7 Populism and democracy in Venezuela under Hugo Chávez

Kenneth M. Roberts

Introduction

The rise of Hugo Chávez to power at the end of the 1990s not only marked a watershed in Venezuelan politics, but also transformed the scholarly debate about the revival of populism in Latin America's neoliberal era. In the 1980s, populism was widely presumed to have run its course, a victim of the debt crisis and austerity measures that undermined state-led models of industrialization to which populism was historically attached (Dornbusch and Edwards 1991). As new leaders with populist tendencies emerged in the 1990s, however, scholars debated whether and how populism could be reconciled with market liberalization (see Roberts 1995 and Weyland 1996 and 2001 for an overview of these conceptual debates). The meteoric rise of Chávez transcended these debates by demonstrating conclusively that more traditional, statist forms of populism were not consigned to the dust bins of history; they were, instead, making a vigorous comeback in a post-liberalization order marked by social dislocation and a crisis of established representative institutions.

Indeed, Chávez was arguably the most quintessential populist figure Latin America had seen since Juan Perón, the legendary Argentine leader who was virtually synonymous with populism in the region. However populism was defined, Chávez fit, as he seemingly embodied whatever core and ancillary properties were attached to the concept. In accordance with the conceptualization of populism in this volume, the ideology and discourse of *Chavismo* morally constructed an antagonistic duality between a virtuous 'people' (*el pueblo*) and an incorrigibly venal and corrupt elite (the oligarchy or, more colourfully, the 'rancid oligarchy' in the parlance of *Chavismo*). Although both sides of this duality were sociologically heterogeneous, each was ideologically constructed in relatively homogeneous and undifferentiated terms in the political arena, with *el pueblo* unified by the leadership of Chávez, and the oligarchy defined by its adversarial status.

The rise of *Chavismo* transformed the debate over Latin American populism in three fundamental (and inter-related) ways. First, it largely eclipsed the 1990s debate over the compatibility of populism with neoliberalism. The election of Chávez, from the outset a strident opponent of 'savage neoliberalism,' was the first in a series of unprecedented electoral victories by populist and leftist leaders in the region. By 2011, eleven countries representing two-thirds of the regional population were governed by left-of-centre presidents. Most of these leaders were more cautious than Chávez in challenging neoliberal orthodoxy; none of them, after all, had the luxury of Venezuela's windfall oil rents and the political latitude this bounty provided. Nevertheless, the 'Left turn' clearly reflected an erosion of the technocratic consensus for market liberalization that had prevailed in Latin America since the late 1980s, and it placed the search for alternatives to neoliberalism front and centre on the region's political agenda (Levitsky and Roberts 2011; Weyland et al. 2010). Following the rise of Chávez, then, the issue was no longer whether populism could co-exist with neoliberalism, but rather whether it could construct meaningful and viable alternatives to it.

Second, this search for alternative models of development re-politicized social and economic inequalities in Venezuela and other Latin American countries. In the aftermath to the 1980s debt crisis, the demands of economic stabilization and the weakening of historic labour movements had marginalized political actors committed to redistributive policies. Chávez's brand of populism, however, was explicit in promoting the social and economic inclusion of subaltern groups by invigorating the state's developmental, social welfare, and redistributive roles. In contrast to other populist figures in the 1990s, like Alberto Fujimori in Peru, Chávez did not merely pose an outsider challenge to the political establishment; he confronted much (though not all) of the business community with his redistributive policies and his vigorous reassertion of state control over the economy. Therefore, while *el pueblo*, for Chávez, was not defined strictly in class terms – indeed, it notably excluded much of Venezuela's organized labour movement, which remained tied to traditional parties like Democratic Action (AD) – it nevertheless had a pronounced popular and lower-class bias.

Third, and most important for the themes of this volume, *Chavismo* expressed in unusually stark terms the varied tensions between populism and liberal democracy in Latin America. Similar to populist predecessors like Fujimori, Chávez is notorious for concentrating power in the executive branch, undermining institutional checks and balances, and marginalizing opposition forces from governing institutions. Indeed, Chávez has repeatedly mobilized popular majorities in a plebiscitarian manner to

bypass established representative institutions and refound the constitutional order. In contrast to leaders like Fujimori, however, who made little effort to create new channels for popular participation in the political process, Chávez has set out to construct a more radical or 'protagonistic' form of democracy based on plebiscitarian expressions of popular sovereignty and grassroots participation in community organizations and self-governing structures. For Chávez, then, popular inclusion does not rest solely on the formation of new electoral alternatives or the delivery of social benefits to marginalized sectors of the population. It includes, as well, the construction of multiple channels for popular protagonism in the design and implementation of public services.

Clearly, efforts to construct radical democracy from below in Venezuela clashed with the reality of highly concentrated executive authority. Indeed, the rhythms and institutional expressions of popular mobilization were heavily conditioned by Chávez, whose shifting preferences and strategic priorities led to very high levels of improvisation and organizational fluidity at the base of his movement. Grassroots expressions of *Chavismo* were often launched with great fanfare, only to be displaced by new initiatives down the road, leaving multiple and overlapping communal organizations that operated on the margins of a weakly institutionalized official party (itself in a state of constant flux). But despite this lack of institutionalization – or, quite possibly, because of it – popular protagonism in Chávez's self-proclaimed 'Bolivarian Revolution' was authentic, and it provided a textbook illustration of the ways in which populism's inclusionary dynamic can expand opportunities for democratic participation at the same time that its majoritarianian logic restricts institutional spaces for effective democratic contestation. The Venezuelan case, therefore, is highly instructive for understanding the tensions between the participatory and competitive dimensions of democracy, as discussed by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser in the introduction to this volume (see also Dahl 1971). These tensions – which ultimately reflect differences between democracy understood as popular sovereignty and democracy conceived as institutionalized pluralism – are the central focus of the analysis that follows.

7.1 The crisis of Venezuelan democracy and the rise of *Chavismo*

The contradictory relationship between *Chavismo* and democracy can only be understood if the populist phenomenon is analyzed in the context in which it was spawned – namely, a profound crisis of Venezuela's democratic regime, a collapse of the party system that undergirded it,

and a popular backlash against several aborted and ineffectual attempts to liberalize an economy based on state-controlled oil rents. Whereas most Latin American countries experienced democratic transitions in the 1980s, Venezuela's democratic regime had been in place since 1958, and until the early 1990s it was widely regarded as one of the most stable and consolidated democracies in the region (Peeler 1992). The progressive unravelling of this regime after 1989 is one of Latin America's great political enigmas, and it heavily conditioned the character of Venezuela's anti-system, leftist variant of populism under Chávez.

