

DEPENDENT CIVIL SOCIETY

The Círculos Bolivarianos in Venezuela

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Abstract: For several years the Círculos Bolivarianos were a key organized component of the movement supporting President Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and the question of their democratic qualities a source of considerable controversy, but until recently there was little data to test the competing claims of supporters and opponents. We report the results of a survey of 110 members of Círculos and several interviews carried out in four Venezuelan states during June and July 2004. After providing basic information on the Círculos, we analyze their tendency to contribute to a democratic civil society. We find that respondents had highly democratic goals and methods; however, their organizations embodied a charismatic mode of linkage to Chávez that undermined their ability to become institutionalized. In addition, although the Círculos performed valuable social work, they often reinforced clientelistic relations between Chávez and the voters, and they did not significantly enhance the level of pluralism in the broader civil society.

INTRODUCTION¹

In 2000, President Hugo Chávez issued a call to Venezuelans to form “Círculos Bolivarianos” as part of a broader strategy to organize his Bolivarian movement for a democratic revolution. Each Círculo was to consist of up to 11 members sworn to defend the Constitution, be faithful

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to the ideals of Simón Bolívar, and serve the interests of their community. Supporters gave an overwhelming response. On 17 December 2001, Chávez conducted a mass swearing-in ceremony that involved 20,000–30,000 members (*Agence France Presse* 2001; VHeadline 2001). Application forms continued to pour in to the new National Coordination of Círculos Bolivarianos by fax and email, and within a few years the national leadership would estimate a total of 2.2 million members. The Círculos ended up playing a key role in the demonstrations that followed Chávez's temporary removal from power in April 2002 and for over two years remained heavily involved in organizing communities, facilitating access to the government's poverty alleviation programs, and campaigning for the president in elections.

Since at least 2004, the Círculos have experienced a significant decline in activity, yet for a time they represented one of the most important organized components of Chavismo and a potentially radical transformation of Venezuela's civil society. At the peak of their activity, they were the subject of considerable controversy that was symptomatic of political life in Venezuela and the experience of populist movements in Latin America more generally. On the one hand, many in the opposition said they were "circles of terror" that received aid and weapons from the government to advance Chávez's political goals (O'Grady 2003; Forero 2002). These claims were bolstered by occasional violent acts committed against members of the opposition by armed Chávez supporters, such as attacks on the private television station RCTV or the formerly opposition-held office of the metropolitan mayor in downtown Caracas. On the other hand, supporters of the Círculos inside and outside Venezuela argued that the Círculos were part of a peaceful movement promoting positive grassroots involvement in local communities (Chávez and Burke 2003; Círculos Bolivarianos n.d.). According to this view, opposition claims were hysterical—or worse, elitist—attempts to turn Venezuelans and the rest of the world against a movement for participatory democracy that would finally eliminate the vestiges of colonialism and dependency.

Despite this wide divergence of views, very little empirical work has been done to determine the truth about the Círculos and the nature of their contribution to Venezuelan civil society. To answer these questions, and to take advantage of a unique opportunity to study a populist movement as it unfolded, we performed a survey of 110 Círculo members during June and July 2004, shortly before the attempted presidential recall election in August. The survey was based on an exploratory, non-random sample and used a standardized questionnaire that was administered in four different states: Aragua, Carabobo, the Distrito Capital (the Libertador municipality in Caracas), and Miranda. The nature of the sample necessarily limits our findings (additional information

about how the survey was carried out is found in the appendix), but it provides us with a valuable snapshot of the movement and allows us to reach some important, if tentative conclusions.

Our most important finding is that respondents did not conform to either of the two stereotypes of the *Círculos*. On the one hand, our respondents generally did not advocate violence, they had a high level of democratic values, and they were involved in a variety of significant efforts to reach into Venezuelan shantytowns with government programs and principles of democratic organization; thus, the opposition's fears about the *Círculos* were probably exaggerated. On the other hand, our respondents also failed to support the idealistic view that the *Círculos* heralded a new form of participatory democracy. The *Círculos* we studied lacked one of the most fundamental attributes of a civil society capable of sustaining participatory democracy: autonomy from the state. Although our respondents clearly espoused principles of participatory democracy, they embodied a strong charismatic linkage to Chávez that undermined their unique sense of identity and frequently compromised their ability to act independently. In addition, through their uncritical acceptance of current government aid programs, they participated in a system with strong clientelistic overtones that undermined the principle of citizenship essential to democracy. These findings suggest that the *Círculos* contributed and accomplished far more than the opposition acknowledged, but suffered contradictions that prevented them from becoming a lasting, positive contribution to Venezuelan democracy. From this perspective, their eventual decline is not so surprising and may provide lessons for advocates of participatory democracy and scholars studying the transformation of civil society in Latin America.

