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Hugo Chavez and President Bush's Credibility Gap: The Struggle Against US Democracy Promotion

N. SCOTT COLE

ABSTRACT. US President George W. Bush confronts a problem as he tries to promote global democracy. When he speaks about spreading freedom, many academics, world leaders, and media pundits respond that he is trying to bolster the USA's global influence. This article explores Bush's "credibility gap." It focuses on President Bush's democracy assistance in Venezuela and how it reinforces the notion that he has a legitimacy problem. This study also identifies how President Hugo Chavez has helped widen Bush's credibility gap. Finally, by using Venezuela as a case study, this article shows that Bush's lack of legitimacy limits his ability to spread democracy.

Keywords: • Hugo Chavez • George W. Bush • Democracy promotion
• Credibility gap

Introduction

As he pursues his vision of global democracy, US President George W. Bush confronts a "credibility gap." The credibility gap is the disparity between Bush's stated desire to end tyranny in the 21st century and the perspective held by some academics, world leaders, and media pundits that the president is not interested in spreading freedom. Critics of the administration's policy portray his democracy promotion as an attempt to bolster the USA's global influence. This article explores Bush's legitimacy problem by focusing on how his critics have interpreted his democracy assistance in Venezuela. Furthermore, it examines the role that Hugo Chavez has played in the construction of the administration's credibility gap. Bush's actions are not solely responsible for creating this impression.

To date, little evidence exists to demonstrate that President Bush has been able to export freedom. More democracies have not emerged as a result of his policies, and there are signs that authoritarian governments are gaining strength

(De Mesquita and Downs, 2005). There have been “color revolutions” in Georgia and Ukraine, which some say were assisted by the White House. But these successes are offset by the USA’s failures in Iran, Cuba, Zimbabwe, Egypt, China, Syria, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Belarus. Add political uncertainties in Iraq and Afghanistan to this list and Bush’s policy appears to be in trouble. This article argues that the credibility gap is one factor restricting the White House’s ability to promote democracy.

The case of President Hugo Chavez can help scholars understand the credibility gap’s emergence and how it influences Bush’s policy. Since 2001, the Bush administration has targeted Chavez by funneling democracy aid to his opponents. White House officials argue that President Bush is seeking to prevent Venezuela from becoming an authoritarian state, which they claim is happening under Chavez. In response to Bush’s policy, President Chavez rails against the White House and tries to undermine the USA. Despite Bush’s efforts, Chavez remains immune to US pressure and has extended his influence throughout Venezuela and Latin America. These factors make this case suitable for a study of Bush’s policy of democracy promotion.

This article does not contend that Venezuela’s democracy is perfect, nor does it argue that Chavez should be idolized. The author agrees with the perspective of Ellner and Hellinger (2004: 220), who maintain that “Chavez’s record on democracy and the efforts to deepen it were far from uniform or consistent. Undoubtedly, his government scored pluses for some initiatives and minuses for others.” However, an analysis of Bush’s democracy assistance leads to the conclusion that the USA is not helping to solve Venezuela’s democratic deficit. By incessantly focusing on Chavez, the Bush administration has been distracted from the goal of supporting democracy in Venezuela.

Some academics assert that President Bush’s policies should not be blamed for Venezuela’s troubles; they would prefer research that highlights domestic factors, especially focusing on Chavez’s presidency. This author does not completely disagree with such assertions. But ignoring the Bush administration’s role denies scholars a complete understanding of the situation. Furthermore, since US foreign policy influences domestic politics in Latin America (Pastor, 2001; Smith, 1999), there is reason to explore President Bush’s actions and how they impact Venezuela.

Interpretations of President Bush’s Democracy Promotion

Since 2001, numerous scholars have criticized President Bush’s foreign policy. Jervis (2005: 352) represents this trend: “The unprecedented extent of American power has allowed the United States to embark on its course, but does not mean that it can endure. In fact, I think it will collapse because of the Bush Doctrine’s internal contradictions and tensions, the nature of America’s domestic political system, and the impossibly heavy burden placed on America’s ability to understand the actors that are seen as potentially deadly menaces to it.”