This experience makes it difficult to categorize the Venezuelan case. Venezuela is clearly an example of populism in power, so the potential exists for more profound effects on democracy than in a country where populism is merely an opposition force (see hypotheses 1 and 2 in the introduction). Likewise, this is not a case of populism arising under a new, unconsolidated democracy (hypothesis 3), as the democratic regime was long standing and seemingly consolidated through the late 1980s. By the early 1990s, however, the regime was in crisis, and patterns of decay were clearly at work. Consequently, although it would probably be misleading to characterize the regime as unconsolidated in the 1990s (hypothesis 7), the deepening crisis made Venezuelan democracy more susceptible to the effects of populism than hypothesis 6 would predict for a case with a fully consolidated democratic regime. Indeed, the rise of *Chavismo* caused Venezuela's post-1958 democratic regime to be swept aside and replaced by a new regime that was more 'popular,' but also more illiberal.

In contrast to countries like Chile, Brazil, and Uruguay, where established centre left parties in the 2000s elected presidents in contexts of increasingly consolidated democratic regimes and competitive party systems that narrowed their room for manoeuvre, Venezuela's turn to the left occurred under a populist outsider who capitalized on the crisis of representative institutions to mobilize opposition to the political establishment. As eloquently stated by Panizza (2005: 9), populism 'is the language of politics when there can be no politics as usual: a mode of identification characteristic of times of unsettlement and de-alignment, involving the radical redrawing of social borders along lines other than those that had previously structured society.' Not surprising, then, Venezuela's populist alternative was committed, from the outset, to a refounding of the constitutional order and a reconstruction of democratic institutions – options that simply did not exist for leftist parties where democratic regimes and broader party systems were not in crisis.

Likewise, the leftist character of Venezuela's populist alternative reflected the failure of the country's crumbling party system to offer

viable programmatic alternatives to market liberalization (Morgan 2007), despite widespread opposition to neoliberal reforms and their marginal success at alleviating a deepening economic crisis. Indeed, market reforms were erratically implemented in a bait-and-switch fashion by elected leaders who had campaigned against them – a pattern of crisis management tailor made for a populist movement that outflanked and attacked the political establishment from the left.

Like all populist movements, however, *Chavismo* was eclectic and rather ill-defined ideologically, blending strong currents of Venezuelan and more regional 'Bolivarian' nationalism with Marxist influences that became more pronounced over the course of Chávez's government. The origins of the movement are found in a small clandestine group known as the Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement 200 (MBR 200), formed by Chávez and other junior officers within the Venezuelan armed forces in 1983 as a deepening debt-fuelled economic crisis dashed the illusions of permanent prosperity created by the oil boom of the 1970s. The MBR 200 embraced the symbols of Simon Bolívar and other nineteenth-century nationalist figures while adopting a critical stance towards the country's increasingly corrupt two-party system and the socio-economic inequalities tolerated under democracy. The military conspirators developed contacts with several small radical left parties and hardened their opposition to the regime as Venezuelan democracy entered into crisis in the late 1980s.

In particular, Chávez and his allies were deeply disillusioned when the military was called on to repress a massive outbreak of urban riots known as the *Caracazo*, which followed the adoption of austerity measures and neoliberal reforms by President Carlos Andrés Pérez of the traditionally centre left AD, shortly after he took office in February 1999 (Hawkins 2010a: 16–17; López Maya 2003: 74–8). These market reforms, implemented in collaboration with the IMF, were a classic case of bait-and-switch liberalization (see Stokes 2001). Pérez had been president during the free-spending oil boom in the 1970s, and his election campaign promised a return to prosperity and was replete with criticisms of neoliberalism and international financial institutions. As such, the election campaign gave little indication that Pérez and his party were about to embark on a radical change of direction.

Sensing a growing delegitimation of the political establishment – Pérez's public approval rating had fallen to a dismal six per cent by 1992 (Romero 1997: 15) – Chávez and the MBR 200 organized a military coup in February 1992. The coup attempt failed, landing Chávez and his co-conspirators in prison, but not before the charismatic young officer was given an opportunity to address the public on television. Chávez

assumed responsibility for the coup and conceded defeat, but he promised to continue the struggle for political and economic change, converting himself into a symbol of steadfast opposition to the status quo.

The political institutions that upheld that status quo, meanwhile, were gradually breaking down. Although Pérez survived a second military uprising in November 1992, he was impeached on corruption charges, found guilty by the Supreme Court, and removed from office by the congress in May 1993. National elections later that year provided graphic evidence of alienation from the political process, as well as an erosion of the traditional two-party system, which had allowed AD or its conservative rival COPEI to win every presidential election in Venezuela's post-1958 democratic regime. Rates of electoral abstention increased sharply (Hellinger 2003: 45; Maingón and Patruyo 1996: 101), while party identification plummeted, with the percentage of Venezuelans who claimed to be members or supporters of a party falling from 48.7 per cent in 1973 to 32.4 per cent in 1990 and a mere 22.8 per cent in 1994 (Molina Vega and Pérez Baralt 1996: 224). By the mid 1990s, an astonishing ninety-one per cent of Venezuelans expressed a lack of confidence in political parties (Luengo D. and Ponce Z. 1996: 70), while only thirty per cent expressed satisfaction with the performance of the country's democratic regime (Latinobarómetro 1998: 6).

This dissatisfaction was rooted, in part, in the characteristics of the party system and its two dominant parties. AD and COPEI were hierarchical and disciplined party organizations with a track record of collusion that had allowed them to monopolize the political arena. While dominating labour unions, business associations, and other organized groups within civil society (Coppedge 1994), they possessed relatively weak ties among the growing urban poor and informal sectors of society. Furthermore, despite their origins on the political left and right, respectively, AD and COPEI largely ceased to offer programmatic alternatives to the electorate, especially after AD shifted towards the right with Pérez's embrace of neoliberal reforms in 1989. Although these reforms were staunchly resisted within AD (Corrales 2002), most of the party leadership continued to support market liberalization in the 1990s, creating vacant political space to the left of centre that would eventually be filled by new contenders (Morgan 2007).

