rhetoric and to restrain their militants from engaging in interparty violence so that political conflict would not get out of hand.

The terms of the pact were carried out quite well at first. Party leaders quickly condemned a couple of instances of violence at campaign rallies and prevented fur-

ther outbreaks. Campaign rhetoric in 1958 was amazingly moderate, rarely venturing beyond expressions of support for unity and the Common Minimum Program. Rómulo Betancourt won the presidential contest by a wide margin, and formed a National Unity government even though his own party had won an absolute majority in both chambers. The terms of the Common Minimum Program were also respected. For example, Copei supported a very significant land reform program, and AD kept the issue of state supervision of private education off the agenda for the duration of the Betancourt government.

In time, some of the terms of the pact failed or were relaxed. Violence among the three signatory parties virtually disappeared, but it was replaced by a guerrilla war waged by the communists, who had been excluded from the pact, and defectors from AD and URD. Rhetoric became heated once more in the campaigns for the 1963 elections, and even more heated in 1968. URD withdrew from the National Unity coalition in 1960, and Betancourt's Adeco (AD party) successor, Raúl Leoni, formed a coalition without Copei in 1964. By 1968, Copei had won an election and was attempting to govern alone. But by that year, the democratic regime had been consolidated. Coup attempts from within the armed forces had ceased; the guerrilla war was over, and its combatants amnestied; and Acción Democrática had lost an election (by the narrowest of margins) and handed over power to an opposition party.

The agreements signed by political leaders in 1958 did more than just carry the country through the difficult transition years; their spirit of moderation and consensus became a part of the political culture of Venezuela. Even today, there is an informal "institutional pact" under which legislative positions (presidents and vice presidents of the two chambers, plus committee chairs and vice chairs) and certain key executive appointments are allocated among the largest parties. Party leaders strive to reach consensus on issues of transcendental national importance, such as defense, foreign policy, and petroleum policy. Party leaders also agree that no conflict should be allowed to escalate to the point where it could endanger the democratic regime.¹¹ These norms of political behavior have helped Venezuelan democracy through the potentially regime-threatening crises that are described below.

The importance of leadership in creating this state of affairs should not be minimized. The failure of the Trienio may have "taught" politicians to moderate conflict and seek consensus while democracy was being consolidated, but not all politicians were such good students of history as Betancourt and Caldera. The thinking of Caldera, Copei, and the Venezuelan church evolved considerably toward the center during the 1950s. Betancourt could have emerged in 1958 still cursing the Right for its earlier betrayal of a democratically elected government. In fact, many of his own party members were inclined to do just that. Signing a pact with the very people who had cheered the junta that had thrown AD out of power in 1948 and exiled, hunted, tortured, and murdered its members for ten years was not the obvious course of action. It was a controversial and courageous act that cost Betancourt the support of most of his party's youth movement.

Strong Parties

Still, it would be naive to believe that Venezuela is democratic today because two wise men willed its democracy into existence thirty years ago. Nothing they did would have had much impact if they had not had the support of strong political parties. By strong, I mean two things: (1) they practiced tight discipline, and (2) they penetrated most politically relevant organizations in society.

Venezuela's first large, mass-based political party was Acción Democrática. The political environment in which it was born shaped its organizational structure and disciplinary norms, which, because of AD's early success, were subsequently copied by all other significant parties. The founders of AD had spent most of their formative years either in exile or in the underground opposition to the Gómez, López Contreras, and later Pérez Jiménez dictatorships. These governments persecuted the opposition relentlessly, arresting party members, torturing them for information about their fellow members, and then sending them into exile or to unspeakably horrible prison camps. Organizational survival under these conditions required secrecy and blind obedience. Party members were grouped into clandestine cells of committed revolutionaries who communicated with other cells by code and sometimes did not even know their leaders' identities but obeyed their instructions nevertheless.

This extreme discipline was permanently enshrined in AD's statutes, which explicitly adopted the Leninist principle of democratic centralism as the rule governing relations between leading and subordinate party organs. The usefulness of such discipline was demonstrated to the nation during the 1945 coup against Medina, when AD militants risked their lives to seize police stations and armories around the country on the instructions of party leaders despite the fact that just two days earlier the national convention had ratified the leaders' qualified support for upcoming elections. When Copei and the URD began organizing during the Trienio, they drafted statutes that were clearly patterned on AD's.

The electoral law drafted by these three parties in 1946 helped extend this discipline to the legislative arena. Venezuelan voters had only a choice of parties, not of candidates. Under their absolutely closed-list scheme of proportional representation, voters stamped a single party *tarjeta*, consisting of a party's name, colors, and symbol and no candidates' names, in legislative elections. This single vote was used to allocate seats among parties in the national senate and chamber of deputies, the state legislative assemblies, and until 1979, the city councils.¹² Few voters even knew the candidates' names for these positions, and elected representatives did not necessarily feel much responsibility to their "constituents," for they owed their primary loyalty to the national party leaders who assigned them to a list and decided how high on it they would rank.

This electoral system (combined with the certainty of expulsion of anyone who vote against the party line) created nearly perfect party discipline in the Venezuelan

congress. Discipline is so tight that congressional votes are almost never counted or recorded. Debate consists of one spokesman designated by his party standing to state (although often at great length) the party position on the legislation at hand. The actual vote is a foregone conclusion once the roll is called at the beginning of the day's session, because every legislator present votes a straight party line.

This exceptionally tight discipline became especially useful when it was combined with party penetration of other organizations. By cooptation, infiltration, or direct party sponsorship, virtually all organizations in civil society besides the church, the military, and business associations were subordinated to party control. Beginning in the early sixties, the officers of social organizations were chosen in elections conducted along party lines: each party put forward a slate of candidates for the vacant offices, and the organization's membership chose among them. This was the procedure that was followed in union elections, in peasant organizations, in the bar association, the medical association, societies of dentists, architects, accountants, economists, political scientists, public employees, teachers, professors, and other white-collar workers; and in student government, from the universities down to the junior high level (and sometimes below). Some say that even beauty contests were decided along party lines!

Party penetration of organizations played an important role in the establishment and consolidation of democracy in Venezuela. Control of organizations gave party leaders the ability to mobilize thousands of supporters on short notice to overthrow dictators in 1945 and 1958. It also gave them the ability to *restrain* supporters when democracy required restraint. The willingness of highly partisan labor leaders to hold back wage demands for political reasons during the Betancourt government, even to the point of accepting a 10 percent wage cut in 1961, was crucial in persuading business elites to support democracy.¹³ Venezuela's comparatively low strike rate has continued to reassure the private sector since then.

Furthermore, the parties' ability to mobilize and restrain gave them authority to bargain effectively with military and business leaders during the pact making of the transition. They had the organization and numbers and discipline to make attractive promises and issue credible threats. And after the transition, control of organizations and, to some extent, the media gave party leaders a great deal of control over the political agenda—the power to decide what the issues were, how they were defined, and what got ignored.