Carothers (2003) is another critic of the Bush administration. He notes that President Bush is confronting significant resistance from authoritarian regimes. Carothers (2003: 59) states, “dictators cling to power, even in the face of a threatened outside military intervention. For them, stepping down is not just a political concession, it represents total defeat – the loss of a lifetime’s accumulation of power

and wealth, as well as the complete deflation of what is often a megalomaniacal sense of pride and self-importance." In recent research, he demonstrates that foreign leaders have been attacking civil society as a way of resisting US democracy aid. These actions represent a "backlash" against the USA's democracy promotion (Carothers, 2006).

Walt's (2005) research also reinforces a negative interpretation of Bush's foreign policy. He cites numerous examples in which the USA is being challenged by dictators and authoritarian regimes. To resist the White House, these leaders have developed various "strategies of opposition," such as increasing their military capabilities, blackmailing the USA with acts of terrorism, or using international organizations to weaken American sanctions against them. In such an environment, it becomes difficult for President Bush to influence political change in other nations.

Some scholars focus on Bush's credibility gap when dealing with his democracy aid. Dalacoura (2005) studies the president's lack of credibility by focusing on his Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). She states that people in the Middle East are skeptical when it comes to Bush's actions; they perceive his initiatives as representing imperialism and domination. Ottaway (2005) also explores the president's credibility gap in the Middle East. Her study analyzes the Arab media's treatment of American foreign policy, finding that they are cynical when describing Bush's democracy assistance. She writes, "The Arab press consistently questions U.S. intentions. Arab commentators lambasted the Bush administration for using the idea of democracy promotion as a code word for regime change" (Ottaway, 2005: 174).

It should be noted that this problem is not unique to the Bush presidency. Other presidents have been accused of using democracy aid to protect the USA's national security interests (Carothers, 1999). Regardless, it cannot be denied that George W. Bush faces a credibility gap. Gordon (2006: 76) reflects this opinion when he says that "Washington now lacks the reservoir of international legitimacy" to pursue the president's agenda.

Even though past research highlights this subject, questions remain when it comes to the credibility gap. For instance, many scholars identify the president's Middle East policy as being central to the legitimacy issue. But is the credibility gap associated with his actions in other parts of the world? Moreover, researchers argue that the media and public opinion have helped create Bush's credibility gap, but what other actors play a role in this process? Finally, past studies do not show how the gap weakens the effectiveness Bush's democracy aid. If it limits his influence, scholars need to identify when and how this occurs. This article asserts that foreign leaders use Bush's lack of credibility as they resist US foreign policy. The case of Hugo Chavez demonstrates this point.

President Bush and Venezuela

Hugo Chavez became Venezuela's president in 1998. For US policymakers, his rise to power was disconcerting, especially since Chavez tried forcefully to overthrow the government in 1992. After becoming president, moreover, he further troubled Washington by visiting dictators in other nations. As Clement (2005: 65) states, "During the Clinton administration, Chavez's visits to Iraq and his praise of Fidel Castro met with some skepticism." In order to stabilize Venezuela's

democracy, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) provided grants to the country's political parties and trade unions. This funding was not, however, intended to push Chavez out of power. There were disagreements between the USA and Venezuela, but President Clinton maintained cordial relations with Chavez (Romero, 2002).

With the election of George W. Bush, the US–Venezuelan relationship soured (Romero, 2004). Chavez sought to antagonize President Bush by saying that Washington only wanted to control Venezuela's oil. Furthermore, Chavez resorted to name-calling to challenge the president, frequently referring to him as Satan. For the White House, this behavior reinforced their argument that Venezuela's democracy was in danger. To prevent Chavez from creating a dictatorship, the Bush administration began funding democracy programs in Venezuela. Washington also tried to convince Venezuela's neighbors to isolate President Chavez.

According to some observers, President Bush is not concerned with promoting democracy, but with opposing Chavez. As Ellner and Salas (2005: 7) write, "the United States has talked about democracy promotion while funding efforts to undermine the elected Chavez presidency." Furthermore, Aviles (2005: 51) states that Bush has approached the "Chavez government via highly illiberal means and worked not to preserve democracy but to support and legitimize its termination." Exploring President Bush's Venezuelan policy can shed light on these perceptions and how they inform the notion that the White House has a credibility problem.