In this article we present our findings in greater detail. Because survey-based data on populist movements are rare, and because little data are currently available on the *Círculos* or their members in particular, we begin by providing basic descriptive information based partly on our survey. We then analyze the *Círculos* in terms of their contribution to Venezuelan civil society and democracy. Finally, in the conclusion we briefly speculate about the *Círculos*' decline and draw out some of the implications of their experience for scholars and activists. Our data are drawn from our surveys, from formal interviews we carried out with members and local leaders of the *Círculos* in 2004 and again in 2005, and from two nationwide surveys used as sources of questions and data for comparison: the 2000 World Values Survey in Venezuela and Canache's 1995 survey on political support in Venezuela (2002). Interviews are generally identified with the names of those we interviewed, but where we feel information may be sensitive we have left the references anonymous. All interview data are available from the authors on request.

Basic Information about the Círculos

Contemporary studies of populist movements are scarce, especially those dealing with the organization and attitudes of participants at the grassroots level. In reviewing studies of populism in Argentina (Alexander 1951; Germani 1965; Horowitz 1990; Murmis and Portaniero 2004; Smith 1974), Peru (Alexander 1973; Kay 1997; Pike 1986; Roberts 1995; Stein 1980), Ecuador (De la Torre 1994; Martz 1980, 1983, 1987), and other Latin American countries (Conniff 1975, 1981, 1999; Smith 1979), we found little evidence of research involving surveys of activists while the populist leader was still in power.² Studies of populism in Latin America have primarily used elite interviews, archival data, and historical accounts, and most have been written after the original populist leader was no longer politically active. The lack of “live” data on activists and the internal organization of populist movements is understandable. It reflects the low organizational component of most populist movements, as well as the fact that most of the classic populist movements in Latin America had waned long before the concept of populism was fully developed (for a brief history of the term, see Conniff 1999, 223–27). More recent movements have sometimes proved too fleeting to allow detailed study, and our own experience in Venezuela shows that there is sometimes a high level of political polarization and mistrust between members of the academic community and members of the movement that makes field research difficult.

Nevertheless, the lack of this kind of data is unfortunate. Live accounts of populist movements are not only likely to be more accurate, but they can be drawn from data sources such as membership lists and personal networks, which become unavailable once movements dissolve. Moreover, when qualitative research is combined with surveys and other more systematic measures, we can have greater confidence in our inferences and a more complete picture of the movement. Surveys become even more feasible in movements with important organizational components, such as the Círculos Bolivarianos in Chavismo, where scholars can identify members of the subject population.

Some of these concerns motivated us to study the Círculos Bolivarianos in Venezuela. Not only is Chavismo an ongoing political movement in Venezuela, with only a few years of life (it became a public phenomenon after the February 1992 coup attempt that Chávez helped

2. Kirkpatrick's 1965 survey of Peronists in Argentina (1971) is a partial exception, although it was carried out several years after Peron went into exile. Alexander's study of Peronism (1951) is contemporaneous but relied on elite interviews, newspaper accounts, and personal observation. Levitsky's work on Peronism (2002) uses survey data on party activists but is very recent.

lead and Chávez's victory in the 1998 presidential election), but recent attempts at organizing the movement have produced a variety of clearly identifiable groups. One of the most significant of these organizations has been the *Círculos Bolivarianos*. Besides the basic historical information mentioned in the introduction, very little is known about the *Círculos* as a form of organization or about the type of people that participated in them (for example, see contributions to Ellner and Hellinger 2003). Therefore, in this section we provide data on the *Círculos'* local and national organization, membership, principal activities, and means of financing, as well as on the socioeconomic profile of the members.