It is important to remember that the three major factors that explain the stability of Venezuelan democracy are all rather unusual. In Latin America, no other country has enjoyed such wealth for such a long period of time. Few leaders have been as willing to put aside partisan and ideological differences for the sake of democracy as Betancourt and Caldera were, even after long periods of exile and repression. And while some other Latin American countries have similarly pragmatic parties, parties that are almost as well disciplined, equally unified, or highly penetrative, no other country has parties that possess all of these qualities in a competitive system.

Presidentialism during the Transition

Venezuela has had extraordinary advantages, but presidentialism is not one of them. In fact, if Venezuela had not had all of the advantages described above, presidentialism might have done away with democracy there. A good example of how presidentialism has interfered with democracy without undermining it completely comes from the transition period. Prior to the Pact of Punto Fijo, party leaders had agreed on four tactics to symbolize and manifest their unified commitment to democracy. Three of these have already been mentioned—the National Unity government, the moderation of political conflict, and the Common Minimum Program. A fourth tactic has received much less attention, however, because it was unsuccessful. This was the agreement to support a “unity candidate” for president.

Power sharing was an indispensable element in the pact making of the 1958 transition. Without an agreement to share power, the first government of the new democratic regime was likely to be overwhelmingly Adeco. The opposition needed guarantees that the new democracy would not be a repeat of the Trienio. Even Rómulo Betancourt agreed on that point. It was he, in fact, who suggested a National Unity government in discussions with Rafael Caldera and the URD's Jóvito Villalba in New York in January of 1958. Naturally, the leader of Copei was eager to cooperate. He knew his party had little chance of winning, so any cabinet posts it won in the bargain would be net gains. Furthermore, Caldera had become a true democrat during the Pérez Jiménez years and was anxious to shed Copei's image as the party of antidemocratic reaction. Participating in a government with AD would further this goal very nicely. Villalba believed he was in a stronger electoral position than Caldera, having been the legitimate winner of a 1952 election stolen by Pérez Jiménez, but he could not be sure of his chances because AD had been barred from the 1952 contest. Power sharing would guarantee his party some executive power and ensure that an AD-dominated government like the one Villalba had vigorously opposed during the Trienio would not return to power.

All three major party leaders therefore agreed on the need for power sharing. It was not clear, however, how to accomplish that goal in a presidential system, which necessarily concentrates a great deal of power in one person. Betancourt, Caldera, and Villalba agreed in January on the obvious formula: their three parties would nominate the same person, a “unity candidate,” who would be chosen in roundtable negotiations among the three parties before the December 1958 election.

The search for the unity candidate dominated the attention of the parties and the media for most of the brief campaign and eventually failed. It created more disunity than unity, for two reasons. In the first place, the roundtable negotiations to choose the candidate created a situation in which the parties had to disagree publicly. First URD and then Copei suggested Dr. Martín Vegas as a possible unity can-

didate. AD rejected Vegas because of his lack of political experience and doubtful ability to deal with the military. Instead, AD suggested Admiral Wolfgang Larrazábal, the leader of the coup against Pérez Jiménez and the president of the provisional government, with the proviso that the three parties compose a consultative council to advise him on important matters. The URD then switched from Vegas to Larrazábal, but still disagreed with AD over the necessity of a consultative council.¹⁴ Then URD accepted the idea of the council, but Copei rejected it, being opposed to a military president under any circumstances.¹⁵ At one point, Betancourt desperately pushed for a three-man collegial executive, only to be rebuffed by the other parties.

The positions of the smaller parties complicated the picture even more. The Venezuelan Communist party, or PCV, supported the idea of a unity candidate, but was excluded from negotiations to select him, while the Venezuelan Socialist party rejected the whole idea of a unity candidate.¹⁶ And the discussions were even more complex than I have been able to describe here. The important point is that for two full months of a six-month campaign, reports of these partisan disagreements and maneuvers were making front-page news every day, contradicting in practice the unity that was being claimed in principle.

In the second place, since so much time and energy had been invested in the search for a single candidate, responsibility for the failure of the search became a heated political issue. In September the URD, growing nervous as the elections approached with no candidate nominated, threw a wrench in the negotiations by independently nominating Admiral Larrazábal and inviting the other parties to endorse him as the unity candidate. Only the Communist party did. In the meantime, Copei nominated Caldera and AD nominated Betancourt, both on the condition that they would defer to a single candidate if one were found. So during October, the parties disputed whether their independent nominations violated the principle of unity, and if so, who violated it first.¹⁷

The Pact of Punto Fijo at the end of October was supposed to put an end to these disputes, but it didn't. The URD continued billing itself as the oxymoronic "Party of Unity," and the PCV stuck with the story that Larrazábal was the unity candidate.¹⁸ The frictions generated by the task of looking for a unity candidate were wearing down the united front these parties all wanted to present for the first election.

The Pact of Punto Fijo takes on new meaning in the context of these negotiations. It was not the ideal expression of the spirit of unity, but a second-best compromise reached when the indivisibility of presidential power raised obstacles to the realization of that spirit. It was the failure to find the perfect candidate that made the pact necessary: when negotiations on the matter collapsed, there was general apprehension that unity was unattainable. The immediate purpose of the pact was to relieve that apprehension by legitimating the nomination of different candidates by each of the parties, provided that the other three aspects of unity were observed.

Presidents and the Congress

One of the most discussed problems with presidential systems is their tendency to foster conflict between the executive and the congress, resulting in stalemate and immobilism or attempts to circumvent the congress, which can lead to regime-threatening constitutional crises. Several scholars have suggested that the severity of these problems is a function of the type of party system a country possesses. For example, Scott Mainwaring and Catherine Conaghan argue that these problems are at their worst when the party system is fragmented and parties are undisciplined and fractionalized, as they are in Brazil and Ecuador.¹⁹

The chaos caused by parties at the disorganized extreme typified by Brazil and Ecuador is undeniable, but it would be a mistake to conclude that the solution lies at the opposite extreme, a dominant party system with highly disciplined parties. Mexico is not the ideal. A congress that blocks everything the president wants to do is undesirable, but so is a rubber stamp. If we are interested in democracy, we want some give and take between government and opposition in the congress. That give and take comes either from the lack of a governing-party majority, which forces the president to bargain with a coalition partner, or from imperfect party discipline, which forces the president to bargain with individual legislators. Parties in the congress can be so fragmented and so undisciplined that the government does not work; but if they are too monolithic and too disciplined, the system is undemocratic. The ideal is not at either extreme of fragmentation or discipline but at some happy medium.²⁰

Venezuela's two large parties are near this happy medium with respect to fragmentation, but given their perfect discipline, the system has the potential to alternate between the worst aspects of both extremes. When the president's party lacks a majority in the congress, even by one vote, a handful of opposition party leaders can unite to block all of the executive's legislative program, and they can do it just as effectively as if the president had no supporters in the congress at all. Since presidents have no veto power, an opposition majority can even legislate over the president's head. And when the president's party does have a majority, even by one vote, the executive can act as though the opposition did not exist, because the support of his own party is virtually guaranteed.