Democracy Promotion or Regime Change?

The White House pressures Chavez by supporting his opponents, a policy that utilizes numerous democracy-assistance organizations. One of these is the National Endowment for Democracy. Created in 1984 by the Reagan administration, the NED receives appropriations from Congress, which it distributes to nongovernmental organizations. During Bush's presidency, the NED has channeled some of its funds to the National Democratic Institute (NDI), which is affiliated to the US Democratic Party. In 2001, it received a grant worth US\$210,500. With this funding, the NDI developed ties to several opposition organizations in Venezuela, such as Proyecto Venezuela, a group that wants Chavez out of power. The Republican Party's counterpart to the NDI, the International Republican Institute (IRI), also receives grants from the NED. During 2001, "the IRI office in Venezuela established a firm working relationship with opposition figures, among them Francisco Aria Cardenas, an erstwhile Chavez cohort who had competed against him in the 2000 election, and Caracas Mayor Alfredo Pena" (Clement, 2005: 70).

In 2002, Bush increased grants for democracy programs in Venezuela to US\$1 million. This appropriation was given to the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL), and the DRL gave some of its money to the NED. As a result of this funding, Venezuela became "the most heavily funded of all NED programs in the region, with a total of US\$1,099,352" (Clement, 2005: 72). With some of this money, the National Endowment for Democracy has funded Sumate, an organization that seeks to remove Chavez from office. In a grant proposal, this group said that any money it received from the USA would be used for a recall referendum against Chavez (Clement, 2005).

Bush also uses other methods to pressure Chavez, which are outlined in a US State Department report entitled "Supporting Human Rights and Democracy: The US Record, 2004–2005." This document indicates that Washington contacts Chavez directly to voice its concerns about Venezuela's political situation. For example, the State Department recently informed Chavez that President Bush was troubled by proposed media legislation, which the White House said would weaken freedom of speech in Venezuela. Furthermore, this report indicates that the USA supported the recall election against Chavez. Also, the White House has encouraged Venezuelans to study in the USA as part of its democracy programs.

President Bush uses the bully pulpit to challenge Chavez as well. During his public appearances, the president frequently mentions Chavez's policies and how they harm Venezuela, apparently hoping this rhetoric will reduce Chavez's popularity and lead to his ousting. Also, Bush uses his speeches to convince the international community that Chavez should be isolated. At the 2005 Summit of the Americas meeting, President Bush discussed Venezuela's government. When reporters asked how he would treat Chavez if they met, the president responded by saying that the USA was committed to freedom and democracy. Bush (2005: 1645) said "to the extent that any leader undermines the free press, we will speak out. To the extent that any leader makes it difficult to worship freely, we will make our positions known. To the extent that the judiciary is not an independent organization – in other words, to the extent that there's not proper checks and balances, we will express our positions."

Furthermore, other administration officials have joined the chorus against Chavez. Former Secretary of State Colin Powell told the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee in 2002 that the USA questioned Chavez's commitment to democracy. At a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing, moreover, George Tenet, the former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, said that Chavez did not support the USA (Clement, 2005). When he was secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld once compared the election of Hugo Chavez to Hitler's rise to power, and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice tells journalists and Congress that Chavez is the most dangerous leader in Latin America.

Adding to the Gap

These tactics are not unusual when considering US democracy assistance. They have been used in other parts of Latin America, in addition to the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa. How, then, do such activities contribute to the president's credibility gap? According to Bush's critics, the answer to this question can be found in the nature of the regime being targeted. The case of Venezuela is unique, specifically, because it represents an instance of democracy promotion being used against a democracy (Aviles, 2005). For the first time in his presidency, Bush is applying democracy aid to a country that has a history of freedom and a record of government accountability. Venezuelans freely elect their public officials and Chavez has not gained power through force. The Carter Center, the European Union, and the Organization of American States (OAS) report that Venezuela's elections are free and fair. Yet the Bush administration is targeting this nation with democracy assistance.