Clearly, however, dissatisfaction was also attributable to the abysmal performance record of the dominant parties in managing Venezuela's oil-based economy. The spending binge, structural distortions, and rampant inefficiencies associated with the mid 1970s oil boom quickly degenerated into a debt crisis when oil prices declined, leading to two decades of chronic economic hardship. By the late 1990s, GDP per capita had

declined by twenty per cent, returning to levels last seen in the 1960s (Crisp 2000: 175).

The political effects of this economic decline were magnified by two critical factors conducive to the rise of a populist challenger, especially one with a leftist orientation. First, Venezuelans overwhelmingly perceived their country as wealthy because of its oil resources; as such, they blamed the political establishment and its corruption and mismanagement of the economy for any hardships they endured. Surveys found, for example, that ninety-four per cent of Venezuelans agreed with the statement that 'If Venezuela were honestly administered and corruption eliminated, there would be enough money for all and more' (Romero 1997: 21).

Second, economic hardships were disproportionately borne by the middle and lower classes, allowing new leftist alternatives to politicize the country's gaping inequalities. While per capita income shrank by twenty per cent, the real industrial wage and the real minimum wage plunged more than sixty per cent between 1980 and the mid 1990s (International Labour Organisation 1998: 43). Indeed, the two-thirds decline in the purchasing power of the minimum wage left it below the level of the early 1950s (Evans 1998: 12). Open unemployment increased from 6.6 per cent to 15.4 per cent of the urban work force between 1980 and 1999 (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean 2000: 744), while underemployment swelled the ranks of the informal sector. Consequently, poverty rates more than doubled, reaching two-thirds of the population by the mid 1990s, while social inequalities became more pronounced. The income share of the bottom forty per cent of the population fell from 19.1 per cent in 1981 to 14.7 per cent in 1997, while that of the top ten per cent increased from 21.8 to 32.8 per cent (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean 1999: 63). Indeed, all but the wealthiest quintile lost income shares during this two-decade-long economic slide. The socio-economic terrain was thus highly amenable to the mobilization of excluded and underprivileged groups by leftist alternatives that promised to support redistributive policies (see Ellner and Hellinger 2003).

Such alternatives emerged in the 1990s as AD and COPEI lost their capacity to integrate Venezuelan citizens into the democratic order, steadily eroding their historic dominance of the electoral arena. A leftist party known as Radical Cause (La Causa R) captured the mayorship of Caracas in 1992, then made a serious bid for the presidency in a close four-way race in the national elections of 1993, winning twenty-two per cent of the vote (compared to 23.6 per cent for AD and 22.7 per cent for COPEI). The election was won by aging former president Rafael Caldera, who

Table 7.1. *Presidential election results in Venezuela, 1993–2006*

Party/Coalition	1993	1998	2000	2006
AD	23.6	–	–	–
COPEI	22.7	–	–	–
Convergencia	30.5	–	–	–
Causa R	22.0	.11	37.5	–
MVR	–	56.2	60.3	62.8
Opposition coalitions*	–	40.0	–	36.9
Others	1.3	3.7	2.2	.3

* Multi-party opposition to Chávez coalesced behind the candidacy of Henrique Salas Römer of Proyecto Venezuela in 1998, Fernando Arias Cárdenas of Causa R in 2000, and Manuel Rosales of Un Nuevo Tiempo in 2006.

Source: Political Database of the Americas, Georgetown University, at: http://pdba.georgetown.edu.

formed an independent label known as Convergencia (Convergence) after breaking with COPEI, condemning Venezuela's neoliberal reforms, and tacitly legitimizing the coup attempt against Pérez (see Table 7.1). In office, however, after an initial experiment with macro-economic heterodoxy, Caldera reluctantly shifted towards neoliberal policies in response to a deepening economic crisis and declining oil export revenues. With leaders of AD and the centre left Movement for Socialism (MAS) collaborating with this new policy shift, the stage was set for the rise of a populist outsider who could channel discontent with both the political establishment and the process of market liberalization (however incomplete the latter may have been).

Hugo Chávez proved to be that leader. Following a presidential pardon from Caldera in 1994, Chávez left prison and travelled across the country to broaden the base of his movement. Although the MBR 200 initially advocated electoral abstention, claiming that a national constituent assembly should be chosen to overhaul regime institutions, it changed its mind in 1997 and created a new electoral front known as the Fifth Republic Movement (MVR, for Movimiento Quinta República) to compete in the 1998 national elections (López Maya 2003: 81–3). Meanwhile, the two traditional parties sank deeper into crisis: Having lost the presidency for the first time in 1993, both AD and COPEI eventually withdrew their candidates for the presidency in 1998, opting instead to support other independent figures in a desperate bid to block

Table 7.2. *Legislative election results in Venezuela, 1998–2010*

Party/Coalition	1998	2000	2005*	2010
AD	30.0	20.0	–	–
COPEI	13.5	3.6	–	–
Causa R	2.9	1.8	–	–
Convergencia	1.9	.6	–	–
MVR/PSUV	22.2	55.8	69.5	57.5
Other Pro-Chávez**	8.2	4.2	30.5	1.2
MUD***	–	–	–	38.3
Others	21.3	14.0	–	1.2

Note: Percentage of seats in Chamber of Deputies/National Assembly.

* Most of the parties in opposition to Chávez boycotted the 2005 legislative elections.

** Includes the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), Patria Para Todos (PPT), Podemos, and other small pro-Chávez groups.

*** In 2010, AD, COPEI, and a number of newer opposition groups coalesced in the Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD), which captured sixty-four seats in the 167-seat national assembly.

Source: Political Database of the Americas, Georgetown University, at: http://pdba.georgetown.edu, and *Consejo Nacional Electoral (*CNE), *Gobierno de Venezuela*, at: http://www.cne.gov.ve/estadisticas.

Chávez's ascendance. Chávez, nevertheless, swept to a landside victory with 56.2 per cent of the vote, and proceeded with his plan to dismantle the constitutional framework of the democratic regime that had governed Venezuela since 1958.