Whether the Venezuelan congress actually realizes its potential to be either a rubber stamp or a stumbling block depends entirely on the will of the leaders of each party. Fortunately for democracy, the party leaders began the regime praising consensus and committed to mutual consultation on all important substantive issues. Even today, all major-party leaders agree that no conflict should be allowed to escalate to the point that it endangers the democratic regime. Nevertheless, this commitment to consensus and consultation has not prevented the parties from venturing close to the brink from time to time, in both majority and minority governments.

Majority Governments

The current democratic regime began with a four-party system, which became increasingly fragmented over the next two elections and then suddenly was transformed into a two-and-a-quarter party system in 1973. It has changed relatively little since then (table 12.2). Three presidents from AD—Rómulo Betancourt (1959–64), Carlos Andrés Pérez (1974–79), and Jaime Lusinchi (1984–89)—enjoyed AD majorities in both houses of the congress, although Betancourt lost his due to two divisions of AD during his term of office. Copei's loyalty to the National Unity coalition kept Betancourt at the head of a majority government for a few months longer, and President Leoni of AD also headed a coalition majority government for most of his term. The rest of the time, Venezuela has had minority governments.

The potential for abuse was present in each of the majority governments. For example, all three presidents who enjoyed AD majorities asked for, and received, special powers under section 8 of article 190 of the constitution to "dictate extraordinary measures in economic and financial matters when the public interest requires." However, not all of these governments seriously abused these powers.

The political climate of unity and consensus between AD and Copei prevented Betancourt's AD majority from becoming abusive. Betancourt was accused of dictatorial abuses by the opposition (the PCV—Venezuelan Communist party—and later the URD and the Movement of the Revolutionary Left, or MIR), and with some justification. During his first two years in office, he enjoyed considerable decree powers since the country remained under Pérez Jiménez's authoritarian 1953 constitution until the new democratic constitution went in effect in January of 1961. Five months after that, he obtained congressional authorization to rule by decree for a fixed period of time. And under both constitutions, Betancourt suspended certain constitutional guarantees for a little more than half of his five-year term. Permission for some open-air public meetings was denied, leftist newspapers were suppressed, homes and offices of suspected guerrillas were raided without warrants, and there were lengthy detentions without trial.²¹

While the governing parties (AD and Copei) ratified the suspension of guarantees in the congress over the strenuous protests of the other parties represented there, it would be unreasonable to interpret the government's actions as abusive majoritarianism, given the severe challenges to the state at the time: two major riots, several coup attempts, armed guerrilla insurgency, a nearly successful presidential assassination attempt, and urban terrorist bombings. It makes more sense to fault the URD for its demagogic (and politically counterproductive) opposition to the measures.

By the time AD won its next congressional majorities, however, there were no longer such good excuses for energetic exercise of presidential power. The presidency of Carlos Andrés Pérez (1974–79) provides an excellent illustration of the potential for a "tyranny of the majority" in a presidential system with a tightly disci-

Table 12.2. Percentages (and Numbers) of Seats in the Congress Won by Parties

President	AD	Copei	URD	MAS	Others
Chamber of Deputies					
Betancourt (AD), 1959–64	57 (73)	15 (19)	26 (33)	—	3 (4)
Leoni (AD), 1964–69	37 (65)	23 (40)	16 (29)	—	24 (43)
Caldera (Copei), 1969–74	31 (66)	28 (59)	8 (18)	—	33 (71)
Pérez (AD), 1974–79	51 (102)	32 (64)	3 (5)	5 (9)	10 (20)
Herrera (Copei), 1979–84	44 (88)	42 (84)	2 (3)	6 (11)	7 (13)
Lusinchi (AD), 1984–89	57 (113)	30 (60)	2 (3)	5 (10)	7 (14)
Pérez (AD), 1989–	48 (98)	33 (67)	1 (2)	9 (19) ^a	9 (18)
Senate ^b					
Betancourt (AD), 1959–64	63 (32)	12 (6)	21 (11)	—	4 (2)
Leoni (AD), 1964–69	49 (22)	18 (8)	16 (7)	—	18 (8)
Caldera (Copei), 1969–74	37 (19)	31 (16)	6 (3)	—	27 (14)
Pérez (AD), 1974–79	60 (28)	28 (13)	2 (1)	4 (2)	6 (3)
Herrera (Copei), 1979–84	48 (21)	48 (21)	0 (0)	5 (2)	0 (0)
Lusinchi (AD), 1984–89	64 (28)	32 (14)	0 (0)	5 (2)	0 (0)
Pérez (AD), 1989–	48 (22)	43 (20)	0 (0)	7 (3) ^a	2 (1)

Sources: Betancourt-Herrera governments—Consejo Supremo Electoral, *La estadística evolutiva de los partidos políticos en Venezuela, 1958–1979*; Lusinchi government—Consejo Supremo Electoral, *Elecciones 1983*; second Pérez government—*El nacional*, 7 Dec. 1988, D-1.

Figures reflect the initial distribution of seats among parties after the elections. Distributions in the Betancourt and Leoni governments changed greatly due to AD splits.

- a. MAS-MIR (Socialists and revolutionary leftists) electoral coalition.
 b. Excluding former presidents, who are senators for life.

plined majority party in power. Pérez assumed office at the beginning of the oil bonanza and had extremely ambitious plans for rapid development of the country. To put his plans into effect, he matched the flood of oil revenues with an avalanche of laws and decrees. In his first one hundred days in office, he issued an average of two new decrees, resolutions, or draft laws per day, and immediately became impatient with the slowness of the legislative process. In the second month of his term, he requested extraordinary powers to issue decrees on a wide and vaguely worded set of issues.²²

As Terry Karl has noted, given the virtually automatic support of the AD majority, there would seem to be little need for decree powers, unless for some reason the president wished to free himself of accountability to his own party.²³ This was obviously one of Pérez's intentions, and his point of view is not hard to understand. He knew from fifteen years of relations between Venezuelan presidents and their

perfectly disciplined parties that AD would eventually endorse just about any bill he proposed with few substantial objections. Seen in this light, the pro forma routine of consulting party leaders probably seemed like a luxury that the country could dispense with in a time of rapid economic change.

What is not so obvious is why party leaders would surrender their right to provide input on new legislation. They did hesitate; approval of the president's request took a little over a month, and in this time AD succeeded in limiting the special powers to twelve months and in requiring the president to submit decrees to specially created multiparty commissions for discussion (although their approval was not required prior to issuance). AD's eventual consent can only be understood as a by-product of the honeymoon Pérez enjoyed in his first year. He had just led his party to a massive victory; he had high approval ratings; his party, still buoyed by gratitude, trusted its leader and was in no mood to deny him what he wanted. But the same would be true *any* time a Venezuelan president wins a single-party majority: he takes the party's support for granted, and the party is only too eager to defer to his leadership. This is, I think, why all three AD majorities granted their respective presidents special powers.

