

**VENEZUELA:
THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE PARTY SYSTEM**

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ABSTRACT

Political parties have been at the center of modern Venezuelan democracy from the beginning. Strong, highly disciplined, and nationally organized parties have dominated political organization and action in the modern period. Parties have penetrated and controlled organized social life and effectively monopolized resources and channels of political action. Beginning in the 1980s, the political parties and the party system as a whole have experienced mounting criticism and challenge. In a time of growing economic, social, and political crisis, efforts have nonetheless been made to loosen national control and open new channels for citizen participation with the aim of 'democratizing Venezuelan democracy.' The ability of the parties to implement these reforms, and to reform themselves in the process, is central to the survival of effective democracy in Venezuela.

RESUMEN

Desde sus inicios, los partidos políticos han estado en el centro de la democracia en Venezuela. La vida política de la moderna Venezuela ha sido dominada por partidos políticos fuertes, disciplinados y organizados a escala nacional. Los partidos políticos han penetrado y controlado la vida social y han monopolizado los recursos y canales de la acción política. Desde inicios de la década de 1980, los partidos y el sistema de partidos como un todo han confrontado la crítica creciente, se han visto retados, y han puesto en marcha un conjunto de reformas. Estas reformas pretenden debilitar el control nacional de la dirigencia partidista, abrir nuevos canales de participación ciudadana, para de ese modo democratizar más la democracia venezolana. Estos intentos han ocurrido en un momento de creciente crisis económica, social y política. La habilidad de los partidos para poner en marcha estas reformas y para autorreformarse son cruciales para la sobrevivencia de una democracia efectiva en Venezuela.

Political parties have always been at the center of modern Venezuelan democracy. For Venezuelans, the mobilization of masses and indeed the very concept of popular democratic rule have been wrapped up with political parties from the beginning. Drawing strength from the massive social changes brought by petroleum, parties brokered and encapsulated the growth of all forms of mass political action in the critical early decades after 1935. They were present at democracy's first creation in 1945, and engineered its rebirth after 1958, combining lasting national support along with effective leadership.

The survival and consolidation of this democracy was managed and ensured by political parties, as elites banded together to defend the principle and reality of democratic government, bringing their mass followings along. Together, elites and masses isolated and defeated opposition from military adventurers and leftist revolutionaries alike. After ten years of growing electoral dispersion, the nation's powerful and creative party organizations turned the tide, and since 1968 have crafted a strong and enduring two-party system. Most recently, these same parties have promoted and enacted major innovations aimed at enhancing democratization through legal and political decentralization and incentives to democracy within the parties themselves.

The dominant role parties have taken in all aspects of political life has led scholars like Levine (1973) or Rey (1990) to call Venezuela a party system, and to make its character as such central not only to the origins of contemporary politics, but also to its operative rules, strengths, and weaknesses, now and in the future. In Levine's usage, the term 'party system' has at least four dimensions: 1. Parties are the basic tools of political mobilization and action. 2. This ensures that mobilized consent and votes—characteristic of modern parties—will become central to legitimate politics. 3. Party domination shapes prevailing political methodology around rallies, propaganda, elections, and now mass media. And finally, 4.

as parties dominate politics, they become the principal agencies for the organization and channeling of political conflicts. Conflicts are expressed primarily through political parties, and this organizational concentration opens the possibility of agreement between parties on the legitimate bounds of conflicts—that is, a procedural consensus on the means of limiting any given conflict becomes a possibility (Levine 1973, 35-36).

We believe that Venezuela's experience as a party system is instructive in exploring the issues of how to build competitive, effective, and lasting political parties, and how to make them central to the construction and survival of democracy. Venezuela has long been regarded as something of an outlier in contemporary Latin American politics. The abundance of money from petroleum gave leaders a valuable cushion, and the nation's ability to sidestep the ideological polarization, organizational and political decay, and authoritarian rule so common elsewhere in

the hemisphere led many observers to assume that Venezuelan politics were unique and thus irrelevant to other countries' experiences. But recent transitions to democracy and the accompanying difficulties of nurturing and consolidating a rebirth of democratic politics have done much to change the pattern of discourse, sparking a fresh look at what Venezuela means for the theory and the practice of other cases.¹

In Venezuela itself, the title and definition of party system are still appropriate, and the parties remain central to political life. This is not to say that nothing has changed. Parties still hold the keys to politics and power, but the pattern of interparty relations, electoral dynamics, campaigning, finance, and the way parties are tied to civil society and to the state have all undergone substantial modifications.² Since the early 1980s, the very role of political parties, and more precisely of parties of the kind that dominate the Venezuelan scene, has come under increasing criticism and direct challenge. Reforms were proposed and implemented in these years, including changes in the electoral system that undermine the centralization and national control long characteristic of this system.

Although the discourse of reform has been 'in the air' for well over a decade (carried forward, for example, in the work of COPRE, the Presidential Commission for the Reform of the State), the idea of reform gained added urgency and a sense of crisis in response to three events that punctuate the process: Black Friday (February 18, 1983), when the *bolívar* collapsed, initiating a long period of hitherto unknown inflation and economic decline; the bloody and traumatic urban riots touched off on February 27, 1989 (27-F), which came in response to the new government's structural adjustment package; and the attempted military coup of February 4, 1992 (4-F). Each of these February events signaled the undermining of a key pillar of the political system: economic strength (Black Friday); the parties' capacity to channel and control participation (27-F); and the parties' hard-won superiority in the balance of forces with the military (4-F). In the wake of the coup, criticisms of the government and of the party system as a whole escalated sharply, constitutional reforms were pushed ahead, and a host of new political groups crystallized and began to make their voices heard on the national scene.

At the time of writing (mid-1992), the outcome of all these criticisms and reforms remains uncertain. No group or political formula has yet emerged on the national scene that appears able to replace the political parties, or to undertake the multiple roles that they have played in national political life. Despite mounting criticism and a widely diffused sense of crisis, it is clearly too early to count the parties out or to write an obituary for the party system. Romulo Betancourt, founder of the nation's dominant party, Acción Democrática, is reported to have put the matter for his

1 For a discussion of Venezuela in light of recent literature on democratization, see Levine (1989); also his review of recent work on transitions to democracy in "Paradigm Lost" (1988).

2 Recent work by Venezuelan scholars strongly affirms this pattern of change in continuity. See, for example, Arroyo (1988) or Rey (1989a).

party in more pungent, folkloric terms, noting that “Adeco es adeco hasta que se muere, y es que los adecos no mueren nunca.”

The following discussion is organized in four major sections. We begin with a review of the life and times of parties and democratic politics in Venezuela. The origins and character of parties are considered, with emphasis on how the range of alternatives has shifted over time. We then take a close look at the evolution of electoral competition, in particular the emergence of a two-party pattern from 1973 onwards. This is followed by a consideration of changing party ties with civil society and the state. We show how the parties adapted to long-term social and cultural change, and consider the nature and prospects of recently enacted state and political reforms. We close with brief reflections on prospects for the future.

The Life and Times of Politics, Parties, and Democracy

The modern history of Venezuelan politics is well documented; a brief account suffices here.¹ Venezuela stands out in Latin America for how few traces remain from the colonial period and the nineteenth century to shape the modern scene. The long struggle for independence from Spain began a series of armed conflicts and civil wars that together wrecked the basis of colonial wealth and destroyed what little of a local aristocracy Venezuela had. Administrative decay and regional fragmentation were other consequences, making the central state mostly nominal throughout the nineteenth century and political parties little more than armed bands, often with marked regional bases and loyalties.

This heritage of conflict had several other noteworthy consequences. Traditional ties were undermined throughout rural Venezuela and major population movements began that have continued in accelerated ways ever since. Every modern census shows a high proportion of Venezuelans living outside of their state of birth. Migration initially flowed to the Andean region, which presented a safe haven from the warfare endemic in the central and plains regions. The growth of Andean states also reflected the emergence of the region's coffee export economy, which got under way on a major scale from the mid-nineteenth century on.²

The concentration of population, wealth, and power in the Andes is important here because at the turn of the century, Venezuela was conquered by an armed political movement from that region. Juan Vicente Gomez, originally second in command, soon took power which he held in an iron grip until his death in late 1935. Gomez was fortunate enough to be in office when the petroleum industry came to Venezuela and skillfully used the money and contacts it provided

¹ This section draws freely on the following sources: Levine (1973 and 1989); Powell (1971); Ellner (1980); Bergquist (1986); Peattie (1968); Bond (1977); Penniman (1980); Karl (1987); and Naim and Piñango (1985).

² On change in the Andean region, see Roseberry (1983) or Margolies (1979).

to destroy his enemies. In so doing, he definitively closed the books on nineteenth-century political life. Traditional political parties and military caudillos disappeared; political opposition and protest soon began to take new tacks, working for the creation of mass politics and political democracy.

The development of the petroleum industry from the 1920s on made for radical discontinuities with the past. Agriculture was destroyed, permanent national armies and bureaucracies were created, roads were built and massive waves of internal migration began to travel on them. The political parties whose conflicts had dominated nineteenth-century politics left no trace at all.

The new social groups and forces being created had little connection to older elites or to the social or political structures of the past. Their new experiences and urgent needs found no legitimate organizational expression, few interlocutors, and no reliable allies. Effective repression saw to that, and thus in curious and doubtless unintended ways the Gomez autocracy laid the bases of modern political life, leaving an open field and a growing potential clientele to the organizers of new movements. Most significant among these were the university students and trade unionists who first appear on the national scene in the 1920s, later returning from exile and prison after the dictator's death in late 1935. As Ramon J. Velasquez puts it, the Venezuela they found was "like plowed land, waiting for the seed" (Velasquez, 1973, xix-xx).

It is thus fair to say that modern Venezuelan life began with the death of Gomez. Subsequent political history falls into four broad periods: 1936-45, 1945-48, 1948-58, and the post-1958 years when democracy is reestablished, successfully defended, and consolidated. Here we review the pre-1958 years very briefly and then consider the democratic period in closer detail.

The decade after 1935 witnessed both the conception and birth of mass politics in Venezuela. Exiles returned eager to organize a new kind of political life that would expand politics and opposition beyond student protest or military conspiracy to include what are now commonly known as "popular sectors." From its formal beginnings in 1941, Acción Democrática, still the nation's dominant party, has called itself "the party of the people," brokering a marriage of needs and interests between small-town middle-class organizers and Venezuela's masses of dispossessed so powerful that repression could no longer eliminate groups: it just drove them underground.

Gomez was followed in office by his Minister of War and designated successor, Gen. Eleazar Lopez Contreras, who tried to keep the lid on change. Incipient trade unions and political groups were banned, open mass activities were prohibited, and control of the army and state machine remained in the hands of the Andean group that had ridden to victory with Gomez. Lopez Contreras was succeeded five years later by his Minister of War, Gen. Isaias Medina

Angarita. Seeking a base of support independent from Lopez, and perhaps influenced by the climate of democratic struggle in World War II, Medina began a gradual liberalization, making union and political organization much easier. With these changes in the air, an amalgam of groups applied for legal status, and Acción Democrática achieved it in September 1941.