Since Venezuela is a democracy, the perception that Bush is allowing other factors to influence his policy becomes plausible. Is Bush concerned with aiding

democracy in Latin America or is the president trying to push Chavez out of power because he represents a threat to US influence? For some organizations, such as the National Endowment for Democracy, President Bush is promoting democracy in a troubled country. They cite constitutional changes that increase the executive's power as harming Venezuela's democracy. Many commentators have questioned these changes because they were made by a constitutional assembly dominated by Chavez's supporters. When this assembly assumed all legislative authority and challenged the elected Congress, charges were made that Chavez's movement was authoritarian. In addition to this troubling event, Chavez's announcement that presidential term limits should be lifted increased concern about his commitment to democracy. Also, the NED properly argues that Chavez has personalized power and refused to strengthen political parties. It cannot be denied, therefore, that Venezuela's democracy needs more checks on executive authority and stronger parties.

Regardless of these points, some argue that Bush is not seriously concerned with correcting Venezuela's problems. Since Chavez is challenging US influence in Latin America, the Bush administration wants him out of power (Sharma et al., 2004). Critics contend that the administration's specific concerns are related to several factors. First, President Chavez has developed close ties to Fidel Castro and has provided Cuba with cheap oil. By giving Castro these resources, the USA's communist enemy has been strengthened. Second, Chavez is trying to convince Latin American leaders to resist the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). As an alternative, he is seeking to persuade them to adopt socialist policies. Since Chavez prefers an economic model that differs from the neoliberal Washington consensus (Parker, 2005), Venezuela is a threat to the White House's global agenda. Third, Chavez troubles Washington because he controls large amounts of oil that the USA needs. During his tenure, President Chavez has tried to find new markets for Venezuela's energy resources and sought to get the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to raise oil prices.

With these thoughts in mind, some scholars are led to conclude that "U.S. policy toward Venezuela is ... driven by self-interest rather than grandiose notions of 'democracy promotion'" (Ellner and Salas, 2005: 5). To buttress their position, Bush's critics point to the White House's role in a coup against Hugo Chavez. In 2002, Venezuela's military and some of its business leaders ousted President Chavez from power and held him hostage. The new government, led by Pedro Carmona, immediately abolished the country's constitution and changed laws that it considered harmful to business interests. The coup ended when Chavez's supporters took to the streets and parts of the military refused to cooperate with Carmona.

While Bush's role in this event is uncertain, reports demonstrate his support. Before the coup, administration officials met with Venezuelan generals who wanted Chavez out of office (Sharma et al., 2004). This type of activity leads Shifter (2006: 56) to assert that "the Bush administration endorsed the military coup against Chavez in April 2002. Although precisely what happened at the time remains unclear, Washington's rush to express approval for such a blatantly unconstitutional act undermined US credibility on the democracy issue." After the event, furthermore, the White House berated the OAS for saying it was concerned about Venezuela's constitutional process. As Clement (2005: 70) states, finally, "The White House ... praised the coup and justified it on the grounds

that Chavez had allegedly instigated his supporters to attack demonstrators and later resigned.”

Presidential advisors also contribute to Bush's legitimacy problem. One such individual is Otto Reich. During the 1980s, Reich organized the State Department's Office of Public Diplomacy for Latin America and the Caribbean. Reich was in charge of creating propaganda that could help President Reagan overthrow the Sandinistas. Among other activities, this group wrote Op-Ed pieces that were sent to newspapers in the USA without revealing that they had been written by State Department officials. Furthermore, Reich planted stories in newspapers that were meant to embarrass the Sandinistas. Despite this history, President George W. Bush nominated him for a position in the State Department. When the Senate rejected his appointment, Bush made Reich his special envoy for Latin America.

During his time at the White House, Reich set the negative tone of the relationship between the USA and Venezuela. For instance, he consistently claimed that President Chavez was a threat to US national security. He fueled the fire against Chavez by citing Venezuela's relationship with Castro. In an article for the *National Review*, Reich argued that “our most pressing, specific challenge is neutralizing or defeating the Cuba-Venezuela axis” (cited in McCaughan, 2005: 202). His most notorious act, however, relates to the military coup against Chavez. Days before the event, Reich met with Venezuelan generals and encouraged them to overthrow Chavez. During the coup, moreover, he communicated with various political actors in Venezuela.