All three of these presidents had the opportunity to abuse their party's trust, but Pérez was the only one who actually did it. The multiparty commissions were largely ignored; even AD leaders sometimes learned of decrees only after they had been published in the *Gaceta Oficial*; and the sheer volume of decrees went beyond any standard of responsible government—830 decrees and 51 new commissions in one year's time. Copei spokesman Eduardo Fernández complained: "I took an average: sixteen decrees a week. The Council of Ministers meets once a week. Each time that the Council of Ministers meets, it OKs sixteen decrees and creates a commission. . . . I think that this creates a situation of very profound confusion in the country."²⁴

The third time AD won majority control of the congress, party leaders remembered how Pérez had abused his special powers. They put up firmer resistance when Lusinchi asked for similar powers in 1984 to deal with the debt crisis. This time, Copei and all of the other opposition parties except the minuscule URD voted against the enabling legislation, and the content of the decrees was strictly delineated in advance.²⁵ Lusinchi's use of his special powers was so circumspect that when they expired, the worst criticism Copei could muster was that they had been unnecessary to begin with, as proven by the fact that Lusinchi had done so little with them.²⁶ While Lusinchi did not abuse his AD majority, the fact that he received decree powers even when the need for them was questionable confirms the *potential* for an abusive rule by other presidents, and Pérez's example leaves no doubt.

Minority Governments

If presidents supported by a highly disciplined majority party have the potential to abuse their power, presidents at the head of minority governments have the op-

posite problem—too little power. Without a working majority in the legislature, a Venezuelan president faces tremendous obstacles to getting his legislative program approved. It is fruitless for him to try to win the cooperation of individual legislators because party discipline requires them to vote their party line. Of course, if the leaders of the opposition parties are in the mood to cooperate, an ad hoc working majority may be put together. But if they are not, there is a stalemate between the president and the congress.

Other scholarship on presidentialism has tended to focus on two possible outcomes to this situation of stalemate (see chapter 1). One is immobilism, a halt (more commonly, a slowdown) in the legislative process. The second is circumvention of the congress by the president, which has an unwelcome tendency to concentrate power in the executive branch while weakening the congress and may also provoke constitutional crises that can contribute to the breakdown of the democratic regime. In Venezuela, there is a third possible outcome: circumvention of the president by the congress, which also has the potential to provoke constitutional crises.

Circumvention of the president is possible because article 173 of the constitution deprives the president of any veto power. If the president disapproves of a bill that has been passed by a simple majority in the senate and the chamber of deputies, he may send it back to the congress for a second consideration. If the bill is passed again, even if it is only by a simple majority, it becomes law, regardless of the president's position (unless the Supreme Court decides that the law is unconstitutional). And any bill approved by a two-thirds majority becomes law without further reconsideration. The congress has the last word. The framers of the Venezuelan constitution probably intended for the repeated consideration to be a potent check on the congress's ability to legislate without presidential approval, but in practice, party discipline and the opposition parties' common interest in discrediting the government have made legislation by the opposition a reality on several occasions.

The final say of the Venezuelan congress does not prevent stalemate from developing into a constitutional crisis. One phase of stalemate ends when the congress passes legislation over the president's head, but another phase of stalemate begins when the congress waits for the president to execute the new law. And it is in this shifting of arenas that a stalemate becomes most dangerous. Stalemate engenders frustration in both branches at their inability to exercise their respective mandates; and that frustration tempts them to resort to extraconstitutional measures.

As of January 1993, minority governments had been in office in Venezuela nearly 52 percent of the time since the beginning of the democratic regime; if President Pérez completes his term without forming a coalition, minority governments will have been in office 57 percent of the time.²⁷ The country has not experienced a constitutional crisis severe enough to lead to a military coup, but it has had several opportunities and has weathered more than one crisis.

Legislation has definitely been hampered during these minority governments,

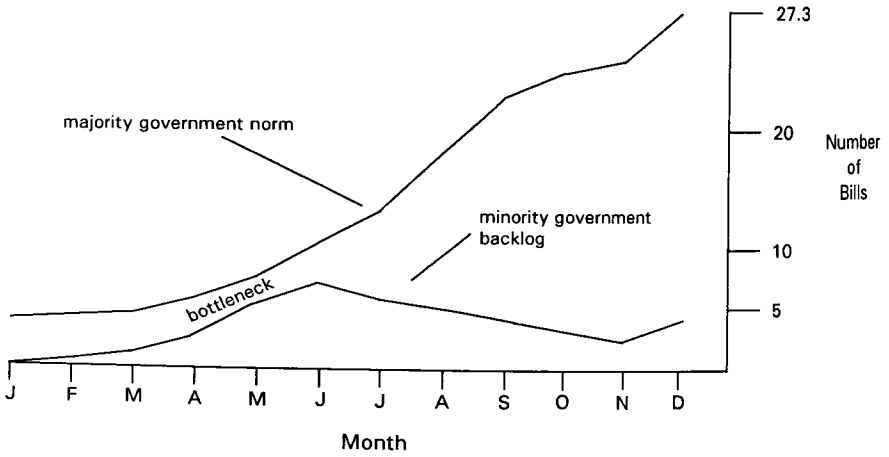


Fig. 12.1. Cumulative Number of Bills Passed in Majority and Minority Governments (Averages, 1959–1982). Data compiled from Congreso de la República, *25 años de legislación democrática* (Caracas: Ediciones del Congreso de la República, 1983.)

compared to the majority governments. In the aggregate, the difference in legislative performance is slight: minority governments approve an average of 23.9 laws per year, compared to 27.3 during majority governments.²⁸ But the more the data are broken down, the clearer the difference becomes. Figure 12.1 shows a significant delay in legislation approved in the course of each calendar year. The upper curve traces the cumulative number of laws approved during majority governments by month of the year averaged over the 1959–82 period; the lower curve traces the corresponding legislative backlog in minority governments, that is, the difference between the average number of laws approved by majority governments and the average number approved by minority governments, cumulated for each month. (The vertical distance between the two curves is therefore the average number of laws approved by minority governments.) Even a stalemated minority government manages to approve a certain fixed volume of legislation, probably composed mostly of the routine, unobjectionable legislation that occupies much of the attention of any legislature.²⁹ But it is a rather thin, and long, bottleneck: by June, the backlog of delayed legislation is more than half as large as the volume of legislation that would have been approved by the average majority government. The average minority government then legislates at an accelerated pace in the second half of the year, and reduces the backlog somewhat, but does not catch up completely by the year's end.