The leaders and activists of Acción Democrática (AD) immediately set out to build a kind of political structure hitherto unknown in Venezuela: a party that was permanent, present at all levels of national and local life, and capable of integrating many interests and groups in its organized life.¹ From the beginning, the party was vertically integrated, with powerful links binding block and neighborhood to regional and national structures. This was something utterly new in Venezuela, especially in the geographically and socially marginal communities where AD concentrated its early efforts. Links to the party provided welcome sources of orientation, legitimation, and solidarity, as well as avenues for redress of grievances and mobility. Party activists were also present at the creation of organized civil society, including trade unions, peasant groups, teachers' organizations, student and professional societies. Their efforts meant that these and similar groups were integrated into the party from the beginning, with sectoral and party loyalties and identities closely connected. In these ways, AD encapsulated emerging social interests, giving groups like labor, students, professionals, or peasants a place in the party's organizational scheme. The whole process underscores the appeal of party as a key affiliation and enhances the independent power of party leaders, who for many years were able to play off one group against the other in the name of the party as a whole. With time, these groups came to be divided on party lines with leadership, for example, elected from competing party slates.

All electorally successful political parties in Venezuela have followed this basic pattern. They are socially heterogeneous, combining group representation with strong centralized leadership. No party with single class appeal or ideology has prospered; all have maintained firm leadership control over component sectors. This has occasionally made for internal conflict, as sectoral leaders (peasants or teachers, for example) resent and resist leadership pressure to sacrifice their interests for the good of the party. But despite a few damaging splits, the pattern noted here has prevailed, leading as we shall see to a political style contingent on structured conciliation of interests within and among parties, brokered and controlled by strong and relatively autonomous leaders.

AD soon swept the field, driving rivals like the Communist Party into a marginality from which they never recovered. These victories brought little satisfaction, however, for power continued firmly in the hands of Andean military and state elites. Mass organization yielded no real power; elections remained indirect and suffrage limited. To change the rules of the game and change the country as well, party leaders joined young military officers in a conspiracy

¹ An account of the party's foundation that stresses these goals is Betancourt (1967).

against the Medina government. A coup was launched on October 18, 1945, and after a brief struggle a provisional junta was formed with four members from AD, two officers, and one independent civilian. The ensuing three-year period or *trienio* marks the definitive introduction of mass politics into national life.

Trienio politics brought decisive and long-lasting changes. Barriers to participation were lowered, suffrage was made genuinely universal (all citizens over 18, with no restrictions by education, gender, or property). The electorate expanded from 5 percent of the population before 1945 to 36 percent immediately thereafter. Free, direct elections were instituted at all levels, from municipal councils and state legislatures to the national congress (deputies and senators), and president. New parties were also formed, most importantly COPEI (a Christian Democratic group formed in 1946) and URD, which grouped the non-Communist left wing of forces that had backed Medina. Organization of all kinds was effectively stimulated and grew rapidly, especially among labor and peasant groups. Services like education, health, water, and communications were extended for the first time to poor and peripheral groups and regions. AD's leaders thus delivered on their promises, and as a result the party strengthened its mass base in spectacular and long-lasting fashion.

Although expanded participation and extended benefits strengthened the party enormously, it also sparked a series of bitter conflicts. Opposition to specific policies was reinforced by elite fears that the new regime would completely erase the existing social order. These beliefs were exacerbated by the very scale of AD's domination. The party was in total control of most popular organizations and popular organizations in turn swept the field. Economic and social elites had always relied on control of the army and administration for guarantees of power and privilege. Popular organizations must have seemed superfluous in a system that rewarded cliques and personal influence more than the capacity to move masses.

For all these reasons, although the *trienio* saw AD build and secure a mass base, it also saw AD systematically alienate a growing number of powerful groups. Opposition gathered on the right, represented by the Catholic Church, by new political parties like COPEI, and by conservative elements in the military, in business (foreign and domestic) and in the US Embassy. Confident in its vast electoral majorities and secure in its alliance with the military, AD largely ignored such opposition, but did so at growing peril, falling on November 24, 1948 to a military coup. The three-year experiment in democracy gave way to a decade of bloody dictatorship. Under the leadership of Gen. Marcos Perez Jimenez, AD was banned. Educational, labor, and agrarian reforms were all rescinded and a new deal was reached with the oil companies. Political opposition was dealt with through a combination of bribery, fraud, and violence. A large secret police force (*Seguridad Nacional*) hunted down opponents, and ran notorious concentration

camps.¹ AD maintained an underground organization throughout the dictatorship, supporting clandestine networks and making several frustrated attempts to assassinate the military leadership. Nonetheless, as late as mid-1957, the combination of strong economic resources, a powerful police apparatus, and visible public backing by the United States made continued military rule seem a safe bet.

But resistance mounted from that point, and the military regime unraveled quickly. Confident of his position, Perez Jimenez called elections for December 1957, but with no warning scrapped election plans in favor of a plebiscite. There was to be only one candidate for every office; all Venezuelans over 18 and all foreigners with more than two years of residence were declared eligible voters. The affront of the plebiscite helped unify and stimulate opposition, and intramilitary support proved to be surprisingly brittle. Concern about the economy, resentment over corruption, and mingled fear of and disdain for the secret police soon resulted in a failed military coup on New Year's Day, 1958. Although the attempt was put down, the dictator's invincible image had cracked. Underground political forces, now united in a Junta Patriótica, mounted a wave of demonstrations and street fighting.² The regime collapsed in a few weeks, and Perez Jimenez fled the country on January 23, 1958. A Provisional Government (under mixed military and civilian rule) took over: elections were scheduled and held at the end of the year. Perez Jimenez was Venezuela's last military ruler.

The events of January 23, 1958 mark not only the restoration of democracy, but in a deeper sense, the creation of a different and more enduring kind of democratic politics. The democracy begun in 1958 has indeed survived, but more has been accomplished than just hanging on to office. The parties themselves and the democracy they support and defend have also changed. Within the overall history of democracy, we suggest a further periodization: the *trienio*; the decade after 1958 (when enemies of Right and Left were isolated and defeated); the subsequent fifteen years when democracy was consolidated around competition between AD and COPEI; and the years since the mid-1980s, which combine sharp economic downturn and growing electoral balance between AD and COPEI with bold innovations designed to make Venezuelan democracy more flexible and democratic.

Political change after 1958 was driven by the lessons political actors chose to learn from recent experience. Key members of the political class saw the fall of Perez Jimenez as a second chance for democracy, an opportunity to correct past mistakes and avoid repeating the political disasters of the *trienio*, which were identified above all as polarization, a sense of uncontrolled conflict, and the alienation of powerful minorities. Many who had welcomed the coming of military rule (opposition parties, foreign business, the Church) ended up suffering under Perez Jimenez

¹ On the secret police, see Abreu (1964).

² The period is described vividly in Kolb (1974) and also Stambouli (1980).

and now sought accommodation with AD. Within AD itself, leaders now saw that the overwhelming majorities of the 1940s had created false confidence, making the party ignore the need to bring others along.

Elite understandings of the trienio were shaped and amplified by the specific character of the transition to democracy in 1958. From the very beginning the transition was an enterprise built on coalitions. Political parties cooperated, both underground and through pacts forged among exile leaders. Business and professional groups joined, as did key elements in the military and popular organizations linked to the political parties. Bear in mind that although the dictator was thrown out, the military institution remained intact. Great effort was expended in 1958 and after to woo the officer corps, purging disloyal elements while gradually bringing new generations along. The need to hold such diverse allies together reinforced dispositions to prudent compromise. There was broad commitment to free open and elections, a commitment maintained throughout the year in which the Provisional Government held power. Further, the 1958 elections also demonstrated that AD's overwhelming majorities were a thing of the past. Compromise was not thus only desirable, it was also essential to effective rule.

This sort of strategy was by no means inevitable. Many on the Left, for example, hoped to push for thorough social and economic change, relying more on mass mobilization than interelite compromise and accommodation. But in 1958 and after, key Venezuelan leaders correctly believed that without revolution and firm control of armed force, strategies of that kind were doomed. They also knew that even under the best of circumstances, democracy is not a likely result of these strategies. Power is either too concentrated in the party running the show (which thus becomes another dictatorship) or conflict is so exacerbated as to make survival simply impossible. Having failed with similar approaches in the past, (i.e., dominance in the trienio), the political class learned from experience and opted this time for caution, conciliation, compromise and prudence.

Prior to the 1958 elections, the major non-Communist parties (AD, COPEI, and URD) signed two formal agreements. The first, known as the Pact of Punto Fijo, pledged the signatories to respect elections whatever the outcome, to maintain a political truce depersonalizing debate and ensuring interparty consultation on touchy matters, and to share political responsibility and patronage. The stress on pacts and interparty cooperation was embodied in a series of coalition governments led by AD. Formal coalition rule lasted for ten years, with AD's partners changing but the general orientation to coalition remaining constant. When explicit coalition rule ended after 1968, a series of agreements known as the Pacto Institucional ensured that the spirit of political cannibalism would not return. The use of coalitions extended beyond national politics to all levels of organized activity: trade unions and secondary associations generally began choosing leaders by proportional representation, with leadership

typically shared among representatives of various parties. Competition within a single group thus replaced older patterns of parallel and conflicting organizations.

The consensus sought through pacts and coalitions was both substantive and procedural.¹ Key political forces essentially agreed to disagree—setting difficult and potentially explosive issues aside to concentrate on more manageable areas where limited ‘technical’ solutions could be found. Program restriction was central to the process and its basic outlines were enshrined in a second formal agreement, the Minimum Program of Government. This Minimum Program embraced a development model based on foreign and local private capital, subsidies to the private sector, principles of compensation for any land reform, and a generally cautious approach to economic and social reform. Pacts and agreements were also intended to defuse potential oppositions: the military got amnesties, better equipment, and salary upgrades; the Catholic Church got improved legal status, public subsidies, consultation on educational reform, and a general sense of security derived from COPEI’s participation in coalition governments after 1958. Opposition from both Right and Left was defeated, the first through successful purges in the officer corps and defeat of military coups, and the latter through marginalization and defeat of the continent’s first big guerrilla insurrection after the Cuban Revolution.²

To the party elites who created it after 1958, democracy was both a goal in itself and a means to other unspecified ends: an open-ended set of arrangements founded on common ways of defining ‘politics’ and appropriate political action. But of course elites are not all there is to politics. Without followers, and especially without mediating structures to organize and mobilize the population, elites are helpless—mere claimants to power and legitimacy. It is important, therefore, to acknowledge the depth and scope of popular support for democracy. With rare exceptions, mass publics followed party leaders, resisting calls to revolution put to them by leftist parties whose mass base had long ago been taken by AD. Mercier states that,

Looked at from a purely class point of view, it could be said that, throughout the years 1960-63, the working class and peasantry were defending a moderate government against assault from political groups composed, for the most part, of intellectuals, students, career politicians, and people who had come down in the world (1969, 106).

After 1958, barriers to participation dropped and active political involvement was encouraged and facilitated. Registering to vote is easy in Venezuela and voting is not only convenient but also obligatory. A vigorous and widespread associational life made participation

1 For details on Venezuelan pacts and their larger significance, see Levine (1973, 1985, and 1988).

2 For discussions of the meaning of the guerrilla movement and the impact of its defeat on political life, in addition to the sources cited above, see Levine (1978). For general comments, see Crowley (1989).

high; pervasive links to the party system gave it structure, and also helped to concentrate efforts in a limited range of arenas, especially electoral competition.