Executive branch policy documents have also added to the US president's credibility gap, especially the 2006 National Security Strategy (NSS), in which Bush states that the USA's foreign policy is based on “promoting freedom, justice, and human dignity – working to end tyranny, to promote effective democracies, and to extend prosperity through free and fair trade and wise development policies” (US National Security Council, 2006). When Venezuela is discussed in this report, however, name-calling is used to pursue these lofty goals: the NSS puts the Chavez Presidency in the same category as Sudan's genocide, Marxist rebels in Colombia, and the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, and states “In Venezuela, a demagogue awash in oil money is undermining democracy and seeking to destabilize the region.” By mentioning oil, this latter statement suggests that the administration is not interested in presenting a balanced interpretation of Venezuela's democracy, but has other concerns.

Finally, the distribution of US democracy aid in Venezuela sheds further light on Bush's legitimacy problem. Basically, the Bush administration only supports groups who oppose Chavez. These organizations are given generous attention and accolades from the administration. Among other benefits, their leaders are invited to the US embassy for dinner and obtain exclusive access to US grants. For President Chavez's supporters, such as the Bolivarian Circles, there is disdain from Washington and charges that they are violent, authoritarian, and anti-American. Since President Bush consistently backs the country's opposition and fails to assist *Chavistas*, it becomes easier to believe that he has a credibility gap when claiming merely to be interested in advancing democracy.

Bush's policy seeks to take advantage of Venezuela's current period of political uncertainty. The country is polarized into competing groups that can find no common ground (Ellner and Hellinger, 2004). On one side, the forces

opposing Chavez view him as a dictator who needs to be removed from power. On the other side, President Chavez believes the opposition represents corrupt elites who have robbed the country. Rather than promoting dialogue among these groups, the Bush administration contributes to polarization. As long as the White House favors the opposition and refuses to negotiate with Chavez and his supporters, the situation will persist. Moreover, Bush is helping to weaken the opposition by tainting their policy proposals. By associating with President Bush, Chavez's opponents allow the White House to dictate their agenda. To receive US financing, the opposition is required to advocate neoliberalism, support US foreign policy, and denounce Chavez. This leads many Venezuelans to vote against them. While oil money helps Chavez win elections, the opposition's subservience to the US government reduces its chances of gaining power.

Hugo Chavez and the Struggle Against Bush's Democracy Promotion

Even though he is targeted by Bush, President Chavez has successfully resisted the White House's foreign policy. There have been strikes by the opposition, a coup, and millions of Venezuelans signed a petition to remove him from office in 2004. Since then, however, President Chavez has become one of the most popular chief executives in Latin America. A 2005 Latinobarometro poll identified his approval rating at 65 percent. There have been low points in his presidency (Yepes, 2004), but his 2006 presidential victory, in which he won 63 percent of the vote (Ramirez, 2006), demonstrates that his popularity is rising.

This article recognizes that President Chavez relies on some highly questionable strategies as he challenges the USA. As highlighted by past research, he harasses opposition groups that receive funding from the USA (Carothers, 2006; Corrales, 2006; Gershman and Allen, 2006). In fact, democratic activists have been arrested for accepting money from the US government. This strategy effectively weakens those groups who obtain support from the NED. However, it is not the only means Chavez employs to resist US pressure.

The Rhetoric of Resistance

One asset that President Chavez utilizes in his battle against the White House is public persuasion. Commentators frequently mention that Venezuela's president is a gifted orator who can work a crowd, much like Fidel Castro (Gott, 2005). Marquez (2004: 209) says that "Anyone hearing him ... could not help but be impressed by his communication skills." Chavez utilizes a weekly radio and television program, *Alo Presidente*, to communicate with his people. Speaking to Venezuelans every Sunday, he seeks to counteract Bush's policy by denouncing the US president and his actions. Chavez tries to strengthen his own poll numbers by telling his citizens that he is not a dictator. President Chavez also travels to numerous international gatherings, especially the World Social Forum and the United Nations, and preaches against Bush.