Furthermore, when the averages are set aside and the raw data are examined, legislative performance during minority governments shows several glaring failures. Majority governments tend to legislate relatively continuously; months in which no legislation is approved are few and scattered. But in minority governments, there are

long gaps. There were two three-month stretches without legislation at the end of both the Betancourt and Leoni governments, three four-month gaps in the Caldera government, and two five-month gaps in the Herrera government. Overlapping the Pérez and Herrera governments, there was an eight-and-a-half-month period, from October 6, 1978, to July 27, 1979, during which no new laws were approved.

Still, we are looking only at the volume of legislation. A comparison of the content of legislation passed under majority and minority governments yields some interesting differences. Organic laws, reforms of politicoadministrative legislation, and ratification of measures concerning the primary sector (oil, mining, and agriculture) have been two to three times more likely to pass during majority governments, while reforms of social or cultural legislation and ratifications of social or cultural measures have been two to three times more likely to pass during minority governments.³⁰ Since this analysis is based on a small volume of legislation, these conclusions should be regarded as tentative. Still, they confirm the expected tendency for majority governments to decide on the more fundamental or controversial issues and to leave the less controversial issues to minority governments.

Stalemate during the Betancourt Government

An even better way to learn about the effects of stalemate is to examine the record of executive-legislative relations under minority governments. Rómulo Betancourt, the founder of AD, headed a National Unity government from 1959 to 1964. AD alone controlled majorities in both houses of congress, but with the addition of coalition partners Copei and the URD, Betancourt began his presidency with a working majority of 125 out of 129 seats in the chamber of deputies, and 49 out of 51 seats in the senate. However, by January 1962, AD had split twice and the URD had left the coalition. After that point, AD and Copei together retained their majority in the senate but controlled only 57 of the 129 seats in the chamber of deputies, leaving the Betancourt government vulnerable to stalemate during its last year and a half.

For the first two years, the spirit of unity that helped the transition to democracy succeed also prevented stalemate and constitutional crisis from occurring. Little legislation was initiated that had not been anticipated by the Common Minimum Program signed by the coalition parties before the election. In addition, the attention of the congress was distracted by its work as a constituent assembly until the new constitution went into effect in January 1961. Because the charter was so new, it anticipated all of the constitutional issues the Betancourt government faced.

These were anything but years of peace and harmony, however. The Betancourt government was threatened by the dissolution of its coalition, two splits in AD and one in the URD, three coup attempts, the leftist insurgency and urban terrorism, and intransigent opposition in the congress on nonconstitutional issues. After a particularly reprehensible terrorist act in September 1963, these threats to the

regime united the parties loyal to the system to defend the constitutional order.³¹ But during the twenty-one months between the second AD split and this rebirth of unity, the minority Betancourt government could not obtain approval of some of its most important initiatives. The budget for the National Agrarian Institute, for example, was cut severely in 1962 and 1963 by the opposition majority in the chamber of deputies, and these cuts slowed the pace of the agrarian reform.³²

Stalemate during the Leoni Government

The next president from AD, Raúl Leoni (1964–69), also suffered a period of stalemate. Rather than continue the coalition with Copei, he began his government with a “broad base” coalition with the URD and the FND, while Copei adopted an “autonomous action” line of loyal opposition. The broad base did not last long, however: by the first quarter of 1968, both the Frente Nacional Democrático (FND) and the URD had withdrawn from the coalition, and AD had suffered a third split, its worst yet. The dissident AD faction formed a new party, the Movimiento Electoral del Pueblo (MEP), which led an obstructionist opposition majority in the chamber of deputies *and* the senate for the remaining fourteen months of Leoni’s administration.

One consequence of this stalemate was a loss of executive leadership on oil policy. According to Franklin Tugwell, the Betancourt and Leoni governments had pursued a very effective policy of “assertive experimentation” before the MEP split. After the split, assertive experimentation gave way to a style of “cautious incrementalism with an eye to short-term considerations,” which increased the bargaining power of the foreign oil companies vis-à-vis the state.³³

This stalemate also led to the regime’s first parliamentary crisis. In March 1968, the parties represented in the congress could not agree on one person to serve as president of the congress. Just before the vote was to be taken, outgoing acting president Luis Augusto Dubuc stepped out of the chamber to consult a colleague, and the next-in-charge officer, a man from Copei, took advantage of Dubuc’s absence to call for an early vote, in which Copei’s choice was elected.³⁴ AD at first refused to recognize the election result: for a while, Dubuc refused to turn over the presidency of the congress to his successor from Copei, and he and another senator petitioned the Supreme Court to annul the election. The crisis was defused only when President Leoni eventually recognized the new congressional officers.³⁵

Stalemate during the Caldera Government

Rafael Caldera won the 1968 election with a plurality of 27.1 percent in a field of six candidates. His party, Copei, controlled only 31 and 28 percent of the seats in the senate and chamber of deputies, respectively. In spite of the abysmal weakness of his base of support, Caldera chose not to form a coalition government.³⁶ Stalemate was therefore practically guaranteed.

During the first year of the Caldera government, the stalemate was intractable:

Led by AD, congressional opponents assailed the presidency at every opportunity: they removed the executive's right to appoint members of the judiciary (except on the Supreme Court) and placed it in the hands of a special panel dominated by opposition parties; they limited government borrowing to two-year periods; and they passed a law forcing all autonomous institutes and corporations with a majority of shares held by the government to appoint union representatives to their boards (AD's strength in the union movement surpassed that of Copei). AD tried briefly to persuade Congress to make Venezuela's state governors elective rather than appointed officials, and at one point seriously discussed the possibility of changing the constitution itself to a parliamentary system. Because of the standoff between the legislature and the executive, Venezuelan politics deteriorated into petty wrangling. Bitterness, fragmentation, and empty rhetoric became the rule, while the country drifted. Things got so bad that there were rumors of "restlessness" in the military. Even Fedecámaras [the peak business organization] attempted to reconcile the antagonists, inviting Copei and AD leaders to meet at its own headquarters (they declined).³⁷

Caldera's congress was born paralyzed: for its first several weeks in March 1969, it did nothing but witness fruitless negotiations among the parties over the election of congressional officers. An odd winning slate was finally approved only with the support of the Civic Crusade, the electoral vehicle of former dictator Pérez Jiménez. This disparate tactical alliance gave the opposition ammunition against Copei for years.³⁸

The conflict over judicial appointments a few months later was serious enough to provoke a constitutional crisis.³⁹ Before the Caldera government, all judges except Supreme Court justices were appointed jointly by the executive and the politico-administrative body of the Supreme Court. In the latter half of 1969, the opposition majority in the congress passed a law that gave to the new National Judiciary Council the power to appoint twenty-five hundred to twenty-eight hundred judges. The majority of this council's members would be appointed by none other than the congress. Caldera challenged the law's constitutionality, and at the same time his minister of justice submitted a roster of nominations to the court for appointment. Both maneuvers were frustrated: the court upheld the law, eight to seven, and the politico-administrative body, which was controlled by AD and URD sympathizers, refused to consider the justice minister's roster.