Much of the success of these agreements hinged on excluding the revolutionary Left. Their parties were deliberately shut out of pacts and coalitions, although they did join in consensual approval of the Constitution and were not excluded from elections until they declared war on the system. Exclusion of the Left from pacts, coalitions, and policy-making was intended to reassure business, Church, and military leaders and reconcile them to the new democracy. The kind of incremental change embodied in the Pact of Punto Fijo and the Minimum Program of Government obviously ruled out the Left's agenda of radical transformation. The Left also excluded itself. Frustrated by the shrinking outlook for major change at home and inspired by the recent example of the Cuban Revolution, parties on the Left came to the conclusion that revolution was not only necessary but also possible for Venezuela and moved quickly to armed insurgency. The insurrection decisively consolidated the coalitions being put together by AD. Military rule was still recent and discredited, and AD's leaders played skillfully on domestic fears, painting themselves as the only real hope for stability. They sought and obtained US support for Venezuela as an alternative to Cuba, thus further reassuring local conservatives while isolating diehard military groups who on several occasions attempted coups in the years just after 1958.

At this point it is appropriate to look more closely at the nature of the major political parties. AD provided the model for political organizers that has managed to dominate the political scene for half a century, providing seven of the nine presidents elected by popular vote. Still, as we show in the next section, the party's organization and electoral predominance decayed together in the decade after 1958. Ideological and factional disputes also caused a series of damaging splits (1960, 1962, 1967) which cut deeply into AD's strength. These were mostly repaired after 1968 as successful organizational and electoral campaigns underwrote the party's remarkable rebound.

Effective competition (especially from its tough, enduring rival COPEI) kept AD from extending its previous hegemony unchallenged to the new generations of voters now entering the electorate in large numbers. COPEI was founded in 1945 as a narrowly based, sectarian opposition to the *trienio* regime. COPEI's initial support was based on an appeal to politically mobilized Catholics, and voters were concentrated in the traditionally Catholic Andean states. But from these origins, COPEI has since grown into a genuinely national and clearly nonconfessional party that competes effectively at every level.

AD and COPEI have much in common. Each is a multiclass party, drawing a varied social base together around a central party leadership. Of all the parties that have challenged AD for power, only COPEI has managed to build a durable and broadly popular base, drawing elements from all across the social spectrum. Both parties also have permanent professional

leaders; both are organized across the entire nation and at all levels; and both incorporate functional groups (like unions, students, or professional associations) as wings in the party organization. They also share an ability to mobilize important financial resources, partly as a result of their time in government but also through carefully cultivated links to business and financial sectors. Each has the technical capacity to mount sophisticated and expensive campaigns and has shown itself able to change with the times, gradually replacing rallies and parades with saturation of the mass media.

Brief comment on three points will round out this review: the rise and fall of Unión Republicana Democrática (URD); the rise and fall of personalist vehicles; and the nature and prospects of the Left. In 1958, URD was the third major party, along with AD and COPEI. It played a key role in clandestine opposition to military rule and was a vital coalition partner during the first two AD governments (1959-63, 1963-68). URD had been founded during the trienio and soon fell under the domination of Jovito Villalba, a former student leader and brilliant orator. Villalba's personalistic control made organizational consolidation impossible: promising cadres were repeatedly driven out, and opportunities to build a durable party structure were wasted. In consequence, URD declined steadily after 1958 and for all practical purposes had disappeared by the late 1970s. The party's electoral strength immediately after 1958 was in any event deceptive, for it rested more on candidate appeal than on the party's own efforts. In the 1958 national elections, URD ran Admiral Wolfgang Larrazábal for president. Larrazábal was the immensely popular ex-head of the Provisional Government that had replaced Perez Jimenez. URD never got close to those electoral levels again.

Larrazábal himself later went on to establish his own party, and along with other popular figures built political vehicles that attracted considerable support in the decade after 1958. Without exception, these disappeared after two elections. Indeed 1968 marks the last time such personalist vehicles (known in Venezuela as 'electoral phenomena') played a significant role. Attempts to build similar movements failed utterly in subsequent elections despite heavy financing and major media campaigns.

The Left contains a number of small parties, none of which managed to take much more than 5 percent of the national vote until the most recent elections when a coalition dominated by the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) garnered about a tenth of the legislative vote and a similar proportion of seats in the Chamber of Deputies. The frustrations of the Venezuelan left have a long history. The Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV) is actually older than AD but has never recovered from losing the organizational wars of the 1940s. AD's strong nationalism and flexible organization cut much more deeply than class unity and solidarity with the Soviet Union, which must have seemed awfully far away to average Venezuelans of the day. Petkoff's comment is apt:

in Venezuela, in the 1940s, while Acción Democrática tried to interpret the nation and its problems, communists dedicated most of their efforts to singing the praises of the Stakhanovites of Irkutsk (1973, 66-67).

Early on, leftist political strength was temporarily inflated by several divisions in AD, but these have enjoyed only fleeting strength. Serious divisions have also hurt the Communist Party itself, most notably in 1968 when in protest against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia a group of Communist leaders left to form an independent socialist alternative, MAS (Movimiento al Socialismo). MAS has committed itself firmly to mass organization and electoral politics, and has been the only competitor to the AD-COPEI axis able thus far to survive and grow over several decades. The most recent alternative on the left has been Causa R, which emerged in the 1989 elections to capture a strong base at state and local levels in the industrial areas of Ciudad Guayana and the state of Bolívar.¹

To summarize briefly, the decade after 1958 was devoted to consolidating and defending the new democracy. This was a primary goal, pursued through alliances and coalitions, and also through vigorous efforts to isolate and defeat enemies on Right and Left. The party system established after 1958 remains dominant, but the cast of characters and some of the rules have changed. After 1968, the political game changes considerably, but the spirit of caution and compromise and the broad commitment to competition and democracy as good in themselves continue to mark the political process. Of the original players, AD and COPEI have risen to joint dominance, while URD and the Communists have all but disappeared. Other challengers have come and gone, with none able thus far to break the binomio. The next section continues the narrative, focusing on the party system in terms of changing patterns of electoral competition.

Elections and the Changing Character of Party Competition

Modern Venezuela presents the observer with an impressive record of three decades of massive, fraud-free, and increasingly competitive elections. Competition has spurred change not only in the pattern of interparty relations, but also in the internal dynamics and organization of the parties themselves. A review of the data in Tables 1 through 5 suggests several critical dimensions of the change in party competition.² We pay particular attention here to four: 1. how fragmentation was overcome and a system dominated by two party competition emerged; 2. the particular character of that competition; 3. the meaning of recent changes in the structure of each

1 The most complete study of MAS to date is Ellner (1992). For further insights into Causa R, see Farruco (1992).

2 Data for these and all tables in this paper are drawn from official figures provided by the Consejo Supremo Electoral.

party's vote and of growing abstentions; and 4. the relation between votes and representation in Congress.

Electoral fragmentation comes in many forms. One obvious element is the sheer growth in the number of candidates and parties seeking office. Three candidates competed for the presidency in 1958, twenty-three in 1988; eight parties presented legislative slates in the first election, compared to seventy-eight thirty years later. Although these numbers are impressive, they need to be treated with care. Although a growing number and variety of groups have sought the presidency, only AD and COPEI have won it. Moreover, these two parties have never combined for less than half the total vote, with that low level coming only at the high-water marks of electoral dispersion, in 1963 and 1968. Since 1968, their joint domination has expanded to account for over 90 percent of the presidential vote during the 1980s (Table 5).

With respect to legislative elections, despite the fact that almost ten times more parties competed in 1988 than thirty years earlier, the number gaining at least one deputy increased only from four to eleven over the same period. That high point was reached in 1973 and has not increased since, although the composition of the group of winners has changed substantially. This result is all the more impressive given Venezuela's generous proportional representation system, which allocates additional seats by national electoral quotient after results are decided within states and territories. The data in Tables 3 and 4 affirm the long-term trend of controlled fragmentation and gradually consolidated domination by AD and COPEI.

Throughout the thirty years of modern democratic politics, AD has never yielded its position as the single biggest party in either house of congress. COPEI has gradually risen to a consistent second place, even in elections where its presidential candidate won strongly as was the case in 1978. The rest of the votes (and seats) have been divided among parties that rarely survived more than a decade (two electoral periods in Venezuela) with any significant strength. Of all the parties that have arisen thus far to challenge AD, COPEI, and the pattern of joint domination, only MAS has resisted the trend. Candidates from MAS have now competed successfully in four elections, holding their own in the first three and growing strongly in votes and seats in 1988. We suggest below that recent electoral reforms favor continued gradual growth for MAS, especially in legislative elections and in votes at the subnational level.

The evolution of competition warrants separate attention. The decade after 1958 was marked by steady decline for AD, uninterrupted growth for COPEI, and the rise and fall of a number of electoral phenomena. Although elections became more competitive in these years, this competition lacked coherence or enduring structure. Growing dispersion of the vote raised fears about fragmentation and possible atomization of the party system. The 1968 elections were the high-water mark of electoral dispersion in Venezuela. Nine major parties (and countless minor groups) competed for public office, with none gaining more than 30 percent of the total

vote. These results seemed to build on the pattern set in 1963 when five strong competitors divided the vote. COPEI took power in that year, the first time an opposition party had ever defeated government and entered office in free elections. COPEI's victory came on a very narrow plurality, with its perennial candidate (Rafael Caldera) squeaking into office with barely 29 percent of the vote, the smallest winning percentage in modern history.

The 1968 election was a decisive turning point. Although competition remained high in later years, fragmentation suddenly disappeared. The share of presidential votes going to "Other" (other than AD or COPEI) dropped from 42.2 percent in 1968 to 12.4 percent in 1973 and since then has headed down, with AD and COPEI successfully pushing their rivals to the margin. Electoral fragmentation was not the only thing left behind with the elections of 1968. The character of viable political parties also changed. The first three national elections under democratic rule gave substantial place to electoral phenomena, loosely organized political vehicles gathered around the candidacy of one striking individual. In 1958, this role was filled by Admiral Wolfgang Larrazábal, popular head of the Provisional Junta that replaced Perez Jimenez. As noted earlier, Larrazábal went on to found his own party, Fuerza Democrática Popular (FDP), in 1963, a year that also witnessed the phenomenon of Arturo Uslar Pietri, a well-known writer, who later founded his own party, Frente Nacional Democrático (FND). These two made their last stand in 1968 when they joined URD's declining forces in a coalition that took about 20 percent of the total vote. Approximately another fifth went to Luis Beltran Prieto, whose Movimiento Electoral del Pueblo (MEP) emerged that year as a result of AD's worst and (so far) last division. Even the former dictator Marcos Perez Jimenez got substantial votes that year, as the Cruzada Cívica Nacionalista (CCN) elected almost a tenth of the Chamber of Deputies (on the basis of a slightly smaller popular vote) in his name.

In the decade after 1968, electoral phenomena disappeared, AD rebounded, and COPEI continued to grow, peaking (in percentage terms) in the 1978 presidential vote (Tables 2 and 4). That pattern has continued to the present, with competition between AD and COPEI thoroughly dominating the political scene. Before we comment in detail on the nature of competition between these two parties, two points are required to set the whole pattern in context.