Local and National Organization

Like the Chavista movement in general, the *Círculos* and their members had some common attributes (such as attachment to Chávez) but also incorporated a diverse set of individuals and groups. This diversity was first evident in the size of individual *Círculos*. According to the official documents of the National Coordination of the *Círculos*, each *Círculo* was supposed to have between seven and eleven members (Comando Supremo Revolucionario Bolivariano n.d.). The median number of members in the *Círculos* in our sample was twelve, suggesting that at least half of the *Círculos* we studied came close to the ideal number; however, some of the *Círculos* we studied clearly exceeded it. The mean number of members per *Círculo* was about eighty-seven, a figure skewed by one very large *Círculo* whose members said it had a thousand or more members, and a few other *Círculos* whose members reported one to five hundred members. These larger *Círculos* often resembled a loose association of Chavistas more than they did a tightly-knit community group of the kind envisioned in the official documents of National Coordination. They seemed to be a surrogate form of partisan organization, one that was more palatable to Chavistas than the explicitly partisan structure of *Movimiento V República* (MVR), Chávez's official party, which was very hierarchical. We suspect that many of these larger *Círculos* were not formally registered with the National Coordination.

This diversity was also apparent in the way that the *Círculos* were organized nationally. Officially, all *Círculos* responded to a National Coordination office housed in the presidential buildings at Miraflores in Caracas. However, the *Círculos* were an expression of a movement that strongly espoused values of grassroots participation and horizontal organization, values that were articulated in the new Bolivarian Constitution, the published materials of the government and parties associated with Chávez, and the everyday discourse of Chávez and his supporters. Attempts by the National Coordination to direct the *Círculos* resulted in considerable friction between them and the local leadership,

and parallel organizations of *Círculos* emerged. While still recognizing Chávez's leadership, the largest of these groups, the Red Nacional de *Círculos Bolivarianos* (National Network of Bolivarian Circles), attempted to reproduce a horizontal mode of organization as much as possible through a loose confederation of state *Círculo* organizations divided into smaller levels of organization. At the time of this writing, the Red Nacional had held three national conventions. Interviews with leaders of the *Círculos* in various states revealed that most *Círculos* were also grouped on parish, municipality, and state levels, as well as on an intermediate level known as an *eje*, or axis, encompassing several municipalities (Silva 2004; Vivas 2004; Carreño 2004; Mendoza 2004). Each of these levels of organization had some kind of coordinating body, sometimes with a head coordinator (different labels were used in each state), that was ostensibly responsible to the membership in their area; however, few had been formally elected.

Membership

Partly because of this mixture of formality and informality, but also because of the politically charged discourse about the *Círculos* and the lack of publicly available data on their membership, estimates of the total national membership of *Círculos Bolivarianos* varied widely. Two sources, based on information from the national coordinators for the *Círculos*, estimated 200,000 *Círculos* with 2.2 million members in 2003 (Chávez and Burke 2003; Gable 2004). However, the national leadership admitted that "many of these 200,000 Circles, due to a lack of guidance and assistance, are not actively functioning in their communities" (Gable 2004).

In fact, our own data suggest that the number of active members and *Círculos* was between one-third and one-twentieth of these official estimates as of mid-2004. The state coordinators of the *Círculos* that we interviewed suggested that as many as two-thirds of the *Círculos* that had been organized in their states had ceased to function; if this trend were nationwide, it would mean that at most 65,000 *Círculos* and about 700,000 members were still active in 2004. However, when asked for more specific numbers of *Círculos* in each of these states, these officials gave estimates that were even lower. In one of our interviews, a coordinator of the *Círculos* for the state of Aragua said that there were 600 active *Círculos* in his state (Vivas 2004). Given the population of Aragua and assuming eleven members on average per *Círculo* and a similar distribution of *Círculos* in the rest of Venezuela, this would mean that there are 9,500 active *Círculos* and 105,000 members nationally. Likewise, an estimate that we received from a state coordinator in Carabobo (Silva 2004) mentioned 10,000 active members in that state, suggesting

about 900 *Círculos* there and about 120,000 active members and 11,000 *Círculos* nationally. All of these numbers are of course much smaller than the membership figures that official sources provide, but we emphasize that they represent active members of *Círculos*, and we do not have any reason to doubt the existence of much larger numbers on the official rolls.