7.2. Populist ideology and discourse under Chávez

Chávez's appeal, and the discourse that secured it, are vintage populism in the dualistic terms in which Laclau (2005a) has defined it. Certainly, *Chavismo* fits the minimalist ideological conception of populism outlined by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser in the introduction, while combining this 'thin-centred ideology' with heavier doses of nationalism, socialism, and a charismatic style of political mobilization. As stressed by Hawkins, Chávez interprets politics in highly moralistic and Manichean terms as a 'cosmic struggle' between forces of good and evil (2010a: 55). Indeed, Zúquete characterizes *Chavismo* as a form of 'missionary politics' in which a charismatic figure 'leads a chosen people gathered into a moral community struggling against all-powerful and conspiratorial enemies, and engaged in a mission toward redemption and salvation' (2008: 92).

Although this dualistic political ideology was highly consistent, the composition of its poles – that is, the identity of friends and enemies, or *el pueblo* and the oligarchy – evolved over time. Initially, Chávez defined the enemy primarily in terms of the political establishment against which he had launched his ill-fated coup attempt in 1992. In particular, he condemned the leaders of AD and COPEI as a corrupt, entrenched, and self-serving political elite that made a farce of representative democracy. Chávez went so far as to claim that Venezuela was 'advancing toward a more authoritarian and repressive state ... of a fascist dictatorial type' (Blanco Muñoz 1998: 368).

After coming to power and relegating traditional parties to the sidelines, however, Chávez became increasingly vocal in challenging other elements within Venezuela's power elite, including corporate-controlled media outlets that were vocal opponents of his rule. And while Chávez had always been critical of U.S. imperialism and its ties to elite interests in Venezuelan society, he intensified his critique in response to Washington's thinly veiled support for the military coup that briefly removed him from office in April 2002. Thereafter, alleged U.S. conspiracies played heavily into the *Chavista* discourse about foreign and domestic enemies who sought to derail his Bolivarian Revolution.

From the outset, Chávez framed his challenge to the establishment in revolutionary terms, in accordance with his cosmic and redemptive conception of political struggle. Initially, however, he eschewed a Marxist or class-based definition of this political dualism, in part because Venezuela's AD-controlled labour movement lacked a proletarian or revolutionary consciousness. The central antagonism in the *Chavista* duality was not between labour and capital, but rather between the dominated and the dominant, or the exploited and the exploiters. Middle classes, for Chávez, were firmly located in the more popular, exploited category. In his words, 'The middle class today is becoming an exploited class. Here there are two poles: a minority of exploiters and a great majority of exploited. If that is class struggle, then there is an explosive element today in Venezuela' (Blanco Muñoz 1998: 397). Although Chávez did not lump all sectors of capital together in the category of exploiters, he left little doubt that monopoly sectors bound to the interests of global capitalism were part of the rapacious power elite that preyed on the common people.

This dualistic conception of political struggle was not initially framed in terms of socialist objectives. In the early stages of *Chavismo*, it was nationalism – not socialism or Marxism – that provided the primary source of ideological inspiration. Chávez repeatedly invoked the symbolism of Bolívar and other nineteenth-century national heroes, mythically linking

the redemptive character of his populist movement to historic struggles for national independence and regional integration (Zúquete 2008: 107–9). Virtually by definition, then, political adversaries were framed as anti-patriotic forces, typically with ties to the interests of imperial power.

Under this ideological construction, *Chavismo* could define itself in opposition to international capital and globalized neoliberalism, without rejecting capitalism or capitalists per se. Indeed, Chávez came to power advocating a 'humanistic' mixed economy that borrowed from both capitalist and socialist development models, with a market freed from monopoly control and a developmentalist state committed to nurturing national producers, both public and private (see Blanco Muñoz 1998: 611–14). This nuanced stance allowed him to garner early support from 'elite outliers' within the business community who sought access to a resource-rich petro-state (Gates 2010). Although Chávez believed the state should promote small- and medium-sized private producers, he rejected the privatization of social services and the national oil company, arguing that strategic sectors of the economy should remain in public hands.

Early *Chavista* discourse, then, did not promise to replace neoliberalism with a futuristic socialist alternative. Instead, it harkened back to the 'third way' logic, between capitalism and socialism, of historic populist figures like Perón, with their commitments to inward-oriented, state-led capitalist development. Indeed, it bore a politically awkward and unacknowledged resemblance to the oil-fuelled rentier statism of Venezuela's AD-COPEI duopoly prior to the turn towards neoliberalism at the end of the 1980s. The more radical discourse related to the construction of 'socialism for the 21st century' only emerged later, in the period after 2004 (see Hawkins 2010a: 83), when the Chávez government steadied itself politically and economically after a series of regime-threatening confrontations in the early 2000s.[1] It isn't clear whether Chávez was radicalized by these confrontations or whether – having survived and defeated the opposition at every step of the way – he simply felt secure enough to reveal his true preferences. What is clear is that the economic content of Chávez's ideological discourse shifted after 2004, and that public policies moved towards the left as well, with a growing number of nationalizations, an expansion of social programmes or *misiones*, and the creation of communal self-governing structures parallel to the representative institutions of municipal governments.

[1] The confrontations in the early 2000s included a business backlash against the beginnings of land reform and other statist measures, mass rallies and protests by opposition groups, the 2002 military coup, a devastating two-month management and labour strike at the national oil industry, and a presidential recall referendum in 2004.

If the radical character of Chávez's economic project only crystallized over time, the radical character of his political project was more evident from the very outset of his movement. Indeed, it could be seen in the constant invocation of revolutionary symbols and objectives, the military rebellion with which *Chavismo* made its public debut, and the insistent demand to refound the constitutional order along participatory (and not simply representative) democratic principles. It is to these issues, and their implications for the relationship between populism and democracy, that I now turn.

7.3 Democracy, inclusion, and popular participation under Chávez

To understand the implications of Chávez's left populism for democracy in Venezuela, and how it differed from more conservative variants of populism like *Fujimorismo*, it is vital to recognize that political redemption in the ideology of *Chavismo* did not rest solely in sweeping aside the partisan-based political establishment and electing a new leader who embodied the aspirations of *el pueblo*. Neither was it simply a matter of providing new social or economic programmes to respond to their claims for material improvements.

For Chávez, the political inclusion of neglected, excluded, and exploited sectors of society – that is, the construction of popular sovereignty – required their active participation in a new, more 'protagonistic' form of democracy that was conceived as an alternative to the liberal or representative democracy of the post-1958 regime. This vision of protagonistic democracy spawned novel forms of popular mobilization and grassroots organization that facilitated the inclusion of new societal actors in the political process, albeit at considerable cost to the quality of democratic contestation.