First, bear in mind that all this has taken place in the context of an expanding electorate that has more than matched the growth of the population. The number of registered voters has grown steadily throughout the entire democratic period, although the rate of increase has slowed lately, showing margins of 31, 25, and 18 percent over the last three recent elections. Turnout is high, with abstentions dropping steadily from 1958 to 1973, only to rise again in 1978, reaching over 18 percent in 1988. (See Table 7. We discuss the possible significance of rising abstention below.) This is no mean accomplishment in a country with such a youthful population and reflects deliberate and consistent effort.

The second point concerns the impact of the electoral system itself. The basic principles of the system were laid down in the trienio reforms and remained substantially unchanged until the late 1980s. These include basic norms such as universal suffrage (all adults over 18), the obligatory and secret character of the ballot, proportional representation for legislatures and only a relative majority for president, and the constitution of a strong, independent body to oversee elections and count votes (the Consejo Supremo Electoral). The voting system was designed to be simple and easy for a largely illiterate population to use. For example, the parties have long been identified with colors (white for AD, green for COPEI) a technique that reinforces the ease of ballot choice. Several other features of the system are relevant here, most notably the scheduling and integration of elections at all levels, the process of candidate selection, and the operation of proportional representation.

Until 1979, when separate municipal elections were instituted, voting for public office in Venezuela occurred only once every five years. To cast a ballot, voters had to make two choices: one for president, by selecting or marking a large card with the appropriate party color or symbol; and another by repeating the operation with a small card and thereby casting a vote for the party's slate for all legislative seats. This included candidates for the Senate and Chamber of Deputies on the national level and also for state legislative assemblies and municipal councils. Such an arrangement enhanced the power of nationally organized parties and national-level leadership to define issues, select candidates, and control campaigns. Top leaders have long controlled candidate selection completely, fixing the place each candidate receives on the party's slate. Because legislative seats are allocated by proportional representation, location on the list has been critical to election. The structure of voting centers attention on differences among the parties: until recently the actual names of candidates have been little known.

The emergence of a system dominated by competition between two heterogeneous and broadly similar political parties is not exclusively an artifact of the electoral system. The kind of proportional representation used in Venezuela allocates seats with minimal distortion and makes it relatively easy for minor parties to gain some seats through a national quotient. Minor parties rely almost exclusively on such 'additional seats' for their representation, while AD and COPEI draw seats wholly from direct election (Tables 3 and 4).

Successful joint domination by AD and COPEI is basically a result of the overall homogenization and nationalization of society and politics described earlier. The political impact of regionalism, for example, has all but disappeared. Through all the national elections held since 1947, wherever AD was strong at the outset it has declined and then rebounded; where it was weak it came up. The pattern holds in reverse for COPEI, with the result that each party's vote is broadly similar in all regions, states, and territories. National influences dominate and vote swings are broadly similar in all areas: AD and COPEI compete evenly and in similar ways

throughout the nation. Moreover, despite the fact that these two parties now combine for a vote that recalls their joint total during the trienio, contemporary patterns are very different in structure. Trienio elections were wholly dominated by AD, but in subsequent votes the difference between the two parties' national totals dropped steadily until 1968, when an alternating pattern begins (Table 6).

How did AD and COPEI overcome decline and dispersion to achieve this impressive joint control? In retrospect, it is clear that a deft combination of strong organizational work and effective media campaigning was decisive in helping these two parties to push their competitors definitively to the margins. It is true that only AD and COPEI have the financial backing that make it possible to bear the heavy costs involved in such an effort. But in modern Venezuelan politics, money is necessary but not sufficient. The failure of electoral phenomena after 1968 suggests the importance of combining financial strength with organization.

Alongside the AD-COPEI binomio, a few other noteworthy trends warrant separate attention. The data in Table 8 document a visible and growing gap in the share of the vote that parties receive for president and for their legislative slates. Part of the gap can be accounted for by the fact that smaller parties often latch on (as free riders) to the presidential ticket of major candidates, and their votes thus inflate the total. But this does not account for the sharp increase registered in the two elections of the 1980s, where the two major parties each dropped about 9 percent from presidential to legislative votes while their major competitor, MAS, rose by a similar amount. These changes have other sources, most notably the electoral reforms of 1979 that, by uncoupling local from national elections, made it easier for small parties to target resources and campaign efforts. This strategy has been followed successfully by MAS, not only in legislative voting but also, and most recently, in the newly uncoupled elections for state governors. We discuss the impact of recent reforms of the electoral system in the next section. Here it suffices to note the implications of the evolving pattern of competition for the internal dynamics of the parties and for the way Congress is run.

Rey (1990) has argued that the evolution of competition in Venezuela reordered the goals of party elites and reshaped the overall role that parties themselves play in the political system. As threats to the system began to fade, emphasis on defense of democracy as a priority also faded, yielding to a stress on electoral competition with decreasing ideological content. Stress on party discipline remains, but the power of party leaders to convince and control all component sectors in the name of the party has dropped off sharply. The growing independence of organized labor from party discipline is only one sign among many.

The emergence of two-party competition reflects successful efforts by both AD and COPEI to occupy the center and to tailor campaigns around the satisfaction of a diverse range of interests. Declining ideological difference and the consistent presence in the Congress of a

shifting set of potential partners have made for growing resort to short-term coalitions. This practice is likely to gain further strength from recent electoral reforms that, as noted, enhance the ability of smaller groups to compete in nonpresidential races.

Electoral Reform and Party Dynamics in the 1980s

During the 1980s, the political system (and in particular, domination by the political parties) came under increasing criticism. Despite many important achievements, particularly when compared to the predemocratic years or to the record of other countries in Latin America, the tendency in the 1980s and early 1990s in Venezuela has been to highlight deficiencies rather than successes. One criticism has focused on the political system's inability to guarantee a better standard of living for Venezuela's growing population. Once major threats to regime stability had been overcome, demands for greater political and especially socioeconomic participation grew sharper. Failures in this area have eroded the legitimacy of the party system and of the democratic regime as a whole. Appeals to 'belt tightening' during the country's present economic difficulties seem absurd to many, especially in light of the successive oil-driven economic booms of the 1970s and 1980s.¹ Corruption is another source of criticism and disenchantment. The inability of the judicial system to guarantee equal treatment and to punish the public officials and private persons involved in administrative scandals has discredited the regime. Political parties have also been widely accused of manipulating the judicial system to protect their members and supporters. In response to growing critiques of the party system, debate has turned to the need for electoral and more general political reforms that would affect the party system, and the state, as well as the relationships among the state, parties, social organizations, and individuals.

With respect to the electoral system, two somewhat contradictory points can be noted. Its relative simplicity stimulates and facilitates participation both by social organizations and individual citizens. The act of voting is simple, requirements for the registration of candidates and parties are very liberal, and voter registration functions smoothly. Parties win seats in Congress and state legislatures with a minimal number of votes. Based on the principles of extending political rights to the entire population and of including and representing the maximum possible

1 In the 1980s Venezuela's economy entered a serious decline, and hopes for improvement in the socioeconomic situation of the population have been frustrated. The combination of declining prices for petroleum, ineffective economic policies, and the pressure of debt service payments have produced currency devaluation, inflation, and a sharp drop in real income. The exchange rate fell from 4.3 *bolívars* to the dollar in February 1983 to over 68 to the dollar in early September 1992. Inflation, which had remained in single digit figures until the mid-1970s, rose to over 80 percent in 1990. This rise has been concentrated in areas like shelter and food, with sharply negative results for the living standards of workers and marginal groups.

number of voters, the electoral system has functioned as an effective channel to incorporate the general population as well as more organized sectors into the political arena.

On the other hand, the electoral system in force through most of the democratic period creates or reinforces certain problems in the political system. The effect of the closed list system in concentrating candidate selection and overall decision-making authority in the hands of national party directorates reduces citizen control over the internal dynamics of the parties and over the performance of elected officials. The demands of party discipline further limit the responsiveness of elected officials to popular demands. The high cost of campaigning also creates financial barriers to the participation of political groups with fewer resources. As a result, the system does not guarantee political or electoral 'fair play' and facilitates the oligopolization of the political game (see Rey 1989b).

Universal suffrage and mandatory voting have been fundamental principles of Venezuelan democracy. In Venezuela, the act of voting has been viewed as a fundamental civic duty, not simply a right (see Rey 1989c). After 1958, voting was further viewed as an "expression of an emotional commitment of adherence to democracy," and the first elections were considered to be "plebiscites in favor of democracy" (Rey 1989c, 21).¹ Failure to vote was viewed as a crime deserving punishment.

The 1961 constitution established a system that has been relatively successful at combining presidentialism, based on a simple majority principle, with proportional representation at the legislative level.² Elections for senators and deputies are governed by the principle of proportional representation. The liberal nature of the proportional representation system as well as the low barriers established for the creation of new parties have been effective sources of incorporation and legitimacy for the democratic system.³ Prior to the adoption of the Second Constitutional Amendment, which took effect in 1983, this principle was applied in municipal

1 The Pact of Punto Fijo reads as follows: "All votes bestowed on the democratic candidacies will be considered as one, and the sum of votes for the competing colors [parties] as an affirmation of the people's support for the constitutional regime and the consolidation of the rule of law."

2 Recent studies on the impact of institutional factors on the establishment, consolidation, and maintenance of democracy have called attention to the different effects of presidentialism and parliamentarism on regime stability. See Linz (1990) and Mainwaring (1990). It has also been argued that the combination of presidentialism and proportional representation creates instability and crises of governability. Venezuela is an exception to both arguments, due in general terms to the hegemony of AD and COPEI: that is, to party discipline, de facto two-party politics, and the nonpolarized nature of ideological debate, as well as to efforts made to reach accords and para-institutional pacts that complement strictly electoral mechanisms and results.

3 The electoral system is so liberal that it has allowed groups winning less than 1 percent of the vote in their districts to win seats in the Chamber of Deputies. To register state-level parties it is necessary to present a roster of members equivalent to no less than 0.5 percent of the total of registered voters in the specific district. If a party registers in at least 12 states, it is automatically constituted as a national party. Also, any group of voters that obtained at least 3 percent of the vote in the previous state or national elections can legally become a party [*Ley de Partidos Políticos, Reuniones Públicas y Manifestaciones*, articles 10, 16, 17].

elections as well.¹ Senators and deputies are elected through a combination of direct elections and the distribution of 'additional' seats.

Directly elected senators are chosen in each of the states and in the Federal District. The list obtaining the greatest number of votes elects the first senator and the second-place list elects the second, unless the first list receives more than twice the vote of the second, in which case it elects both of the directly elected senators. The remaining senatorial seats are awarded via the application of the national electoral quotient.² The maximum number of additional Senate seats allowed to each party increased from two to three with the latest reform of the *Ley Orgánica del Sufragio* in 1989.³ Thus, the Venezuelan Senate conforms to the classical federal formula whereby all territorial divisions have the same political weight, independent of differences in their population, size, amount of resources, etc. In a centralized state characterized by inequality among its political and territorial units, this formula runs counter to the principle of proportional representation. It has reinforced the dominance of the major parties in the upper chamber, since for all practical purposes they are the only parties capable of electing the two directly elected senators from each state.