Activities

Despite the mixture of formality and informality in organization, all of the *Círculos* that we studied were involved in a similar set of activities. To determine the principal focus of the *Círculos'* activities, we used a series of closed-ended questions about the frequency with which each *Círculo* participated in a list of specific types of actions, and an open-ended question about the principal focus of the *Círculo* in its activities. In these questions, two major types of activities emerged as the principal emphases of the *Círculos*: community work, especially with the programs of the government, and politics.

Nearly all the *Círculo* members we interviewed said that their *Círculo* did some kind of work in the community. The *Círculos* we examined were particularly active in remedial education and health programs. Fifty-four percent of respondents said their *Círculo* was involved daily in literacy and remedial education, and 36 percent worked daily in health clinics or health campaigns. These efforts were characterized by a high level of coordination with the government's official programs or "missions" to promote education, health, and economic self-sufficiency: when asked an open-ended question about their principal activity, 30 of 109 survey respondents mentioned working with at least one of the missions, and we presume the actual number was higher.

Círculo members also mentioned political activity in support of Chávez as a frequent and important part of their activities. Because we conducted the survey in the two months leading up to the August recall referendum, we had an excellent opportunity to observe the political aspect of the *Círculos'* activities. Nearly all of our respondents made it clear that they were participating in the recall campaign and that the campaign took precedence over their social work. Not surprisingly, 40 percent of respondents said their *Círculos* participated in meetings, demonstrations, or campaigns in favor of Chávez on a daily basis and another 44 percent said they participated in these kinds of activities at least a few times a month. In response to our open-ended question about their principal current activity, 26 of 109 respondents mentioned some aspect of the campaign to defeat the recall, although it was clear from their answers to subsequent questions that they were still heavily involved in social work.

Despite these high levels of political involvement in support of Chávez, most Círculos in our sample did not participate heavily in other forms of political activism and interaction with the government, and they resisted being characterized as a political party. For example, slightly more than 9 percent said that their Círculo worked to improve salaries and working conditions on a daily basis, and only 6 percent of respondents said that their Círculo had ever participated in the campaign of any candidate besides Chávez.

Both the high level of participation by Círculo members in campaigning for Chávez and their high degree of affiliation with government programs indicated dense, highly structured ties between Círculos, the government, and Chávez. These ties had serious implications for the institutionalization of the movement which we will discuss later in this article. Though the Círculos' political activity was certainly heightened before the election, these results show that the Círculos constituted an easily mobilized and loyal political base of support, even when their principal activities were not normally or necessarily political.

Financing

In casual conversations with Venezuelans opposed to Chávez, we often heard claims that members of the Círculos received money from the government for their personal benefit. We found, however, that Círculos in our sample tended to have small budgets and funded most of their activities from sources other than the government. Sixty-four percent of our respondents reported that they did not require much money to carry out their activities, and, of those resources that did prove necessary for effective functioning in any given Círculo, about 55 percent came from contributions by the individual members of the Círculo. The next most important source was raffles and sales, which provided another 30 percent of the total resources of the average Círculo. Government financing did form about 10 percent of the Círculos' resources, but most of this apparently came in the form of goods to facilitate Círculo activities, such as chartered buses, lunches, paint, or national flags. This government money came from a variety of sources, such as the office of the local mayor, government agencies dealing with cooperatives and development, and in response to direct petitions to the national government.

Though there was little indication that members of the Círculos received direct material benefits from their membership, we saw signs that the Círculos sometimes acted as brokers for government assistance to Venezuelans not in the Círculos, and that membership in the Círculos probably facilitated access to government programs through other organizations. We met several people who had come to the meeting of a Círculo to request its assistance with a personal or family financial

problem, such as one Peruvian immigrant that came to request money for a plane ticket to visit relatives in Peru. One of the *Círculos'* main functions was to bring government programs to their communities, making them brokers of these government benefits that were often provided conditionally to supporters of Chávez; this topic is discussed at greater length below. *Círculo* membership may also have been a prerequisite for or facilitated entry into government programs and funding. For example, several of the *Círculos* in our sample had the creation of cooperatives as one of their principal aims or achievements, through which they received loans of \$500–\$1,000 per person.