For Chávez, popular participation was not simply a normative or ideological commitment that differentiated his mode of democratic governance from what came before it. It was also, more instrumentally, a political resource that provided greater leverage to overcome the constraints of existing regime institutions. In short, popular participation helped Chávez refound the constitutional order, sideline the political establishment, and deliver social and economic benefits to a broad range of potential supporters. Participation, then, was both an end and a means for *Chavismo* – an integral component of democracy conceived as popular sovereignty, as well as a mechanism for constructing new forms of popular power.

Under Venezuela's post-1958 democratic regime, popular participation occurred primarily through electoral mobilization – which, as

described earlier, declined sharply by the 1990s – and semi-corporatist forms of interest group representation, which linked relatively privileged and well-organized business and labour associations to the dominant parties and a wide array of state consultative and policy-making boards (see Crisp 2000). The relative closure of these formal institutional channels to community-based groups that were not tied to traditional parties, especially among the urban poor, contributed to increased levels of social protest in the 1990s (López Maya 2005). Simply put, while the existing democratic regime formally enfranchised the Venezuelan citizenry, it left large swaths of the population on the margins of the political system, disillusioned with the available options for partisan and electoral representation, and largely devoid of opportunities for meaningful participation in the policy-making process.

Chavismo adopted a two-pronged strategy to overcome this de facto exclusion. First, it relied heavily on plebiscitary measures to mobilize a new popular majority behind an agenda for radical institutional change, effectively giving citizens a direct voice in the refounding of the constitutional order. A central plank in Chávez's 1998 election campaign had been a promise to convene a constituent assembly to redesign Venezuela's democratic institutions, and the new president moved quickly to uphold this pledge after taking office. In his inaugural address on 2 February 1999, Chávez issued his first decree, which ordered a consultative popular referendum on whether a constituent assembly should be convened. Although only 37.8 per cent of eligible voters participated in the April referendum, Chávez obtained a strong mandate to proceed with his plans, with 86.4 per cent of voters supporting the election of a constituent assembly (see Table 7.3). These elections were held in July 1999 under a plurality electoral formula that allowed Chávez's supporters to claim 121 of the 131 seats in the assembly.[2] In a rebuke to the political establishment, and a symbol of the desire to incorporate new voices in the political arena, public office holders were not allowed to stand as candidates for the constituent assembly.

This convocation of a constituent assembly to 'refound' the republic was a classic exercise in popular sovereignty, as it largely bypassed and eventually dissolved the inherited constitutional rules and procedures. Venezuela's 1961 constitution contained no provision for electing a new constituent assembly; when asked to rule on the matter shortly before Chávez took office, the Supreme Court declined to state whether a constitutional amendment would be necessary to elect such an assembly,

[2] This information is from http://www.constitutionnet.org/en/country/venezuela (accessed 22 July 2010).

Table 7.3. *Popular referendums and presidential recall election in Venezuela, 1999–2009*

Vote	Convoke Constituent Assembly (1999)	Approve New Constitution (1999)	Presidential Recall (2004)	Approve Constitutional Reforms (2007)	Approve Constitutional Amendment (2009)
Yes*	86.4	71.4	41.7	49.3	54.9
No	13.6	28.6	58.3	50.7	45.1

* In all of these referendums, with the exception of the presidential recall, the 'Yes' vote represented the pro-Chávez position.

Source: Political Database of the Americas, Georgetown University, at: http://pdba.georgetown.edu.

although it recognized the legality of holding a popular referendum to gauge public opinion on the matter.[3] The opposition-controlled congress bitterly opposed the election of a constituent assembly, knowing that such an assembly would assume its legislative powers. Nevertheless, Chávez imposed his will, armed by his plebiscitary mandate and seventy per cent approval ratings in public opinion surveys. Upon convening, the new constituent assembly claimed 'supra-constitutional power,' a claim subsequently upheld by the Supreme Court, and moved quickly to dissolve both houses of the national congress as well as state legislative assemblies, effectively eliminating institutional checks on executive power that were located in other elected bodies. By December 1999, a new constitution had been drafted and approved in yet another popular referendum by a crushing majority of 71.4 per cent of voters, and a committee was formed out of the constituent assembly to exercise legislative powers in place of the disbanded national congress.

The new constitution made no mention of political parties, instead emphasizing the direct, participatory, and protagonistic role of citizens and civil society in the democratic process (see Álvarez 2003: 151–5). While strengthening the powers of the presidency, the constitution also recognized the role of referendums in the exercise of popular sovereignty, including recall elections that would allow citizens to remove public officials and judges after the midpoint of their terms in office. Ironically, the opposition to Chávez employed this mechanism in an attempt to remove him from office in 2004, but after a lengthy and contentious petition drive to gather the signatures needed to convoke the referendum, Chávez

[3] Ibid.

defeated the recall bid with a comfortable 58.3 per cent majority vote in the referendum. He fared less well in a December 2007 referendum on a package of constitutional reforms that, among other measures, would have eliminated term limits on the presidency. For the first time, Chávez was defeated in a referendum by a narrow margin of 50.7 per cent to 49.3 per cent of the vote. Although he accepted this defeat and acknowledged shortcomings in his administration that undermined its popular support, Chávez quickly regrouped and implemented some of the reform measures by presidential decree. A new referendum on a streamlined constitutional amendment eliminating term limits on the presidency and other elected offices was then held in 2009, and this time the amendment was ratified with 54.9 per cent of the vote (see Table 7.3).

The *Chavista* conception of protagonistic democracy, however, was not limited to referendums and plebiscitary measures that allowed for the direct expression of mass sentiments on major issues of constitutional order. Even more fundamentally, perhaps, it nurtured community-based forms of popular participation in local governance, the provision of social services, and productive activities. Indeed, the Bolivarian Constitution of 1999 proclaimed that 'assemblies of citizens' could make binding decisions, even overriding those of elected local, regional, or national governments (Álvarez 2003: 154). Although this proved difficult to implement in practice, the Chávez government did experiment with an evolving mix of grassroots organizations dedicated to a variety of social, economic, and political purposes. Some of these were informed by the innovative experiences of Causa R governments at the local level, as a faction of the leftist party had broken off and joined the coalition led by Chávez's MVR.