Senatorial elections thus combine a (somewhat improved) majoritarian system with proportional representation. Although the system practically guarantees dominance by the two major parties, because of the rule stipulating that the first-place party must receive twice the total votes of the runner-up in order to take both seats, the possibility of one party's winning both directly elected senate seats from the same state is diminished. The distribution of the remaining senatorial seats also mitigates the effects of the majoritarian system and introduces elements of PR, though only to a limited extent since there remains a ceiling on the amount of additional seats that can be awarded.⁴

1 See Rey (1986). The amendment sets a precedent for the possible adoption of special and distinct electoral systems for elections to municipal councils and state legislatures. Although there was some debate as to the proper interpretation of the amendment, until recently it was generally accepted that given the political importance of the principle of proportional representation, some element of proportional representation must be present at the municipal level. See also Brewer-Carias (1987).

2 The electoral quotient is arrived at by dividing the total number of valid votes by the fixed number of senators to be elected. In awarding additional senators, the number of votes won by each national party is divided by the electoral quotient. If the difference between this result and the number of positions won by the respective party is one or two or more, then one or two additional senators are awarded to the party. The names are drawn from party lists in the states where the party had its best showing without winning representation in the Senate [*Ley Orgánica del Sufragio*, articles 14 and 16].

3 The *Ley Orgánica del Sufragio* was rewritten in 1989. Because these changes have not yet been applied in legislative elections, we will here describe the system as it existed before these changes. Among the most important changes are an increase in the number of 'additional' senators and deputies and the introduction of systems of preferential voting for the election of deputies.

4 A discussion of these issues can be found in Rey (1986, 22-23).

In the Chamber of Deputies, the population base for a seat is equal to 0.55 percent of the total national population. The number of deputies per district varies, and is arrived at by dividing the number of inhabitants by the population base. Deputies from districts are elected by the method of the electoral quotient via the d'Hondt system.¹ Although the Constitution of 1961 explicitly refers to 'additional' representatives only in the case of the Senate, this formula has also been applied to the election of federal deputies. Additional seats in the lower chamber are distributed using the national electoral quotient for deputies. Under the new law, the number of additional increased from four to five.²

Because voting is mandatory, the state is obliged to provide citizens with the resources necessary to guarantee its effective exercise. The Supreme Electoral Council (CSE), created in 1936, is central to the successful institutionalization and effective functioning of the Venezuelan electoral system.³ The CSE is widely respected, and operates with representation from all parties, who together staff voting tables at election time. Elections have been transformed into a source of legitimation for the political system largely because there exist guarantees that they will be conducted with impartiality and responsibility.⁴

The financing of party activities and campaigns has become increasingly controversial. Campaign funds come principally from four sources: regular contributions by party members; private contributions; state resources; and the Supreme Electoral Council. The financing of party activities rests largely on private donations and on the discretionary use of public funds by the party in power. Contributions by party activists are minimal, and funds provided by the CSE

1 Under the d'Hondt formula, a party's total vote in each constituency is divided by consecutive divisors (1, 2, 3, etc.) and each party's resulting quotients are arranged in numerically descending order, with seats awarded successively to the party with the highest quotient, until all seats have been distributed by party lists [*Ley Orgánica del Sufragio*, article 13].

2 The national electoral quotient is determined by dividing the total number of valid votes in the country by the fixed total of seats available in the Chamber of Deputies, following the established population base. The seating of additional deputies is achieved by dividing the total number of valid votes won by each national party by the electoral quotient. If the difference between this result and the number of seats won by the party around the country is 1, 2, 3, or 4, or more, then the party gains up to four additional seats. The names of the deputies are drawn from party lists in districts where the party failed to win representation or where there was a discrepancy between the number of votes the party obtained and the number of seats it won outright [*Ley Orgánica del Sufragio*, article 15].

3 The Supreme Electoral Council is charged with coordinating all stages of the electoral process: voter registration, candidates, electoral legislation, internal party disputes, voting itself, and above all with guaranteeing the regularity and fairness of elections. The Council is composed of nine members who serve for terms of five years. They are named by Congress, with five being nominated by the parties who received the largest share of the vote in the most recent election. The four remaining members are nonpartisan and are elected by a two-thirds vote of Congress. National parties receiving at least 3 percent of the vote in the most recent elections may also designate a representative to the council. This representative has the right to active voice only, not vote [*Ley Orgánica del Sufragio*, articles 38 and 39].

4 Even admitting the possibility of fraud at the level of local electoral boards, this does not appear to have any significant effect on the results of the weakest competitors in elections. See Molina and Vaivads (1989).

become available only after the campaign is over and almost never cover the total expenditures. This situation undermines the democratic quality of representation and has led, for example, to the adoption of public policies favorable to special interests that contributed to the financing of the campaign, to the inclusion of corporate and interest group representatives in state bureaux, and even at the level of the Cabinet, and to administrative corruption and fraudulent use of state resources.¹

To redress these problems, the 1978 *Ley Orgánica del Sufragio* authorized participation by the CSE in campaign finance. During election years, part of the CSE budget is reserved for financing party campaigns. Funds are distributed proportionally among the parties that obtained between five and ten percent of the total vote for the Chamber of Deputies in the most recent elections. The CSE may also purchase media time for party propaganda. This time is distributed equally to parties that won at least five percent of the vote in the last legislative elections.² Nevertheless, given the length, sophistication, and high costs of campaigns, these funds cover only a small part of the cost of campaigning for the large parties.

Criticisms of the Electoral System, and the Move Toward Reform

The intensity of criticisms of the party and electoral systems during the 1980s and early 1990s highlight the central role held by political parties in Venezuelan political life. It has been argued that the excessive domination by parties 'suffocates' civil society, that the parties have become pragmatic and corrupt machines beyond the reach of democratic and ethical controls, etc. The barrage of criticism to which the parties are being subjected is increasing and indeed worrisome. Numerous public opinion polls confirm this impression.³

Reformers have sought to change the role and conduct of the parties themselves. Proposals for reform have had three short-term goals. First, they seek internal democratization of the parties, especially with regard to the candidate selection process. Second, they argue for the establishment of conditions for 'fair play' in interparty competition. Finally, institutional reform is

1 On these issues see Rey et al. (1981, *passim*).

2 *Ley Orgánica del Sufragio*, article 155.

3 In a recent national survey, 87 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that "the parties only care about winning elections." Of respondents who identified themselves as *militantes* [party activists], 66.4 percent agreed that "the parties are corrupt." This figure differed little from the responses of those identifying themselves as *simpatizantes* [party identifiers] (70.3 percent) and independents (68.9 percent). The statement that "the parties are controlled by *cogollitos* [small closed leadership circles] was agreed to by 87.6 percent of *militantes*, 91.5 percent of *simpatizantes*, and 89.3 percent of independents. Some 88 percent of the sample agreed that "the parties talk a lot but don't do anything." The statement that "the parties are concerned about solving the country's problems" was disagreed with by 49.7 percent of *militantes*, 60.8 percent of *simpatizantes*, and 60.3 percent of independents. These data are from polling conducted by Data Analysis, CA, commissioned by COPRE after the 1989 municipal elections.

sought to foster greater quality and rationality in the electoral process, particularly as regards the regulation of campaigns and their financing.¹ Several proposed reforms are directed specifically at the electoral system. At the time of writing, the Venezuelan Congress was discussing the possible reform of the *Ley de Partidos Políticos, Reuniones Públicas y Manifestaciones* of 1965 (Venezuelan Senate, 1990).

Current reform measures date from the mid-1980s. On December 17, 1984, then President Jaime Lusinchi issued a decree creating the Presidential Commission on the Reform of the State (COPRE). COPRE was charged with preparing a blueprint for a far-reaching "overall reform of the state," as well as with proposing immediate and specific steps that would facilitate such reforms. Part of COPRE's activities were directed at the study and promotion of political reforms. Pointing to "the shortfall in the complexity of political institutions" (COPRE 1989, 101-18), COPRE stated that the complexity of the mechanisms and options of the electoral system should be matched by the degree of complexity attained by Venezuelan society. In the view of the Commission, it was time for institutional change in order to enhance representation and participation. COPRE has since been joined by various sectors and personalities in criticizing the current electoral system.² Criticisms ranged from those focusing on superficial and procedural aspects of the system, to proposals that challenged the basic principles of the existing electoral system (Rey 1986, 13-15).

One of the most controversial aspects of the public debate on electoral reform was the possibility of introducing the use of names on the ballot, the so-called *personalización* of voting.³ Proposals of this kind were often put forth by individuals or factions with slim chances of gaining seats under the existing model of closed party lists (see *El Nacional* 1990 and COPRE's response 1990). Party leaders have found it extremely difficult to respond to the barrage of criticism with an articulate and convincing defense of the principles and procedures under which the country has long operated.⁴

Another controversial feature of the system of representation is the extent to which popular votes are accurately reflected in the distribution of public offices. Although barriers to representation are relatively low in Venezuela, it is of course true that any system of voting and distribution of public offices contains some element of distortion. For example, the d'Hondt

1 See Rey (1986, 142). See also the *anexo* of this same article, entitled "Sobre la democratización de los partidos políticos."

2 See, among other sources: Rausseo (1981); Rey (1986); Brewer-Carias, (1987); Molina (1986 and 1991a); and Torres (1986).

3 One-fifth of all media coverage of electoral reforms in 1988 referred to this issue, with a majority of stories (57.3 percent) expressing support for preference voting. See CSE (1990a).

4 As Franklin Guzmán has pointed out, this has occurred to such a point that in the debate on electoral reform, "we saw two paradoxes: party politicians embarrassed about their profession and proposals for electoral reform that spoke of *uninominalidad* but with an added PR bonus" (Guzman 1989).

system as used in Venezuela works to the advantage of large parties. It also favors coalitions, and counters the dispersion of votes (see Rey 1986, 42 and Rausseo 1981, 42-44). The task of raising this issue has fallen almost entirely to the minority parties, in particular the MAS (see Molina 1989 and MAS 1989). According to leaders of MAS, the three elements used to distribute seats (the electoral formula, the size of districts, and mechanisms for final compensation) have distorted Venezuelan PR to the detriment of smaller groups and factions.¹

Efforts to reform the electoral system also respond to changes in Venezuelan electoral behavior which some attribute to deficiencies of the electoral system itself. In particular, the increase in abstention over the past several elections is seen as a reason for electoral reform, in the belief that change is needed to bring about greater participation by the electorate. Until recently, Venezuela pointed with pride to its high levels of electoral participation. Nevertheless, since the first election for municipal councils (1979) and in the subsequent local contests, the level of abstention has increased. In the national elections of 1978 the rate of abstention was 12.4 percent, while in the municipal elections of 1979 this figure climbed to 27.1 percent. Whereas abstention was 12.1 percent in the 1983 national elections, in the municipal elections the following year it reached 40.7 percent. Finally, in the national elections of 1988 abstention was 18.3 percent, and in the recent elections for state governors, mayors, and municipal authorities the figure soared to 54.8 percent.² In a system that views voting as a civic duty and as a pledge of adherence to the democratic regime, such a rise in abstention causes serious concern. Inasmuch as voting (or, perhaps more accurately, voting for AD or COPEI) and support for democracy have long been linked both practically and ideologically, abstention looms as a real problem, especially given the broader context of increasing criticism of the political system as a whole.