Chavez's public appearances offer him an opportunity to weaken Bush's democracy assistance. Consider how his speeches focus on the negative aspects of Bush's foreign policy to make this point. During his radio and television show, for instance, Chavez refers to Bush as "Mr Evil" or "Mr Danger" and the White House is identified as a threat to international stability. During a recent visit to Europe, furthermore, Chavez said that George W. Bush was the biggest terrorist

in the world. Also, the Venezuelan leader claims that Bush is trying to create an American empire by invading the Middle East.

Chavez's speeches reinforce the notion that Bush is not trying to bolster democracy in Venezuela. He even accuses the USA of wanting to assassinate him, an argument that gained attention when a Bush supporter, Pat Robertson, suggested this possibility. Using the public stage in this manner helps Chavez construct the perception that the White House is not trying to spread freedom. Public opinion polls show that his rhetoric is working. In 2005, Latinobarometro found that only 41 percent of Venezuelans had a positive attitude about the USA. While the US invasion of Iraq and prisoner abuses most likely impacted these attitudes, it would be hard to deny Chavez's influence.

President Chavez also says that poverty in Venezuela has been influenced by the USA. During the 20th century, the US government convinced Venezuela's leaders to cut oil prices. As a result, social programs for the poor were not adequately funded. In addition to this argument, Chavez's diatribes focus on the negative aspects of the USA's neoliberal economic model. Neoliberalism, he argues, requires spending cuts in education, welfare, housing, and healthcare. By contrast, he portrays his socialist policies as creating equality and social justice. Highlighting capitalism's problems helps Chavez avoid critical discussions of his reforms, which he calls the "Bolivarian Revolution."

Building Democratic Legitimacy

Some commentators assert that Hugo Chavez is a dictator who abuses the rule of law and acts unconstitutionally. According to Shifter (2006: 46), President Chavez "is on a catastrophic course of extending state control over the economy, militarizing politics, eliminating dissent, cozying up to rogue elements, and carrying out wrong-headed social programs that will set Venezuela back." He further notes that "His autocratic and megalomaniacal tendencies have undermined governance and democratic processes in Venezuela" (Shifter, 2006: 45). Shifter also maintains that Chavez has stacked the National Electoral Council and the Supreme Court with his cronies.

Since 1998, Chavez has been the central actor when it comes to defining and implementing his government's policies. He has supporters within the administration, but the personalization of the Bolivarian Revolution is a defining feature of Chavez's tenure and one that scholars highlight as being problematic. Whether this situation exists because Chavez is egotistical or due to the nature of Latin American politics, this trend troubles those who study democracy. By dominating the government, President Chavez prevents other voices from being heard. If he is going to sustain a democratic movement, Chavez needs to be more inclusive when it comes to policymaking.

During his presidency, Chavez has tried to confront charges that he is authoritarian. Although his failed 1992 coup was certainly undemocratic, Chavez has now renounced violent means of obtaining power and concentrates on winning elections. To demonstrate this commitment, he has participated in a constitutional referendum, National Assembly elections, and presidential contests, winning all of them since his first victory in 1998. As Gunson (2006: 59) states, "He has won two clear victories in presidential elections and defeated a midterm recall referendum by a handsome three-to-two margin. All were certified by international observers as broadly free and fair (although the referendum was denounced as a massive

fraud by the opposition, which has never succeeded in proving its case)." His participation in the 2006 presidential election further demonstrated his respect for democracy.

To entrench further his democratic credentials, Chavez allows the country's opposition to operate. While recognizing some abuses of human rights, many scholars identify Venezuela's civil society as healthy and vibrant. According to Gunson (2006: 59), "It has a largely free press, few restrictions on political activities, and just a handful of political prisoners." Furthermore, the 1999 constitution allows for a participatory form of democracy, which permits the public to recall elected officials. Chavez's constitution also protects acts of civil disobedience. Moreover, "There are no mass executions, death squads, or concentration camps in Venezuela. Civil society has not disappeared, as it did in Cuba after the 1959 revolution. There is no systematic, state-sponsored terror leaving scores of *desaparecidos*, as happened in Argentina and Chile in the 1970s. And there is no efficiently repressive and meddlesome bureaucracy a la the Warsaw Pact" (Gunson, 2006: 59).