Although Chávez was initially averse to creating a mass party organization, he began to organize grassroots 'Bolivarian committees' after his release from prison in 1994. These were coordinated at the municipal level and vertically linked to regional and national organs of his movement, as well as local and regional assemblies. After 1997, when the MBR 200 shifted its stance from electoral abstention to electoral participation, grassroots organizational efforts became closely tied to the tasks of electoral mobilization in the 1998 presidential campaign, along with the sequence of popular referendums associated with the constitutional overhaul. Many civic groups with links to *Chavismo* were also actively engaged in the debates over constitutional reform, ultimately developing 624 proposals for consideration by the constituent assembly, over half of which were incorporated in some form in the final draft of the constitution (García-Guadilla 2003: 186). Nevertheless, upon taking office, Chávez initially relied heavily on military personnel rather than

civic groups to coordinate public works projects and the delivery of social services (Norden 2003: 104–6).

After completing his constitutional overhaul, however, and winning new national elections in 2000, Chávez shifted his attention increasingly to social and economic reform, progressively radicalizing his 'Bolivarian Revolution' and, in the process, intensifying elite opposition. This dynamic provided a new stimulus to grassroots organization and popular mobilization, in part to help carry out social and economic reforms, and in part to provide a counterweight to the de facto power of elite groups in the business community and mass media (see Roberts 2006). Initially, the centrepiece of community-based popular organization were the so-called Bolivarian circles, which formed in low-income districts beginning in 2001 and ultimately collaborated with the government in a broad range of education, health care, nutrition, and other social programmes. These Bolivarian circles played an important role in the popular protests that helped reverse the April 2002 business-backed military coup, which briefly removed Chávez from office. By 2003 the government claimed, probably with some exaggeration, to have registered 2.2 million members in two hundred thousand local circles (Hawkins 2010a: 177).

After this initial burst of energy, the Bolivarian circles became less active and were largely displaced by a plethora of more specialized community-based organizations, including dozens of community water councils, local planning councils in each municipality, and over six thousand urban land committees with an estimated membership at 1.6 million to assess land claims and deliver titles (Hawkins 2010b: 43). Many of the social 'missions' of the Chávez government – programmes related to health, education, nutrition, and other social needs – also had a strong participatory character, with local committees formed to assess community needs and administer government assistance, which amounted to as much as 3.5 per cent of GDP by the middle of the decade. Hawkins (2010b: 36–43) estimates that some sixty-five hundred local health committees with close to three million participants were formed as part of the Barrio Adentro health care mission, whose benefits reached nearly half the adult population, according to public opinion surveys. The subsidized food mission known as Mercal reached an even higher percentage of the adult population, with 71.6 per cent of survey respondents claiming to have used its services, while over two million students participated in new educational missions at the primary, secondary, and university levels. As part of its strategy to build 'socialism for the 21st century,' the government also encouraged the formation of over sixty thousand local cooperatives to engage in productive activities and the service sector of the economy (Goldfrank 2011).

Finally, starting in 2005, the government made a major push to promote the formation of participatory Communal Councils (CC), which function parallel to and independent of elected municipal governments. The CCs make planning decisions through local assemblies of citizens, form sub-committees to oversee the implementation of programmes in different areas, and obtain funding directly from the central government for local infrastructure, housing, and development projects. By 2008 some eighteen thousand CCs had been formed (Handlin and Collier 2011), and surveys indicated that 35.5 per cent of the adult population had participated in their activities. As Hawkins (2010b: 42) states, this level of participation far surpasses that of the highly touted participatory budgeting initiatives launched by the Workers' Party (PT) in Brazil, which typically engage '2 to 8 per cent of the population in municipalities with the programme' and reach 'as high as 10 per cent only in the most successful areas.' With independent authority to plan public works and secure government funding, the CCs clearly go beyond a mere consultative role in the process of community development.

Given their dependence on state initiative and resources, CCs (and other community-based organizations) were often criticized by the opposition for being clientelistic and partisan instruments of *Chavista* control. Although more rigorous scholarly research has found little evidence of overt clientelistic manipulation of government programmes at the level of individual recipients, there is evidence to suggest that political loyalties influence the allocation of resources at the district level, and certainly there is a pro-Chávez partisan bias in the profile of programme participants (Hawkins 2010a: ch. 7). Nevertheless, public opinion surveys suggested that state-sponsored community organizations provided channels of participation for citizens whether or not they supported Chávez, even if his partisans were more likely to take advantage of participatory opportunities. Thirty-nine per cent of Chávez supporters, for example, reported that they participated monthly in meetings of CCs or other community-based associations – but so did twenty-eight per cent of the supporters of other parties and twenty-one per cent of nonpartisans. These figures all dwarf those recorded in Chile, Brazil, and Uruguay, where more institutionalized leftist parties governed, but provided weaker stimulus for participation from below (see Handlin and Collier 2011). Furthermore, survey evidence indicates that 'Bolivarian associations are mobilizing new Venezuelans, particularly sectors of the population, such as women and the poor, that have traditionally been excluded from politics' (Hawkins 2010b: 54).

Undoubtedly, the CCs and other grassroots forms of popular organization were plagued by a number of problems. The constantly evolving maze of communal groups suggested that they remained highly dependent on state (and particularly executive) priorities, initiatives, and resources, and they were undoubtedly poorly institutionalized and thus prone to deactivation (as seen with the Bolivarian circles). Their status relative to elected municipal governments remained an ongoing source of political contention, and in a context of state-allocated oil rents, there is an ever-present danger of being transformed into mere vehicles for clientelistic political manipulation. Nevertheless, state-sponsored community associations under Chávez clearly offered mechanisms for social and political inclusion and grassroots participation that exceeded those created by other leftist governments in Latin America and far exceeded what had existed previously in Venezuela. This activation at the grassroots level, moreover, carried over into more explicitly partisan affairs. As Handlin and Collier (2011) show, Venezuelan citizens were four times as likely to attend meetings of Chávez's political party than all other parties combined, and nearly three times as likely to participate in campaign activities of Chávez's party or to identify with his party.

To summarize, on the basic Dahlian dimension of democratic participation or inclusion, Chávez's brand of leftist populism clearly led to significant advances. Chávez attracted sectors of Venezuelan society that felt alienated or excluded from the existing democratic regime, directed appeals specifically to subaltern groups within a broader conception of 'the people,' mobilized a new popular majority through electoral and plebiscitary means to refound the constitutional order, and opened new channels for grassroots participation in the political process. What remains to be seen, then, is what this new expression of popular sovereignty, with its heavy reliance on charismatic authority, implied for the other core dimension of democracy – that of contestation.