Reforms Put into Practice

The adoption in 1978 of the *Ley Orgánica del Régimen Municipal* was an attempt to give autonomy and administrative viability to municipalities (see Linsey and Herrera 1980). This initiative opened the door for significant political and electoral reforms. The main reforms enacted during the 1980s consisted of separate elections for municipal councils (1979), direct elections for the offices of state governors and mayors (1989), and the introduction of elements of nominal

1 Despite these arguments, there have been no attempts to replace the d'Hondt system with other methods of awarding seats, in particular the Saint Lague method. It has been concluded that any improvements on the present system would be marginal. There would also be the problem that Saint Lague does not work in favor of coalitions, a crucial feature of the Venezuelan political system. See Rausseo (1981, *passim*).

2 Data are from CSE (1990b).

voting in the selection of municipal councils (1989).¹ The introduction of separate elections for the municipal councils had at least two important consequences: first, it granted political relevance and identity to local government, generating the conditions for increased autonomy; and second, it created new political space for competition with new electoral opportunities for smaller parties and groups.

Party representation in the councils is now more diverse than would have resulted from merely repeating at the municipal level the results of national legislative elections (see Molina 1986 and 1991b). Although AD and COPEI have continued to obtain the highest vote shares in all municipal contests since 1978, the creation of new spaces for party and electoral competition has tended to favor minority parties and factions. This is especially true for MAS, and most recently for Causa R. For example, in the 1978 elections MAS won 6.16 percent of the legislative vote, and the Left as a whole won 13.5 percent. In the municipal elections of 1979, competing as a united bloc, the Left's share of the vote rose to 16.36 percent. In the municipal elections of 1984 MAS gained 7.21 percent of the vote, as opposed to only 5.75 percent in the legislative elections of 1983. Finally, in the recent elections of 1989, MAS-MIR (the two parties merged) captured 18.0 percent of the vote at the municipal level, (as opposed to 10.2 percent in the previous year's legislative elections) despite an absolute decline of 20,000 votes.² Although MAS increased its percentage of the total vote, in absolute terms the party's vote decreased by more than 58,000 due to the growing proportion of the electorate abstaining. Causa R's vote in the 1989 elections was heavily concentrated in urban areas, above all Ciudad Guayana and Caracas. Since many smaller parties tend to manifest a higher degree of militancy than is the case in the larger party organizations, in relative terms they have benefited from rising rates of abstention.

Municipal reform also affected internal party dynamics. Separate elections for councilors have legitimized municipal politics as a relevant political space within the system. Consequently, groups that compete successfully within this new sphere have acquired greater autonomy and legitimacy within their respective parties, as well as a basis for questioning the continued dominance of traditional party elites.³ The need to take into account local criteria in the

1 Here we have taken into account modifications of the *Ley Orgánica del Sufragio* in 1978 and 1979, the promulgation of the *Ley Orgánica del Régimen Municipal* in 1978, and the promulgation of the *Ley de Elección Directa de los Gobernadores de Estado* in 1988. Still under discussion are the *Ley de Partidos Políticos*, *Reuniones Públicas*, y *Manifestaciones* and additional changes in the *Ley Orgánica del Sufragio*.

2 Data are from the CSE.

3 For example, in March 1979 the National Executive Committee of Acción Democrática issued its "Rules for the Selection of Candidates for Municipal Councils." These rules established that in the selection of primary candidates for *ayuntamientos*, the party's District Committee "must consult the opinion of the ranks of party activists, through assemblies made up of the directors of local committees" and must also solicit "the opinion of neighborhood associations in the community." See Gil (1986).

elaboration of candidate lists for councilors and mayors has led to confrontations (some very severe) between national and local leaders within the parties.

Direct elections for state governors are another recent and important innovation in the electoral system.¹ Prior to 1989, governors were appointed officials serving at the pleasure of the President of the Republic. As in the case of municipal elections, direct gubernatorial elections have opened new space for political participation on the part of previously uninvolved citizens and groups, narrowing the distance between voters and elected officials and reinforcing the tendency to decentralize power. The results of the first gubernatorial elections were mixed. Relatively high abstention rates in these elections suggests that they did not trigger the degree of 'civic enthusiasm' hoped for.² Still they did succeed in personalizing and localizing elections, this time at an even more important politico-administrative level. They also opened spaces for smaller parties and allowed experimentation with new forms of opposition.

Despite these multiple reforms, the party dominance of AD and COPEI remains apparent. In the December 1989 elections, of a possible 20 state governorships, AD won 11, COPEI 6, and MAS and Causa R one each. Under the former electoral formula, all twenty governors would have gone to AD. In any case, AD's apparent success is somewhat deceptive; the party lost in the most populous states with Aragua, Carabobo, Bolívar, Merida, Miranda, and Zulia all going to the opposition (Table 9). Furthermore, several governors' races saw the formation of coalitions and alliances among opposition groups which in some cases proved crucial to the victory of certain candidates.³

Direct elections for mayors were also introduced in 1989, along with 'preference voting' for municipal councilors. Under this system, voters may either vote for the entire list proposed by a party, or choose their preferred candidates by name from among all registered candidates even when their names appear on separate party lists.⁴ According to one of its founders, the purpose

1 The method for choosing state governors sparked bitter debate in the Constitutional Assembly of 1946-47. During debates that led to the Constitution of 1961, a similar confrontation was avoided by adopting the 'temporary' solution (which lasted nearly thirty years) of presidential designation of governors until the matter could be resolved definitively. See Kornblith (1991).

2 Orlando Contreras Pulido, director of municipal affairs for COPEI, predicted that direct popular election of governors, mayors, and municipal councilors "will generate civic enthusiasm in a population wearied by the formal and routinized practice of democracy. [They will give] a second wind to a system which 31 years after its founding has fallen into elitism, and is therefore distant from the people and absolutely disoriented in regard to its purposes" (Contreras Pulido 1989, 56-57, italics added).

3 For example, in the state of Carabobo, the COPEI candidate won with 46.6 percent of the vote. Of this total, 31.3 percent came from COPEI supporters, 11.4 percent from MAS voters, and the rest from votes cast for smaller groups and factions. The AD candidate won 45 percent of the total vote.

4 These innovations were established by the reform of the *Ley Orgánica del Régimen Municipal* in 1988 and by the partial modification of the *Ley Orgánica del Sufragio* in 1989. According to law, each voter may vote for as many names as equal the total number of candidates to be elected in the municipality [*Ley Orgánica del Sufragio*, article 161].

of this reform was to increase the powers of the voters vis-à-vis the party organizations (Molina 1991b). In all, 269 mayors were chosen throughout the country. Of these, AD won 151, COPEI 105, MAS 10, Causa R 2, with an independent group of voters from the state of Falcón winning 1 (Table 9). In these elections, 38.4 percent of the candidates ran under the banner of a multiparty coalition. Alliance politics were decisive in only two cases for AD, but for COPEI the coalition option was critical to victory in twenty-five races, seventeen of which saw alliances between COPEI and MAS.¹ Even though the government party once again proved victorious in these contests, alliance politics within the opposition functioned smoothly and demonstrated their capacity to generate support, thus undoubtedly strengthening the practice of interparty accords in the future.

In the December 1989 elections for municipal councilors, 24.5 percent were chosen by preference voting and 75.5 percent through the traditional party-list method. (Only 14 percent of voters made use of the new electoral option.) Of the 481 councilors elected by nominal voting, 41.2 percent gained office through the effects of preference voting (10 percent of the total number of councilors elected).² Though underutilized by the electorate, the capacity of nominal voting to modify the positions of candidates on party lists altered the final outcome significantly.

Both voter abstention and the underutilization of preference voting are cause for some reflection on the implications of recent electoral reforms. Why did these elections, and the new electoral system on which they are based, not awaken the 'civic enthusiasm' hoped for? Were such expectations justified in the first place?³ Numerous opinion polls have shown that the public was not well informed about the issues and had no clear image of what was at stake in these political and electoral reforms.⁴ Furthermore, when one considers that the last elections took place a mere 10 months after the violence of 27-F (Kornblith 1989), it is perhaps even more remarkable that the government party was able to get an electoral majority in the first place, and that abstention did not climb higher still. The lack of adequate publicity about the new system, combined with the overall atmosphere of social unrest, political decay, and economic decline, suggests that expectations of greater electoral participation and interest in the December elections were unfounded.

1 Data are from CSE (1989c). See also Carrasquero and Welsch (1989c).

2 Data are from CSE (1990a). According to Molina, the number of voters using the preference voting system reached 30 percent and 24 percent of municipal councilors were elected by preference voting (see Molina 1991b, 225 ff.).

3 For an argument that the question of preference voting was given exaggerated importance in debates over electoral reform, see Guzmán (1989a).

4 A review of press coverage between May and November 1988 shows that electoral reform was not an issue of great importance, and further, that it faded as the campaign got underway. This is consistent with the low level of information in the general public about issues of electoral reform. See CSE (1990c; also 1989b).

The combined predominance of AD and COPEI has not been seriously challenged by the recent elections. The incumbent party has won each time, although since the 1989 elections incumbents at the national level have been required to share power in broader and more meaningful senses at the regional and local levels. In part, this is due to the fact that the municipal and state elections were held less than a year after the national elections (though the timing of the elections was not stipulated by the law), so that in practice national elections may have exercised a kind of 'drag' on the subsequent contests. Many believe that the separation of these electoral contests should serve as a kind of plebiscitary mechanism for consultation and criticism of the incumbent administration. However, the timing of these contests, on the heels of the national elections, can also be viewed as an attempt by the larger parties to consolidate the results rendered at the national level.

Although overall assessment of these reforms remains premature, at first glance the results appear decidedly mixed. Reforms have clearly increased local and regional autonomy, created new spaces for political competition and participation, and narrowed the distance between voters and elected officials. At the time of writing, when many national politicians are encountering severe criticism, polls show state governors with high levels of popularity, much higher than those going to their counterparts in Congress. At the same time, growing voter abstention has spurred skepticism about the long-term effects the reform process can have on the creation of new and effective channels for popular participation.

In general terms, the implementation of these reforms has clearly generated a new set of dynamics in the Venezuelan party system. Although the overall system remains dominated by AD and COPEI, the smaller parties and factions are gradually increasing their participation at lower levels of power. A new generation of leaders is clearly emerging, with careers rooted not in Congress and national party machinery but in success with state and local-level voters. Politicians now vie to be candidates for governor and mayor, offices not even open to direct election ten years ago. These changes, including increased power for local leaders (both within and independent of the parties) and the emergence of new relations among political forces, now require party leaders to begin crafting new rules of the game.

Within the party system itself, we can observe the emergence of three political and electoral subsystems which, although they overlap to a certain degree, are to some extent independent of one another. At the level of presidential elections, the hegemony of AD and COPEI has been reinforced in recent contests. At the level of national legislative elections, their joint control remains but is now accompanied by a growing tendency toward voter dispersion, a process that permits greater representation of small parties. This has led to new and often temporary alliance patterns in Congress and state legislatures. Finally, although AD and COPEI remain dominant at state and local levels, there is a shift in favor of smaller parties. New patterns

of behavior can also be observed within the electorate: abstention grows and political preferences diversify as one moves from the national to the local level. Although smaller parties and factions have attempted to exploit new electoral opportunities with great vigor, the electorate as a whole has reacted to the changes with apathy. The party system has become more complex, and patterns of competition and conflict are not as predictable as they once were. Intraparty competition has been promoted by the preference voting system, which in effect gives the electorate a key role as referee of these disputes. At the same time, interparty conflict can now proceed on different tracks at different levels, for example with parties and voters in local or regional contests making electoral agreements independent of national considerations.