The controversy did not end here, however, because a new conflict arose *within* the opposition over nominations to the new National Judiciary Council. All of the opposition parties agreed on excluding Copei, but beyond that basic point there was little agreement. During the summer recess, AD led the delegated commission of the congress (which exercises certain congressional powers when the congress is not in session) to appoint two members to the council. The presidents of the senate and chamber of deputies, however, were not Adecos and called a special session

of the congress to annul the appointments and name two different members to the council. AD and other parties boycotted the session, thereby preventing a quorum. Eventually a smaller party participated, the special session was held, and the council was appointed.

The judicial appointments crisis was the most severe manifestation of stalemate in 1969, but the same procedural plotting and intricate jockeying for partisan advantage was characteristic of the first year of the Caldera administration. President Caldera became convinced that some kind of legislative alliance was necessary. After lengthy negotiations, AD agreed to an informal alliance, called the *Coincidencia*, in which AD would support the government "on predefined 'areas of coincidence.'"⁴⁰ AD and Copei now controlled a majority in both houses.

The productive period of the *Coincidencia* lasted only a year and a half, and even then it meant only that AD would no longer obstruct its own legislative program: most of the significant legislation passed during this period originated in *Acción Democrática*, and AD retained its veto on legislation it opposed. For example, AD opposition led the congress to reject the finance minister's attempt to levy nine new taxes in order to balance the budget.⁴¹ The *Coincidencia* did decrease controversy over foreign policy and prevent obstructionist delays in the election of congressional officers and the approval of the Budget Law and the Law of Universities. However, by no means can it be said that the *Coincidencia* made it possible for the Caldera administration to govern or function well. As Donald Herman observes, "The Adecos and Copeyanos apparently concluded that they would only keep the government's machinery functioning. . . . [The Copeyanos] likened AD's position to that of a doctor who gave his patient medicine to help him feel better but who did not cure him: the Adecos wanted to maintain the system, but they would do everything possible to minimize the effectiveness of Copei."⁴² Stalemate was the fundamental reality of politics during the Caldera government. It underlay everything that happened.

Stalemate during the Herrera Government

When Copei candidate Luis Herrera Campins won the presidential election of 1978, AD found itself once again in the opposition, and the president was once again without a working majority in the congress. President Herrera was even less tempted to form a coalition than Caldera had been, since his party controlled 43 percent of the seats in the combined houses of congress. But AD was just as determined to obstruct as it had been ten years previously, and it controlled 45 percent of the seats. The stage was set for another bout of stalemate.

In the first months of the Herrera administration, *Acción Democrática* applied the political equivalent of a full court press to the Copei legislative program. By August 1979, only two pieces of legislation had been approved in ten months. The frustrated Copei government then proposed to extend the spring session of the congress into August so that some very important bills could be approved.⁴³ Small

third parties, weary of AD's obstructionism, were willing to support the extension, but AD prevented it for two days by boycotting the congress and thereby breaking quorum. On the third day, AD acceded to a voice vote on the extension but vigorously disputed the declaration by the Copeyano president of the congress that the extension then passed.

Based on these events, AD boycotted the congress for the next three weeks, and upon returning, it accused the governing party of "turning its back on duties that it has contracted before the constitutional system of the country" by having legislated without a quorum in the interim.⁴⁴ AD kept up this obstructionist line for the remainder of the Herrera government, with the result that two-thirds of all the legislation approved between 1979 and 1982 was approved on the last day of a session.⁴⁵

Postscript and Prospects

Presidentialism has caused its usual mischief in Venezuela. In 1958, it hindered the achievement of unity in an important transitional election. In combination with minority governing parties in the Betancourt, Leoni, Caldera, and Herrera governments, it led to executive legislative stalemate. In combination with a majority party, it allowed President Pérez to circumvent the legislative process altogether. Most of the time, these situations have led to consequences no more serious than the concentration of power in the presidency and the erosion of power from an inefficient and unproductive congress. But more than once, the conflicts generated by presidentialism in the context of a strong party system—even a centrist, nearly two-party system—have carried Venezuelan politics to the outer limits of constitutionality.

At this writing (January 1993), Venezuela is undergoing its most severe constitutional crisis in thirty years, a crisis that is fundamentally the product of presidentialism. Now in his second government, President Pérez has very little political support. It is not just that his party lacks a majority in both houses of the congress; his problems are compounded by the fact that he has been isolated from his own party and from the voters since the very beginning of his administration. Many voters supported Pérez in the 1988 presidential election believing that he would bring back the state-led and oil-fueled prosperity of his first government, but within days of his inauguration, he initiated a draconian structural adjustment program that inflicted high short-term social costs. This surprise economic "package" left many Venezuelans—including activists in Pérez's own party—feeling personally betrayed by the president.

Pérez became even more isolated when riots and looting broke out in February and March 1989. Some citizens were appalled by the brutality with which the disturbance was repressed. Many more were appalled that the government did not respond immediately, and they transferred their gratitude to the active-duty defense minister, who reported the security forces' response on television.

In 1991–92, inflation was below 40 percent and the economy was growing rapidly, but polls showed most Venezuelans remaining pessimistic about their economic prospects. In the meantime revelations of corruption in the Lusinchi and Pérez governments abounded. The economic situation, the corruption scandals, and mushrooming crime rates in the wake of the riots all contributed to deepening public disillusionment with political parties. For example, when a 1988 poll asked respondents which party's ideas about governing the country were most like their own, 18 percent replied, "none of the above"; but when that same question was asked in September 1991, those replying "none of the above" had increased to 45 percent.⁴⁶ By November of 1991, 56 percent disapproved of Pérez's performance as president and only 35 percent approved; ratings of the government itself and of parties in general were even lower.⁴⁷

When a coup against Pérez was attempted on February 4, 1992, the plotters encountered significant support, but probably from a minority of the population, as only about one-quarter of the respondents in the November poll believed a military solution might be possible. (Two-thirds opposed military intervention.) Nevertheless, it was a very serious uprising of more than one thousand army troops in four cities, more than seventy people were killed, and Pérez narrowly escaped assassination. The coup provoked a desperate search for drastic measures to prevent future coup attempts. Former President Caldera called for Pérez to resign, and he was seconded by the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) and prominent intellectual Arturo Uslar Pietri. In a parliamentary system, a call for resignation would have been entirely appropriate, but as a president elected to a fixed term, Pérez argued that resignation under pressure would amount to an unconstitutional "civilian coup." To complicate matters further, it was unclear who would replace Pérez if he were to resign because the office of his designated successor, the president of the senate, was vacant at the time due to a political deadlock in the senate.