7.4 The Chávez regime and democratic contestation

As Rovira Kaltwasser and Mudde suggest in Chapter 1, the construction of new forms of popular sovereignty by populist movements may well enhance democratic inclusiveness and participation at the expense of democratic contestation. These tradeoffs are not inevitable, however. Popular majorities can be built without violating the rights of political minorities or undermining political pluralism, while plebiscitary and participatory mechanisms can be developed to supplement rather than displace or circumvent representative institutions.

Nevertheless, in the Venezuelan case tensions and tradeoffs between the two primary dimensions of democracy have clearly been present (see Coppedge 2008). These tradeoffs can be seen in two principal areas.

First, *Chavismo* used plebiscitary measures to concentrate power in the executive branch, in particular in the hands of a charismatic leader, in the process weakening the institutional checks and balances associated with liberal democracy. Second, this erosion of institutional checks and balances has undermined the protection of civil and political liberties for opposition groups and thus weakened democratic contestation. Although Venezuela remains politically competitive and pluralistic – *Chavismo* has not created a single-party regime and suppressed all political opposition the way another populist-turned-Marxist did in Cuba fifty years ago – it is today probably closer to Levitsky and Way's (2002) model of 'competitive authoritarianism' than it is to liberal democracy.

Clearly, power is highly concentrated, both within *Chavismo* as a political movement and within the broader political regime. Within *Chavismo,* Chávez's charismatic authority is essentially unchecked by rival political leaders or institutionalized mechanisms of accountability. Secondary leaders have come and gone, and sometimes returned, at a dizzying pace, but none have been allowed to consolidate a personal base of power to rival that of Chávez. Chávez has the power to make or break the political careers of subordinates, and this dependency accentuates the autocratic tendencies within his leadership. Furthermore, Chávez, like Perón, initially took only half-hearted measures to institutionalize his movement as a party organization, and when he did finally adopt a more ambitious party-building strategy after 2006, with the formation of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), it remained very much an instrument of his personal authority.

There is, of course, nothing very novel about political parties serving as instruments of personal authority in Latin America, or in Venezuela for that matter. What is more problematic for democratic contestation is the extent to which political authority in the larger regime is also highly concentrated in the presidency, and the ways in which this concentration has steadily eroded the horizontal checks and balances provided by other regime institutions. As previously mentioned, Chávez used his plebiscitary power to first bypass, and then dissolve, the opposition-controlled legislature in the process of rewriting the constitution, and he crafted new electoral rules that ensured his movement an overwhelming majority in the constituent assembly.

The new constitution strengthened executive powers in a number of significant ways: The presidential term was lengthened and re-election was allowed, and the president was given the power to dissolve congress, control military promotions, and convoke popular referendums or constituent assemblies. The refounding of the constitutional order also allowed for new elections in 2000, giving Chávez's MVR an opportunity

to capture a majority of seats (see Table 7.2), which it then used to grant Chávez expanded decree powers. These decree powers were instrumental in the turn towards more statist and nationalistic economic policies in the early 2000s. Additionally, the constituent assembly dissolved provincial legislatures and declared a judicial emergency, leading to the dismissal of some 200 judges. A judicial reform bill passed in 2004 allowed the government to appoint twelve new Supreme Court justices, helping *Chavismo* to consolidate its control over the judiciary as well.

Largely relegated to the margins of formal regime institutions, opposition forces turned increasingly to extra-institutional measures to contest Chávez's rule. A series of civic protests in early 2002 culminated in the short-lived military coup in April of that year. When the coup was reversed, the opposition tried a new tactic: a damaging two-month strike in the national oil company in late 2002 and early 2003, which Chávez finally broke by firing some eighteen thousand managers and staff and placing trusted allies in charge of the company. The oil strike triggered a severe recession in 2003, but as oil prices started a steady climb and the economy began to recover, the government used its newly enhanced control over the oil windfall to redirect revenues to the missions and other social programmes (Corrales and Penfold 2010). Chávez's public approval ratings increased sharply following a decline in the early 2000s, and he was able to comfortably defeat the opposition's attempt at a presidential recall in the referendum of 2004.

An increasingly demoralized opposition 'barely contested' sub-national elections in October 2004 (Corrales and Penfold 2007), allowing Chávez supporters to capture twenty-one out of twenty-three state governments and more than ninety per cent of municipalities. The following year, the opposition made a last-minute decision to boycott national legislative elections entirely, in part as a response to concerns that the government could trace voter identities through the automated voting system.[4] This boycott allowed the MVR and other parties sympathetic to Chávez to capture all the seats in the national assembly. By 2005, then, *Chavismo* effectively controlled the national executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government, as well as other regime institutions like the National Electoral Council (CNE).

[4] For example, the names of Venezuelan citizens who signed the petition for a recall election against Chávez in 2004 were subsequently revealed by electoral officials and published on the Internet, in blatant violation of the norm of voter anonymity. In response to opposition concerns, Venezuelan electoral authorities reached an agreement with the Organization of American States to withdraw controversial digital fingerprint scanners prior to the 2005 legislative elections, but this did not induce the leading opposition parties to participate in the electoral process.

Clearly, the closing of institutional space for opposition forces was not unrelated to their own political weakness and ineffectiveness. AD and COPEI retreated into political insignificance after 1998, and fragmented opposition forces repeatedly failed to coalesce behind a new party organization or political movement capable of challenging *Chavismo* in the electoral arena. Lacking confidence in their ability to compete against a charismatic leader on an unlevel playing field, many opposition groups abandoned institutional spaces and opted for quasi-insurrectionary forms of resistance to try to force Chávez from power, such as the 2002 coup and the national oil strike. These tactics, however, created political instability and economic hardships that made it difficult for the opposition to win over undecided citizens, and the coup, in particular, cast doubt on the democratic credentials of the opposition itself. Indeed, it played into the hands of a populist figure who framed political struggle in highly confrontational and conspiratorial terms.