Assessing the Reforms

Some of the electoral reforms undertaken in recent years have posed unanticipated problems for the political order. For reforms to take root, a number of changes must be made simultaneously in various aspects and levels of the system. One key aspect of this change is represented by the modification of the *Ley de Partidos Políticos* in ways that seek to make party organizations more participatory and more fully subject to democratic control.

Two key points are likely to affect the stability of the Venezuelan political system in the short to medium term. The first is the erosion of credibility and legitimacy enjoyed by the political parties, which carries over into a more general disillusionment with the political system. The second is the deterioration in the quality of life of much of the Venezuelan population. How much these reforms can contribute to reversing these trends remains an open question. So far, in an environment increasingly hostile to 'traditional parties,' these parties have been unwilling or unable to respond successfully. Meanwhile, new formulas for inter- and intraparty cooperation (and conflict) are emerging.

Reform efforts often assume that the basic pillars upon which the party system was built will remain solid, such that modifications will simply improve the status quo. But if one or more of these pillars, such as the nonpolarized nature of ideological debate, should change, reform could ultimately weaken the system in significant ways, creating unintended, but nonetheless real problems of governability and political stability.

We have already noted the tendency toward divergent voting patterns at the executive and legislative levels. This tendency is likely to grow in the future, making it harder to build the legislative alliances necessary to govern. In the past, the political system has adjusted successfully to situations where the party in power did not have a congressional majority. But in a contest where new agents of political power are being created and in which there exists an uneven balance of political forces between the national and regional levels, political power may fragment, resulting in a systemic incapacity to produce governing alliances. Party discipline and

party-government coherence have both decayed visibly in recent years, with serious implications for the ability of either the executive or the congress to act effectively and with reasonable dispatch. Additional problems stem from the emergence of groups of elected officials whose claims to legitimacy rest on different and somewhat conflicting bases. Governors, mayors, and municipal councilors, for example, who are elected by name, contrast their supposedly more direct link to the people with members of congress, elected on closed lists through a proportional representation system. The long-term legitimacy and effectiveness of the democratic system requires that electoral reform continue until all levels of the political system operate under comparable rules.

The electorate's general lack of response to new electoral opportunities suggests a widening communication gap between the parties and the electorate. The sudden outbreak of intense violence on February 27, 1989 in which all parties saw themselves overtaken by events,¹ as well as the sporadic turnout at a series of public rallies intended to encourage popular participation, are evidence of a widening gap. This may lead to a situation in which the parties, their leadership, and their programs become gradually disengaged from the population, and where reforms are simply added to a set of institutions, interests, and procedures that are alien to the very people they were created to represent.

The fact that proposals for political and electoral reform have emerged in a context of crisis has important implications for the future. On one hand, this crisis atmosphere spurs support for reforms that are widely perceived (at least in the political class) as an important 'cure' for a set of ills. It also reveals a needed capacity for self-critical reflection on the part of the main actors in the political system, as well as an ability for adapting the system to new challenges. On the other hand, this critical environment also places high (likely exaggerated) hopes in the capacity of institutional engineering (including modifications of the electoral system) to solve problems whose roots extend well beyond the electoral arena. Popular pressure for change may lead to hasty decision-making, to the detriment of the quality and consequences of the decisions taken.

The Venezuelan political system has arrived at a difficult juncture. Reforms already enacted indicate the existence of a will to change and an important level of self-criticism, together with a healthy awareness of the necessity of conserving the many positive aspects of the system. They also suggest that in spite of its serious shortcoming, the Venezuelan political system is not 'frozen' or 'petrified' (see Karl 1987 and Martz 1982), but instead is demonstrating initiative and flexibility for undertaking change leading to a deepening of democracy in that country.

1 Two instructive collections of articles and photographs from *El Nacional* (a leading Caracas daily newspaper) are *27 de febrero: Cuando la muerte tomo las calles* (Caracas: Editorial Ateneo de Caracas, 1990) and *El día que bajaron los cerros* (Caracas: Editorial Ateneo de Caracas, 1990).

Prospects for the Future

Political parties and the system built around them (the party system, in our terms) have contributed mightily to the creation and survival of democracy in Venezuela. The plus side of the political ledger is long, and the parties deserve credit for what they have accomplished. Mass publics have been incorporated into politics; high rates of participation have been combined with enduring stability; debilitating ideological polarization has been set aside; and threats of overthrow, insurrection, atomization, vote dispersion, and political fragmentation have all been overcome. Success in these efforts has been due, above all, to the combination of strong party organization, effective leadership, and an evolving democratic political culture. To be sure, past success is no guarantee of present or future virtue. Politics everywhere asks 'what have you done for me lately?' and even accounting for the force of memory, it is therefore appropriate, in conclusion, to consider not only what the parties have achieved, but also the dilemmas and challenges now emerging for the future. For the Venezuelan party system to survive and the democracy it has built to consolidate and prosper in the future, avoiding another sad February in Venezuela, three challenges must be addressed: coping with economic scarcity, accommodating demands for new channels of participation, and controlling the military.

Throughout most of its modern history, an expanding economy and overflowing treasury have given Venezuela's leaders room to maneuver often denied to their colleagues elsewhere in the hemisphere. Governments could count on ever-increasing income, with no need to take from anyone in order to increase the overall pie. Income taxes were essentially unknown. But the economic crisis (drop in oil prices, devaluation, inflation, and a large fiscal deficit) of the 1980s has raised questions about the ability of this system to operate in such different circumstances. Without abundant resources to distribute, the role of the state will have to shift, from dominant player to one actor among many. Thus far, efforts to reorient the role of the state and the pattern of public policy begun under the second government of Carlos Andrés Pérez in 1989 have had mixed results. At the very least it is clear that interelite pacts buttressed by organizational mechanisms to channel and control discontent can no longer be relied upon.

Accommodating new channels for citizen participation and in this way 'democratizing democracy' has been central to the reform programs under way for over a decade. It is important to realize that pressure for reform has roots that extend well beyond institutional engineering and the details of altered electoral systems. One way to grasp these pressures is to see them as the results of democracy itself. Pressures for reform of the parties and the party system gain strength from an organized civil society that simply did not exist when the party system took on its current form. The characteristics of Venezuelan political parties noted in this chapter—centralization,

national organization, and a constant effort to penetrate, encapsulate, and control organized social life along party lines—clash increasingly with the existence of a host of groups and movements that have sprung up throughout the social order, independent of party-controlled networks. These organizations—ranging from middle-class neighborhood associations, cooperatives, independent trade unions, and human rights organizations to a host of newly articulate nongovernmental organizations [NGOs]—no longer need the parties to gain access to information and acquire means of political action. They operate via networks of FAX and electronic mail, and have acquired independent access to radio, television, and print media. Groups like these have been among the foremost supporters of electoral reform. In the wake of the coup of February 4, 1992, these same organizations began to consolidate in alternative political organizations.¹

It remains unclear how and to what extent groups like these will be able to consolidate and form viable political alternatives. It will not be easy, because more is at stake than simply representing new social forces. The task at hand is not simply to represent but rather to do so in a way that provides reasonable order and governability to democratic politics. The dilemma, as yet unresolved, is that governability is desired at the same time that attacks are launched on the very elements (the parties and central state institutions) that have provided strength, unity, and governability in the past. Coming generations in Venezuela will have to figure out how to combine the virtues of decentralization and stimulus of participation with the advantages of unified leadership and disciplined party structures that have been at the heart of politics since 1958.

Controlling the military may prove to be the hardest of all. The attempted coup of February 1992 revealed deep divisions in the armed forces, above all a split between younger officers committed to radical change and those at the ranks of colonel or above who remained loyal to the system. The coup was engineered by a group of younger officers² whose commitment to an uprising dated back at least ten years with roots in strong nationalism, opposition to corruption, and the emergence of a new leadership generation. With command of the army's elite battalions, they organized a coordinated rising in four major cities (Maracaibo,

1 Examples include Factor Democrático, RED (Respuesta en Democracia), Mesa Democrática, or Queremos Elegir. Many of these groups are hard to trace or document in systematic ways, but see the series of articles published in *Economía Hoy* (Caracas) in July, August, and September of 1992: "Tras la Intentona de febrero nuevas caras esperan turno al bate" (July 21, 1992); "La Venezuela posible no es un sueño, es un hecho" (July 29, 1992); "La participación comienza con una 'red' de comunicación" (July 31, 1992); "La sociedad civil no quiere mas encomenderos" (August 5, 1992); "Los líderes del futuro aguardan su turno" (August 7, 1992); and "Escasez de postulaciones alternativas a los partidos tradicionales" (September 3, 1992). Elias Santana provides an interesting perspective on the nature of these new organizations (1992); for a general analysis see Levine and Crisp (1992).

2 Known as *comacates*, for *comandantes* [lieutenant colonels], *capitanes* [captains], and *tenientes* [lieutenants].

Valencia, Maracay, and Caracas) that only narrowly missed succeeding. Divisions in the armed forces, especially the army, have not been resolved.¹ Moreover, the popularity of their leaders, above all Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chavez Frias who has become something of a popular hero, poses a continuing challenge to the legitimacy of democratic politics and especially of the party system.

The mass of the Venezuelan public continues to prize democracy, but people's commitment is increasingly shot through with cynicism and a growing rejection of political parties. Available survey data show consistently strong support for democracy as a political system and also for the procedural norms and principles of legitimacy on which it is founded. Elections are widely acknowledged as the most legitimate path for political change and there is broad rejection of military or single-party rule and strong support for criticism by opposition parties. Although criticism of governments (as inept or corrupt) increased sharply in recent years, this has no clear impact on evaluations of democracy generally. Discontent with specific policies or leaders has thus far been transformed politically into a 'throw the rascals out' point of view.

The optimistic implications of this scenario are undermined by growing levels of voter apathy and abstention which raise serious questions about the long-term viability of a position that rests its hopes for the future on alternation between the two major parties (thus ejecting a different set of 'rascals' each election). There are not enough data at this point for analysis to confirm a trend with any degree of confidence. But it is clear that overcoming voter apathy, creating new, enduring bases for political organization, and democratizing the theory and the practice of democracy in Venezuela are the central challenges the parties and party system face in the foreseeable future.