Technically, it would have been possible to *force* the president to resign; however, in Venezuela's presidential system the procedures available for doing so are either so cumbersome or so threatening to the political leadership that it lacked the will to use them. Impeachment would have required charging Pérez with a serious criminal offense such as corruption. But since Venezuela's oil wealth had supplied most politicians with comfortable glass houses over the preceding thirty years, few were willing to cast the first stone. In theory, a constituent assembly would have had the authority to dismiss the president in the absence of criminal charges, but the constitution did not provide for such an assembly. In the time it would have taken to amend the constitution to permit a constituent assembly, for the assembly to deliberate, and for its decisions to be ratified in a referendum, Pérez probably could have finished his term. With the congress's sweeping constitutional powers and strong party discipline, it may have been possible to accelerate the process somewhat, but the leaders of AD and Copei were determined not to permit a constituent assembly because they feared its unlimited power to dismantle the system they had

built for themselves. The congressional leadership instead toyed for several months, with a more limited set of constitutional amendments, but in September 1992 it decided not to act on even these reforms. In November the senate went so far as to pass a Copei resolution asking the president to submit to a referendum on finishing his term. The resolution was nonbinding, however, and when Pérez refused, the matter was dropped.

Days later, on November 27, 1992, officers from all three services staged a second coup attempt. Bystanders cheered as planes dropped bombs over the presidential palace. This attempt was defeated, too, after twelve hours of fighting and hundreds of deaths, but it is hard to imagine a more graphic symbol of the frustration caused by the fixed presidential term. In a parliamentary system, there are far easier ways to remove an unpopular leader from office.

The twentieth-century history of Latin America is replete with examples of politicians who, faced with similar crises, have remained intransigent, withdrawn their participation, appealed to the military to solve their problems, or in other ways unwisely sacrificed their long-term interest in preserving democracy on the altar of short-term political advantage. Venezuela's party leaders made those mistakes once but were wise enough to step back from the brink to save the regime from breakdown. Betancourt and Caldera agreed to share power; Leoni recognized the opposition leadership of the congress; Caldera negotiated the *Coincidencia* with AD; and AD ended its boycott of the congress during the Herrera administration with little more than verbal protests.

Latin American history is also replete with examples of leaders who tried to step back from the brink but looked on helplessly as their followers leaped or fell over the edge, often carrying democracy with them. Venezuela has avoided that fate so far because its unusually penetrative and well disciplined parties have given their leaders the ability to keep followers away from the edge. Oil wealth has helped prevent the economic disasters that have carried Venezuela's neighbors to the brink, but this does not mean that Venezuela has avoided regime crises; it only means that crises have been less frequent. Presidentialism has carried Venezuela to the brink more than once. Venezuelan democracy survived these close calls in the past because its leaders knew when to step back and were able to keep their followers behind them. If past patterns prevail, democracy should survive this crisis as well. However, now that parties are weaker and leaders seem to be taking greater risks, that outcome can no longer be taken for granted.

Notes

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1. Terry Karl, "Petroleum and Political Pacts: The Transition to Democracy in Venezuela," in *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Latin America*, edited by Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986), p. 215.
2. Karl, "Petroleum and Political Pacts," has offered a series of more sophisticated arguments in favor of the oil connection for the Venezuelan case. First, she argues that oil-led development delayed the formation and organization of all social classes, which meant that only a small number of elites had to reach agreement in crucial political pacts. This assertion applies well to the economic elites, but by the time any relevant pacts were made, the key *political* elites were the heads of large, mass-based political parties; agreement was relatively easy at that point, not because social groups were underdeveloped but because they were exceptionally well organized. She also argues that (1) the Right was less intransigent because the oil companies had provided incentives for the oligarchy to transform itself from a class of landlords into a class of entrepreneurs; and (2) political parties were able to become well disciplined because other interest associations had not had a chance to develop, because of the enclave style of development characteristic of oil. These are both intriguing arguments that fit the facts of the Venezuelan case well, but I am not convinced that the causal connection is there. I suspect that a comparison with Ecuador, another late developer with an important oil sector (as well as a very conservative elite and a chaotic party system), would require placing greater explanatory weight on other factors originally identified by Daniel Levine—leadership, party discipline, and prior dictatorial repression, whose importance Karl also recognizes. See Levine, "Venezuela since 1958: The Consolidation of Democratic Politics," in *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*, edited by Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978), pp. 82–109.
3. The Trienio began in October 1945, when junior officers backed by the young political party Acción Democrática (AD) overthrew General Medina Angarita and installed a civil-military "Revolutionary Junta," which promised a rapid transition to democracy. This junta, composed of four leaders of AD, two of the military conspirators, and one nonpartisan civilian, oversaw elections for a constituent assembly in October 1946 and congressional and direct presidential elections in December 1947. The presidential election was won by AD candidate Rómulo Gallegos, who was inaugurated on February 15, 1948. The Trienio ended on November 24, when Gallegos was overthrown after just nine months in office.
4. See John D. Martz, *Acción Democrática: Evolution of a Modern Political Party* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1966); and Daniel Levine, *Conflict and Political Change in Venezuela* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973).
5. Glen L. Kolb, *Democracy and Dictatorship in Venezuela, 1945–1958* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1974), pp. 23–24.
6. Levine, *Conflict and Political Change in Venezuela*, chaps. 3, 4; Kolb, *Democracy and Dictatorship in Venezuela*, p. 50.
7. Levine, *Conflict and Political Change in Venezuela*.
8. For an elaboration of this argument, see Terry Karl, "Imposing Consent? Electoralism vs. Democratization in El Salvador," in *Elections and Democratization in Latin America, 1980–1985*, edited by Paul W. Drake and Eduardo Silva (San Diego: U California, San Diego, 1986), pp. 9–36. For its application to the successful transition in Venezuela, see Karl, "Petroleum and Political Pacts."
9. In view of Lijphart's observation of the majoritarian bias of presidential governments, and of Linz's argument that a majoritarian style is risky during transitions to democracy, it is tempting to blame the majoritarian style of the Trienio on presidentialism. However, presi-

dentialism should not be blamed in this case because Acción Democrática was so much larger than the other parties at the time that it would have behaved just as arrogantly in a parliamentary system. AD won Trienio elections with 70 to 79 percent of the vote and controlled majorities of between 75 and 86 percent of the seats in legislative bodies. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that most Adecos felt that they had a mandate to govern during those years and did not take the nascent opposition very seriously. Given the size and strength of the party and the weakness of any organized opposition, the AD governments would have behaved in a majoritarian fashion whether the regime had been presidential or parliamentary. Governments in far weaker positions do so today in parliamentary Great Britain and Spain.