Socioeconomic Background

The background of our respondents indicates that members of *Círculos* were as much activists as they were Chavistas. When asked to place themselves in a social class, 35 percent of respondents identified themselves as “working class,” 18 percent more than among the general population and 15 percent more than among MVR supporters in the 2000 World Values Survey (WVS) in Venezuela. However, an objective measure of social class, the respondent’s dwelling type, showed that a larger proportion of *Círculo* respondents lived in “nice” or “luxury” homes or apartments than did either Venezuelans in general or MVR supporters. The *Círculo* members we interviewed were also more likely to have had secondary or university education than the average Venezuelan or MVR supporter was. Of those we interviewed 89 percent had at least some secondary education, while only 78 percent of the general Venezuelan population and 75 percent of MVR supporters fell into this category in the 2000 WVS. While these levels of wealth and education may seem high for Chavistas, they are not if our respondents represented a core of committed activists rather than the rank and file of the Chavista movement.

THE *CÍRCULOS* AS CIVIL SOCIETY

As mentioned in the introduction, one of the main questions that motivated our study was what kind of civil society the *Círculos* represented—one that contributed to democracy by mobilizing the popular sectors (as supporters of the *Círculos* suggested) or one that undermined it by spreading violent norms and practices (as opponents of Chávez claimed). Two problems confront us as we answer this question. First, some skeptics might argue that the *Círculos* could not meaningfully be considered an example of civil society because they were initiated by a call from Chávez and were asked to register with the national government. However, if we define civil society as voluntary associations

outside of the family and the state (a minimalist definition in keeping with most of the literature on civil society; see for example Brysk [2000], Diamond [1999], and Warren [2002]), then the descriptive data presented above demonstrate that the *Círculos* should be considered part of Venezuelan civil society: membership in the *Círculos* was voluntary and probably not significantly financed by the state, and most of the *Círculos* eventually created their own parallel national organization that they felt better represented their interests; in at least some cases *Círculos* were formed that never registered at all. This does not mean that the *Círculos* were completely autonomous or had a unique identity (points we develop below), but it does mean they had a high degree of formal independence.

The second problem we confront is that there are different normative visions of what constitutes good democracy and, therefore, what civil society should do. To borrow the terms used by Mainwaring and Viola (1986) in categorizing new social movements in Latin America, we can distinguish a “liberal democratic” from a “radical democratic” understanding of civil society. Each side of the conflict in Venezuela is associated with one of these perspectives. The liberal democratic view, associated most heavily with the opposition, takes interests and identities largely as a given and sees civil society as the organized embodiment of these interests/identities; citizens influence the government either by creating multiple, cross-cutting organizations that competitively lobby their elected representatives (the pluralist view; see Truman [1951]) or by organizing along sectoral lines and selecting national leaders that are incorporated into tripartite commissions (the corporatist view; see Schmitter [1974]). In contrast, the radical democratic vision—in Venezuela, associated largely with Chavismo and many of the activists in the *Círculos*—regards civil society not only as a set of organizations but as a place where identities and interests are constructed through political action; in fact, the construction of identity—in Latin America, a unified “popular” identity—is considered crucial for redistributing political power and achieving an equitable society (Laclau 1985; Laclau and Mouffe 2004). According to this latter view, formal decision-making channels and even the democratic state are regarded ambivalently because of their tendency to facilitate cooptation and to undermine a common popular identity; traditional political parties are not natural allies and representatives but potential competitors or even usurpers (Oxhorn 1995).

While we acknowledge the fundamental differences between these two perspectives on democracy and civil society, for the purposes of this analysis we suggest that they are complementary. In keeping with the ideas of Warren (2001), both perspectives suggest that civil society can improve democracy by 1) enhancing the political skills and democratic values of participants, 2) providing a space for public deliberation,

and 3) providing institutional resources for overcoming collective action problems and influencing the state (or solving problems independently). In addition, there seems to be some agreement that one of the crucial attributes of civil society is its ability to enhance the individual and collective autonomy of citizens, or their capacity to make reasoned decisions and act on them.