Uprooting the *Punto Fijo* is another way Chavez has demonstrated his democratic legitimacy. This system, which operated in Venezuela from 1958 until 1998, was led by the country's political parties, that is, Democratic Action (AD) and the Committee of Independent Electoral Political Organization: Social Christian Party (COPEI). During the *Punto Fijo*, these parties were elected into office, which made Venezuela unique among Latin American nations. Although they were put into power legitimately, AD and COPEI created a political system characterized by corruption, clientelism, the centralization of power, and failed economic policies. In 1989, protests and riots (the *Caracazo*) erupted in Venezuela, reflecting frustration with these parties and their neoliberal economic reforms that had failed to distribute wealth to all sectors of society (Ellner and Hellinger, 2004; McCoy and Myers, 2004).

After Chavez was elected, he dismantled the *Punto Fijo*. To start this process, a constitutional assembly was elected and charged with writing a new constitution. Among other changes, this convention created a unicameral National Assembly, granted more power to the president, and extended the executive's term. In addition to these reforms, Chavez sought to weaken established parties by creating a new political organization, the Fifth Republic Movement (MVR). Another change has been to give citizens the right to participate directly in the policymaking process. Furthermore, since coming to power, Chavez has focused on redistributing wealth. Capitalism still exists, but the state's influence is growing, especially when it comes to Venezuela's natural resources (Gott, 2005; Guevara, 2005). As a result of these reforms, traditional elite groups and segments of the middle class have sought to remove Chavez from office, but his policies are popular with the masses.

Herrera (2006: 198) argues that "The changes occurring in Venezuela reflect the true spirit of the country's people, and if these changes did not happen now, they would happen eventually." To gauge his democratic legitimacy, Latinobarometro's polling data can be cited. Even though Bush claims that Chavez has created an authoritarian state, Venezuelans say their country is democratic. When asked in 2005 about the level of democracy in their country, Venezuelans ranked their nation at 7.6 on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 being least democratic). They placed their democracy higher than citizens of any other Latin American

nation. Furthermore, 61 percent said they had confidence in Hugo Chavez as their leader. While 49 percent questioned whether Venezuela's elections were clean, 68 percent believed that their vote made a difference.

Oil and the Bolivarian Revolution

President Chavez needs energy resources to achieve the objectives of his Bolivarian Revolution (Kozloff, 2006). To attain his goal of alleviating Venezuela's poverty, for instance, he needs profits from Petroleos de Venezuela Sociedad Anonima (PdVSA), the country's nationalized oil company. Furthermore, as he develops an independent foreign policy (Kelly and Romero, 2002), oil helps Chavez find new allies. With this energy resource, he is able to make new friends in the international arena, which explains China's interest in Venezuela. Oil also helps Chavez maintain a high level of popularity with his citizens. When the public becomes dissatisfied with his government, welfare spending can be increased using the PdVSA's profits. In terms of resisting pressure from the USA, oil helps him remain independent of Bush's foreign policy. Chavez frequently states that he will stop supplying oil to the USA if Bush invades Venezuela.

According to the White House, Chavez is using Venezuela's energy resources to build an anti-American coalition. He is doing this, Bush contends, by helping leftists get elected in Latin America. Indeed, Chavez has tried to influence ballots in Bolivia, Nicaragua, Peru, and Mexico. Using his bully pulpit and Venezuela's treasury, President Chavez has backed socialist candidates in all of these nations. In two cases (Bolivia and Nicaragua), leftists have won, but in two others (Mexico and Peru) conservatives have triumphed. Due to this mixed record, Chavez has not been able to become a dominant force in the region. It cannot be denied, however, that he has friends in many parts of Latin America, such as Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, and Nicaragua. Using oil diplomacy, Chavez is trying to convince leaders of these nations to follow his anti-Bush agenda (see Romero, 2007). But it is unlikely that Venezuela's president can displace the USA as the pre-eminent political actor in the region. Once oil prices drop, Chavez will be forced back to the domestic arena.