10. The story of the transition can be found in several accounts of the early years of the regime, among which are Martz, *Acción Democrática*, and Robert J. Alexander, *The Venezuelan Democratic Revolution* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers UP, 1964). Levine emphasized the importance of isolating conflicts and moderating leadership in *Conflict and Political Change in Venezuela*, which is briefly synthesized in his "Venezuela since 1958," and more thoughtfully developed in his "Venezuela: The Nature, Source, and Prospects of Democracy," in *Democracy in Developing Countries: Latin America*, edited by Larry Diamond, Juan J. Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1989), pp. 247–89. Karl's interpretation in "Petroleum and Political Pacts" is compatible with Levine's two earlier works but places the transition in the context of oil-led development and emphasizes the class content of pact making during the transition.

11. In a 1985 survey of AD party leaders, two-thirds believed that "avoiding open political conflict that could endanger the democratic system" was a good reason for having a pact with Copei. Michael Coppedge, "Strong Parties and Lame Ducks: A Study of the Quality and Stability of Venezuelan Democracy" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1988), p. 369.

12. Three dramatic reforms of the electoral system were adopted in 1988 and 1989. First, the position of mayor was created at the municipal level. (Previously, municipal executive officials were the presidents of city councils, elected indirectly by the councils.) Second, state governors became directly elected rather than appointed by the president. The first elections under these new provisions were held in December 1989. Third, starting in 1993 legislators will be elected by a system similar to the West German system: half in single-member districts, and half by party ballots by proportional representation, perhaps with some freedom to reorder and choose among individual candidates. I expect party discipline to become looser under these reforms.

13. Karl, "Petroleum and Political Pacts," pp. 210–15.

14. Velázquez, "Aspectos de la evolución política de Venezuela en el último medio siglo," in *Venezuela moderna: Medio siglo de historia, 1926–1976*, edited by Ramón J. Velázquez, Aristides Calvani, Carlos Rafael Silva, and Juan Liscano (Caracas: Fundación Eugenio Mendoza, 1976), pp. 173–75.

15. *El universal*, 16 Oct., 1958.

16. *El universal*, 6 Oct., 1958.

17. See *El universal*, 23 Oct., 1958.

18. *El universal*, 13 Nov., 1958.

19. Scott Mainwaring, "Institutional Dilemmas of Multiparty Presidential Democracy: The Case of Brazil" (paper prepared for the 15th International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, Miami, 3–6 Dec. 1989); and Catherine M. Conaghan, chap. 10 herein.

20. One also hopes that, whatever the degree of fragmentation and discipline, bargaining between government and opposition is based as much as possible on the content of leg-

isolation rather than on vote buying or personal favors. One of the worst attributes of Brazilian “democracy” is that the party system is so unwieldy that vote buying (subtle or not) and personal favors are often the *only* way a president can put a majority together.

21. Alexander, *Venezuelan Democratic Revolution*, pp. 127–30.

22. Terry Karl, “The Political Economy of Petrodollars” (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1982), pp. 208–13.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 219–20.

24. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 231.

25. *Ley Habilitante: Ley orgánica que autoriza al Presidente de la República para adoptar medidas económicas o financieras requeridas por el interés público*, *Gaceta oficial*, no. 33,005, 22 June 1984 (Caracas: Distribuidora Capitolio, 1984); Margarita López Maya, Luis Gómez Calcaño, and Thaís Maingón, *De Punto Fijo al pacto social: Desarrollo y hegemonía en Venezuela (1958–1985)* (Caracas: Fondo Editorial Acta Científica Venezolana, 1989), p. 97.

26. Interviews with Eduardo Fernández and Leonardo Ferrer, *El nacional*, 23 June 1985.

27. Minority governments are defined here as those in which the president’s party, together with the other parties with cabinet representation, controls less than half of the seats in the chamber of deputies.

28. The data cited in this paragraph were compiled from Congreso de la República, *25 Años de legislación democrática* (Caracas: Congreso de la República, 1983.) The dates referred to are the dates of publication in the *Gaceta oficial*, but the president must promulgate laws within ten days of legislative sanction unless he returns them for further consideration, so the dates are approximately correct. Notice that the Venezuelan congress is remarkably unproductive; the average number of laws approved by the legislatures of other countries is much higher. The U.S. Congress averages 500–600; the British Parliament, 100; the French Parlement, 110; and the Spanish Cortes and the Colombian congress, 70 each. Comparisons from Arnoldo José Gabaldón and Luis Enrique Oberto (Comisión Bicameral de la Reforma Parlamentaria), *La reforma parlamentaria: Necesidad y alternativas de modernización de la acción legislativa* (Caracas: Congreso de la República, 1985), 1:14n.

29. For a descriptive survey of the nature of Italian legislation, see Giuseppe DiPalma, *Surviving without Governing: The Italian Parties in Parliament* (Berkeley: U California P, 1977), chap. 2.

30. These conclusions are based on an unpublished analysis by Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, who classified all Venezuelan legislation from June 1959 to December 1982 by type of law (organic, ratification, regular, reform) and subject matter (industry, finance, agriculture, labor, politicoadministrative, social, or cultural). The basic data came from Congreso de la República, *25 Años de legislación democrática*.

31. John D. Martz, *The Venezuelan Elections of December 1, 1963. Part I: An Analysis* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for the Comparative Study of Political Systems, 1964), p. 29.

32. Alexander, *Venezuelan Democratic Revolution*, p. 182.

33. Franklin Tugwell, *The Politics of Oil in Venezuela* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1975), p. 157.

34. In order to win the vote, Copei had persuaded the elderly former dictator López Contreras to show up in the senate chamber and reactivate his status as senator for life.

35. Velázquez, “Aspectos de la evolución política de Venezuela,” pp. 285–86.

36. It may be that Caldera would have preferred to form a coalition but simply could not do so, given the limited choice of partners.

37. Tugwell, *Politics of Oil in Venezuela*, p. 103.

38. Velázquez, “Aspectos de la evolución política de Venezuela,” pp. 295–96.

39. My account of this controversy is based on *ibid.*, pp. 307–9.

40. Tugwell, *Politics of Oil in Venezuela*, p. 104. Tugwell says that the importance of this pact was pressed upon AD by the party's old guard—Betancourt, Leoni, and Barrios—presumably in the interest of preserving the democratic regime.

41. Donald L. Herman, *Christian Democracy in Venezuela* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina P, 1980), pp. 145–46.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

43. My account of this crisis is my interpretation of the events referred to in a partisan document: Acción Democrática, *Documentos sobre la crisis parlamentaria de agosto de 1979* (Caracas: Partido Acción Democrática, 1979), esp. pp. 13–19.

44. AD, *Documentos sobre la crisis Parlamentaria*, pp. 18–19.

45. Calculated from information in Congreso de la República, *25 Años de legislación democrática*.

46. “La inseguridad es el problema que más preocupa a los venezolanos,” *El universal*, 1 Oct. 1991, pp. 1–18.

47. Alba Sánchez, “Poll Respondents Reject CAP, Support Caldera,” translation of article in *El nacional*, 26 Jan. 1992, p. D-2, in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service—Latin America Report* 92–037 (25 Feb. 1992), pp. 25–27.