The institutional marginalization of opposition forces was also attributable, however, to Chávez's manipulation of popular sovereignty – mobilized through plebiscitary means – to evade or override institutional checks and balances and then alter the rules of the game in ways that tilted the playing field. Likewise, it reflected the concentration of resources in the hands of the state, as Chávez had control over special funds for social programmes independent of central bank oversight, and the CNE was lax in enforcing restrictions on the use of state resources, public office, and television advertising in electoral campaigns (Corrales and Penfold 2007 and 2010). The Chávez government was clearly in a position to use state contracts, revenues, licensing powers, regulatory authority, and legal sanctions (for example, on corruption charges) to reward loyalists and exclude or punish opponents in a wide range of economic and social activities.

Indeed, concerns mounted over time that these forms of financial and legal leverage were being used to hamstring the political opposition (Human Rights Watch 2008). Tensions were especially acute with the mass media, as the country's leading private television channels and newspapers were strident opponents of Chávez, and in some cases they had openly sympathized with civic protests against the regime and the 2002 military coup. Chávez sought to 'democratize' the media by expanding public television and radio outlets and supporting community-based radio programming, but he also clamped down on opposition media – for example, by denying the renewal of a broadcasting license for one major television station and filing charges against the director of another for defamation and disseminating false information. Similar charges were used to imprison an opposition former state governor in 2010 (Human Rights Watch 2010). As Venezuela moved towards national legislative elections in September 2010, at a time of deepening economic crisis and social unrest, Chávez decreed the formation of a new public office with potentially wide-ranging censorship powers.

Despite these measures to weaken or intimidate the opposition and tilt the political playing field, it is important to recognize that voting procedures under Chávez have generally remained free from fraud. As such, *Chavismo* can still be challenged in the electoral arena, as the 2010 legislative elections clearly demonstrated. After abstaining from legislative elections in 2005, opposition forces opted to form a new coalition to contest *Chavismo* in 2010, confident that they could garner newfound support in a context of soaring crime rates, a severe recession triggered by the global financial crisis, and spot shortages of basic goods in the marketplace. Although Chávez's PSUV narrowly defeated the opposition coalition and captured a majority of seats, it fell short of fifty per cent of the vote for the first time in competitive elections, and even gerrymandered electoral districts did not provide the official party with the two-thirds majority of legislative seats required to pass certain types of organic laws or award Chávez executive decree powers. Therefore, as Chávez prepares to run for yet another re-election in 2012, he will be forced to compete in a political environment with meaningful institutional checks and balances for the first time since he came to office.

Where, then, does this leave the balance sheet for assessing the quality of democracy under Chávez? Assessments that prioritize one of Dahl's dimensions over the other can easily come to radically different conclusions, either lauding democratic advances under Chávez (Wilpert 2006) or decrying the descent into authoritarianism (Brewer-Carías 2010). Looking at the two dimensions together, however, suggests that the record is a mixed one, and that the regime has a hybrid character that combines elements of democracy and authoritarianism (see Corrales and Penfold 2010). In terms of democratic inclusion and participation, the Chávez regime made substantial gains in comparison to the crisis-ridden and discredited democracy of the 1990s. Indeed, at the height of its popularity in the mid 2000s, the Chávez regime fared strikingly well in comparison to other Latin American democracies. In regionwide public opinion surveys conducted in 2005, for example, Venezuelan citizens were the least likely in all of Latin America to say that politics was too complicated to understand, the second most likely (after Uruguayans) to express satisfaction with the performance of their democratic regime, and the most likely to characterize their regime as democratic (Latinobarómetro 2005). Clearly, *Chavismo* made popular sovereignty meaningful for a large number of Venezuelans. At the same time, however, it concentrated

power, undermined checks and balances, and made opposition rights increasingly tenuous. Nevertheless, Chávez did not completely suppress opposition forces; he left open channels for electoral contestation that the opposition has recently shown it can exploit, even if the playing field is tilted to the president's advantage. Only time will tell whether Chávez keeps this space open, and whether the opposition can continue to make gains within it.

Conclusion

The Venezuelan case lends support to many of the propositions about populism outlined in the introduction to this volume. *Chavismo* demonstrates how populism's moralizing discourse can polarize society into antagonistic camps, and how its thin-centred ideology can complement and undergird both nationalist and socialist ideological influences. It also demonstrates that populism in power can have profound effects on democratic institutions and practices, even under relatively long-standing democratic regimes. Although fully consolidated democracies provide institutional safeguards against populist manipulation, regimes in a state of advanced decay may prove surprisingly susceptible to change wrought by populist mobilization. Indeed, opposition to an entrenched but discredited regime was the primary rallying cry for populist mobilization in Venezuela.

Such mobilization is not inherently anti-institutional, much less anti-democratic. In a context of acute political crisis, populist figures may assault established representative institutions as regime and party system outsiders. If given access to state power, however, they may well rebuild new and more powerful regime institutions, along with grassroots channels for popular participation, even if they are loathe to create intermediary institutions that might restrain their freedom to manoeuvre. And while these new regimes may consolidate, their relationship to democracy is likely to be highly contradictory, with gains in inclusion offset by limited contestation and opposition rights. Chávez, for example, prioritized new and more inclusive expressions of popular sovereignty while undermining the checks and balances required for effective democratic contestation or institutionalized pluralism.

Chávez's challenge to liberal democracy in Venezuela had deep roots in the crisis of the post-1958 democratic regime and the opportunities this provided for anti-system and anti-establishment populist mobilization. The collectivist ideologies of nationalism and socialism that were attached to populism in Venezuela were neither necessary nor sufficient for the vitality of such a challenge; as the chapter on Peru by Levitsky

and Loxton shows, populist ideology attached to a pro-market agenda may be just as threatening to democracy as that attached to more collectivist goals. The inclusionary and participatory character of *Chavismo*, however, was more clearly rooted in its socialist aspirations to enhance the welfare of lower-class groups by strengthening their voice in the political process. Although 'the people,' for Chávez, potentially included anybody outside the disdained political establishment, the poor occupied a privileged space in the populist camp. Consequently, *Chavismo* in power not only polarized Venezuelan society politically – driving a wedge between supporters and opponents of Chávez and his regime – but also socio-economically, given the class distinctions that underlay the political cleavage.

Placed in a larger, comparative perspective, the Venezuelan case clearly continues the long tradition of political tension between populism and democracy in Latin America (de la Torre 2010). More specifically, it sheds new light on the dual participatory and contestatory dimensions of democracy that do not always co-exist in harmony with one another. Redemptive to some, and threatening to others, populism is likely to remain an integral part of the regional political landscape so long as institutions are weak and citizens are excluded from meaningful participation.