1 On the military in Venezuela, see Daniels (1992) and, in a much more critical vein, Muller Rojas (1992).

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TABLE 5**Cumulative Vote Totals, Top Five Presidential Candidates, Venezuela, 1958-1988
(Percent)**

Top	1958	1963	1968	1973	1978	1983	1988
1	49.18	32.81	29.13	48.70	46.65	56.72	52.91
2	83.79	52.99	57.37	85.40	89.96	91.26	93.33
3	100.00	70.50	79.59	90.47	95.14	95.43	96.06
4	-	86.58	98.93	94.73	96.82	98.77	96.92
5	-	96.01	99.61	97.80	97.94	99.25	97.76
Others	-	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: CSE, Dirección General de Electoral

TABLE 6**Venezuelan Electoral Results, AD and COPEI, 1946-1988 (percentage)**

Year	Presidential		Legislative	
	Share Total Vote (AD+COPEI)	Difference (AD-COPEI)	Share Total Vote (AD+COPEI)	Difference (AD-COPEI)
1946	-	-	91.7	65.2
1947	96.8	52.0	91.1	50.5
1958	64.4	34.0	64.7	34.2
1963	53.6	13.2	53.5	11.9
1968	57.3	-0.9	50.0	1.5
1973	85.4	12.0	74.7	14.2
1978	89.9	-3.3	79.4	-0.12
1983	91.5	27.3	78.6	21.2
1988	92.9	12.7	78.4	12.4

Source: CSE, Dirección General de Electoral

TABLE 9

Elections for Governors, Mayors, and Municipal Council Seats, Venezuela

December 1989

	Governors			Mayors				Municipal Council Seats			
State	Winning Party	% Vote Winner	% Vote Party of Winner	AD	COPEI	MAS	Other	AD	COPEI	MAS	Other
D. Federal	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	17	10	8	1
Anzoátegui	COPEI	53,6	34,3	12	1	1	-	52	37	2	11
Apure	AD	56,6	55,6	5	1	-	1	25	21	1	-
Aragua	MAS	50,5	48,8	2	6	7	-	40	33	31	10
Barinas	AD	51,5	51,1	5	5	-	-	34	30	3	1
Bolívar	CAUSA R	40,3	40,3	5	2	-	2	32	22	-	15
Carabobo	COPEI	46,6	31,3	5	4	-	1	30	25	19	12
Cojedes	AD	47,6	46,9	5	2	-	-	24	20	1	-
Falcón	COPEI	50,6	44,1	7	14	-	-	63	60	1	9
Guárico	AD	52,2	51,5	11	3	-	-	52	34	7	3
Lara	AD	40,3	39,5	6	2	-	-	29	29	10	2
Mérida	COPEI	19,1	18,6	5	12	-	5	52	78	3	3
Miranda	COPEI	41,4	39,8	9	6	3	-	63	55	14	13
Monagas	AD	58,1	56,4	10	-	-	-	43	22	1	8
Nueva E.	AD	49,0	47,6	5	6	-	-	38	27	5	5
Portuguesa	AD	38,4	38,1	11	3	-	-	46	34	10	10
Sucre	AD	55,3	55,3	15	-	-	-	64	32	7	4
Táchira	AD	45,3	44,9	11	11	-	-	71	56	19	2
Trujillo	AD	48,0	48,0	11	2	-	1	44	47	2	7
Yaracuy	COPEI	42,0	38,5	3	5	-	-	26	26	2	2
Zulia	COPEI	38,4	37	4	13	-	-	51	70	6	13
T. Amazonas	-	-	-	6	1	-	-	4	3	1	1
T. Delta Am.	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	4	2	3	-
Venezuela	-	-	-	149	99	11	10	903	772	156	132

Source: CSE, Dirección General de Electoral. Figures for Mayors and Municipal Council Seats from Carrasquero and Welsch (1989, 15)

TABLE 1
Results of Venezuelan Presidential Elections, 1947-88

Year	AD		COPEI		Others (top 3 in order of finish)		Total Valid Votes
	#	%	#	%	#	%	
1947	880,720 Gallegos	74.40	265,163 Caldera	22.40	37,881 Machado	3.20	1,183,764
1958	1,284,042 Betancourt	49.18	432,262 Caldera	16.21	903,479 Larrazábal-URD/PCV	34.61	2,610,833
1963	975,574 Leoni	32.81	589,177 Caldera	20.18	1,530,988 Villalba-URD Uslar-IFPN Larrazábal-FDP 2 others	43.02 17.51 16.08 9.43 3.99	3,077,739
1968	1,050,806 Barrios	28.24	1,083,712 Caldera	29.13	1,586,142 Burelli-URD-FND, FDP Prieto-MEP Hernández-MAN 1 other	42.63 22.22 19.34 0.68 0.39	3,720,660
1973	2,130,743 Pérez	48.70	1,605,628 Fernández	36.70	542,560 Paz-MEP Rangel-MAS Villaba-URD 7 others	12.40 5.07 4.26 3.07 2.20	4,375,269
1978	2,309,527 Piñerúa	43.31	2,487,318 Herrera	46.64	425,890 Rangel-MAS Arria-Causa Común Prieto-MEP 5 others	7.99 5.18 1.68 1.12 2.06	5,332,712
1983	3,773,709 Lusinchi	56.72	2,298,176 Caldera	34.54	499,562 Petkoff-MAS Rangel-MEP Olavarria-Nueva República 7 others	7.51 4.17 3.34 0.48 0.75	6,653,317
1988	3,879,074 Pérez	52.91	2,963,015 Fernández	40.42	325,059 Petkoff-MAS-MIR Marín-ORA Villalba-URD 18 others	4.43 2.73 0.86 0.84 2.24	7,331,387

Source: CSE, Dirección General de Electoral

TABLE 2
Venezuelan Legislative Elections, 1958-1988
Votes, by Party

											TOTALS		
Year	AD	COPEI	URD	PCV	FND	FDP	CCN	MEP	MAS	Other (#)	Number of Parties	Parties gaining at least one deputy	Valid Votes
1958	1,275,973 49.45%	392,305 15.20%	690,357 26.76%	160,791 6.23%	-0-	-0-	-0-	-0-	-0-	60,791 2.36%	8	4	2,580,217
1963	936,124 32.77%	595,697 20.86%	497,454 17.42%	-0-	381,600 13.36%	274,096 9.60%	-0-	-0-	-0-	171,295 6.00%	11	8	2,856,266
1968	939,759 25.55%	883,814 24.03%	340,195 9.25%	103,591 2.82%	96,027 2.61%	194,931 5.30%	402,351 10.94%	475,909 12.94%	-0-	241,507 6.57%	33	9	3,678,084
1973	1,955,439 44.44%	1,330,514 30.24%	140,462 3.19%	52,754 1.20%	11,313 .26%	54,759 1.24%	189,667 4.31%	218,192 4.96%	232,756 5.29%	213,909 4.86%	37	11	4,399,765
1978	2,096,512 39.68%	2,103,004 39.81%	88,807 1.68%	55,168 1.04%	-0-	-0-	-0-	117,455 2.22%	325,328 6.16%	496,615 9.40%	29	11	5,282,889
1983	3,284,166 49.95%	1,887,226 28.71%	125,458 1.91%	115,162 1.75%	-0-	-0-	-0-	129,263 1.97%	377,795 5.75%	655,255 9.97%	52	12	6,574,325
1988	3,123,790 43.26%	2,247,236 31.12%	103,883 1.43%	70,058 .97%	-0-	-0-	-0-	116,621 1.62%	733,421 10.16%	825,241 11.43%	78	11	7,220,250

Source: CSE, Dirección General de Electoral

TABLE 3**Senate Seats Obtained by Party, Venezuela, 1958-1988
(Number and Percent)**

Year	AD		COPEI		Others (top 3 in order of finish)		Total Seats
	# of seats	%	# of seats	%	# of seats	%	
1958	32	62.75	6	11.76	13	25.49	51
1963	22	46.81	8	17.02	17	36.17	47
1968	19	36.54	16	30.77	17	36.69	52
1973	28	59.57	13	27.66	6	12.77	47
1978	21	47.73	21	47.73	2	4.54	44
1983	28	63.64	14	31.82	2	4.54	44
1988	22	47.83	20	43.48	4	8.70	46

Source: CSE, Dirección General de Electoral

TABLE 4

Chamber of Deputies, Seats by Party, Venezuela, 1958-1988
(Number and Percent)

Year	AD	COPEI	URD	PCV	FND	FDP	CCN	MEP	MAS	Other*	No. of Parties	Seats
1958	73 54.89%	19 14.29%	34 25.56%	7 5.26%	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	133
1963	66 37.08%	38 21.35%	29 16.29%	-	22 12.36%	16 8.99%	-	-	-	7 3.93%	8	178
1968	66 30.84%	59 27.57%	17 7.94%	5 2.34%	4 1.87%	11 5.14%	21 9.81%	25 11.68%	-	10 4.67%	11	214
1973	102 51%	64 32%	5 2.5%	2 1%	-	-	7 3.5%	8 4%	9 4.5%	3 1.5%	10	200
1987	88 44.22%	84 42.21%	3 1.51%	1 .5%	-	-	-	4 2.01%	11 5.53%	9 4.52%	11	199
1983	113 56.50%	60 30%	3 1.5%	3 1.5%	-	-	-	3 1.5%	10 5%	8 4%	11	200
1988	97 48.26%	67 33.33%	2 1%	1 .5%	-	-	-	2 1%	18 8.96%	14 6.97%	11	201

* Other, by year: 1963 (3); 1968 (3); 1973 (3); 1978 (5); 1988 (5)

Source: CSE, Dirección General de Electoral

TABLE 7
Electoral Participation and Abstention, Venezuela, 1958-1988
(Legislative Votes)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Year	Estimated Electoral Population	Registered Voters #	Registered Voters % (Col. 2 as % of Col. 1)	Total Votes	Total Votes (Col. 4 as % of Col. 2)	Valid Votes #**	Valid Votes %** (Col. 6 as % of Col. 4)	Abstention #	Abstention % (Col. 8 as % of Col. 2)
1958	3,337,739	2,913,801	87.30	2,684,949	92.15	2,580,217	96.10	228,852	7.85
1963	4,072,595	3,369,968	82.75	3,053,974	90.78	2,856,266	93.53	310,552	9.22
1968	4,240,000	4,134,928	97.52	3,907,823	94.36	3,678,084	94.12	233,241	5.64
1973	5,103,748	4,737,122	92.82	4,572,187	96.52	4,399,765	96.23	164,965	3.48
1978*	6,186,000*	6,223,903	100.61	5,449,790	87.56	5,282,889	96.94	744,113	12.44
1983	8,186,535	7,777,892	95.01	6,818,606	87.75	6,574,325	96.42	952,712	12.25
1988	9,399,532	9,185,647	97.72	7,500,085	81.91	7,720,250	96.27	1,661,430	18.09

* The electoral population was seriously underestimated in 1978.

** For legislative vote

Source: CSE, Dirección General de Electoral

TABLE 8**Distance, Presidential-Legislative Votes, Venezuela, 1958-1988****Selected Parties (percentages)**

	1958	1963	1968	1973	1978	1983	1988
AD	-3.73	-.04	-1.91	-4.20	-3.63	-5.42	-9.5
COPEI	-0-	+.67	-4.65	-5.05	-5.47	-3.88	-8.96
URD	-15.47	-.09	-2.57	+.12	+.61	+.61	+.02
MEP	-	-	-4.41	+.59	+1.1	+.86	-0-
MAS	-	-	-	-0-	+1.46	+2.39	+7.45

* United MAS-MIR slate.

Note: Tables 1 and 2 give global figures for the candidate of a party. Table 8 is based only on the votes in the individual's party line.

Source: CSE, Dirección General de Electoral