Moreover, some commentators maintain that oil has a negative relationship to freedom. Nations with more oil will have less democracy, according to this argument. Friedman is among those who support this position, declaring, "Leaders in these countries ... build up security forces, bribe opponents, buy votes or public support, and resist international norms and conventions" (2006, 33). Increasing profits from high oil prices only exacerbate the problem, Friedman claims, and since Venezuela has large oil reserves, he predicts a deterioration of this country's democracy. In fact, he cites figures from Freedom House that show a steady decline of democracy in Venezuela since the 1990s.

Can President Bush Spread Democracy?

For some researchers, US presidents have sufficient power to influence political transitions in authoritarian countries. Zarate (1994) maintains that President Reagan pursued a pro-reform agenda that helped build democracy in Central America. But other scholars question the president's power to spread freedom. Huntington (1984: 218) finds that "the ability of the United States to affect the development of democracy elsewhere is limited." For him, the presence of capitalism

and a favorable political culture are more important for democratic development. Building on this notion, Whitehead (1986) concludes that domestic factors are more vital to democracy than international pressure. In terms of Latin American politics, the same argument is put forward by Lowenthal (1991). After exploring the history of US foreign policy in the region, he writes that "recurrent efforts by the government of the United States to promote democracy in Latin America have rarely been successful, and then only in a narrow range of circumstances" (Lowenthal, 1991: 261).

When it comes to President Bush, conclusions are mixed regarding his ability to influence global democracy. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, neoconservatives maintained that the White House had sufficient power to influence authoritarian nations. Richard Perle advocated a pre-emptive strike against Iraq as a way to stimulate democracy in the Middle East. In recent years, by contrast, scholars have challenged this position and highlighted failures in Iraq and Afghanistan. It should be noted, moreover, that some neoconservatives now question Bush's international influence (Fukuyama, 2006).

How does the case of Venezuela inform this subject? It appears that Washington's influence is limited, given that Chavez remains in office despite Bush's efforts. Money from the National Endowment for Democracy has not been able to remove Venezuela's president from office, and President Bush's rhetoric has not inspired a majority of Venezuelans to vote for the opposition. Thus, the White House has failed to achieve its objective of promoting democracy, especially if the administration defines success as Chavez's absence from power.

Ending the Credibility Gap

The Bush administration could reduce the credibility gap by taking appropriate measures. First, the USA could end its support for dictators in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, just to name a few. This would alleviate the impression of hypocrisy created by Bush's contradictory policies. Second, the administration needs to oppose illegal military coups like the one that occurred in Venezuela. A clear line needs to be drawn demarcating the acceptable boundaries of political activity that the White House endorses. Third, the president needs to be more balanced when it comes to supporting civil society in countries receiving democracy aid. Fourth, the Bush administration should stop using democracy promotion to pressure freely elected leaders whom the White House finds offensive to Washington's interests.

There are some signs that the Bush administration is not opposed to adopting a more balanced approach to Venezuela, but a unified message needs to emerge for this to happen. Following Venezuela's 2006 presidential election, members of the Bush administration issued statements that appeared accommodating to President Chavez. Assistant Secretary of State for the Western Hemisphere Thomas Shannon said that politics in Venezuela "is now conducted through democratic institutions" (Romero, 2006: A10). Furthermore, a press secretary for the State Department said in a phone interview that "We look forward to having the opportunity to work with the Venezuelan government on issues of mutual interest." He also stated, "We are open to a relationship with him and his government." If the administration's policy changes, this will help reduce President Bush's credibility gap. For this to happen, however, a coherent message needs to

emerge from Washington. Days before Venezuela's presidential election, John Negroponte, the national intelligence director, warned of the dangers associated with Chavez's international policies. During the election, moreover, the White House consistently supported the opposition.

For US–Venezuelan relations to improve, President Chavez has to change his approach, too. After winning the election, Chavez said that the devil (meaning George W. Bush) failed to influence the ballot. For diplomacy to work, this type of rhetoric needs to be abandoned. It should be noted, however, that President Chavez responded positively to the State Department's comment concerning Venezuela's democracy. According to *The New York Times*, "Mr. Chavez said that Mr. Shannon 'at least recognized we have democracy in Venezuela,' and added, 'I think these are good signs.'" Whether Chavez will make concrete overtures to the USA is unknown at this point, but his actions need to be considered when seeking an understanding of the relationship between the USA and Venezuela.

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