Because of this common ground, we relied on the framework of Diamond (1999) in deciding which aspects of the *Círculos* to measure in our survey. Diamond suggests five aspects of civil society that determine how much it will contribute to democracy: 1) whether the organization is *internally democratic*; 2) the *goals and methods* of the group for participating in society; 3) its *institutionalization*; 4) the degree to which it contributes to organizational *pluralism* in the larger civil society, or a multiplicity of organizations around similar issue areas; and 5) the degree to which it encourages high *density of membership* by individual citizens in the broader civil society. Although Diamond's framework is heavily influenced by a pluralist notion of the appropriate role of civil society, the aspects that he identifies neatly capture the common ground between the liberal and radical democratic perspectives on civil society; his framework also has the benefit of being specific and easily operationalized in a survey.

Internal Democracy

Diamond suggests that, in order for organizations to help build democratic norms among their members, they must be internally democratic (Diamond 1999, 228). While some scholars question the need for internal democracy in all forms of civil society (Warren 1999), we found that this was an area in which the *Círculos* were very strong. To get at this quantitatively, we included a question in our survey that asked if the *Círculo* had a leader and how this leader was chosen. Ninety-three percent of the *Círculos* surveyed had some kind of leader. None of the respondents mentioned using a secret ballot to choose this leader, but over half of the people we interviewed had chosen their leader through a voice vote, and another third simply recognized someone out of an organizational consensus, often because that individual was the founder of the *Círculo*. Only one respondent indicated that their leader had been imposed on them by higher authorities. This matches a characteristic of the *Círculos* that we have already mentioned, that they value horizontal or non-hierarchical organization. This belief in internal democracy was evident in the *Círculos'* rejection of the National Coordination. It was also apparent in the frequent complaints we heard about the selection of candidates for local elections (subsequently held in October 2004), all of whom had been designated by party leaders. A large number of *Círculos*

were running their own candidates to stand against official ones from MVR and proposed that primary elections be used to allow “the people” to make the final choice.

Goals and Methods

Diamond (1999, 228) and other scholars (Brysk 2000) also suggest that members of a truly “civic” civil society must value a pluralistic democracy and democratic procedure and use non-violent methods that express and reinforce these ideals, showing respect for other organizations regardless of their differences of opinion about policy (Diamond 1999, 228). Because this aspect of the Círculos was the subject of so much controversy, we included a large number of questions in our survey to measure both democratic values and the actual practices of the Círculo members. While it was evident that some Círculos did not adhere to peaceful, pluralistic norms of democracy (as demonstrated by occasional acts of organized violence against members of the opposition and the private news media), we were pleased to find that most of the Círculo members we interviewed had liberal conceptions of democracy and held pluralistic norms. Thus, in one of the areas of greatest popular concern, the Círculos appeared to perform quite well. However, many of our respondents also incorporated clientelistic attributes that contributed negatively to democracy, attributes that received much less attention in public debate and in the Círculos.

To better understand the goals of these organizations, we asked about attitudes towards social change and different regime types. The first question was drawn from the 2000 WVS and asked whether the respondent felt that society needed to undergo deep change through revolution, if instead it should undergo gradual change through reform, or if it should be defended from change by any subversive forces. Our results, found in table 1, show that average Venezuelans (WVS) and Chavista voters (WVS [MVR]) actually had very similar views in the WVS that showed a strong preference for gradual change through reform (56 and 52 percent, respectively) and ranked revolutionary change last (12 and 17 percent). In contrast, our respondents (CB Survey) were ambivalent, with the largest portion (42 percent) preferring deep, revolutionary change, and the next largest portion (30 percent) preferring to defend the gains they have already made; the smallest support was for gradual reform. Once again, our respondents fit the profile of radical activists more than they did rank-and-file members of the movement.

That said, our respondents preferred democracy much more than average Venezuelans or even Chavista voters did. To measure the preference for a democratic regime, we used a question from the 2000 WVS that asked respondents how they felt about certain regime types: a strong

Table 1 Attitudes Towards Social Change

Attitudes towards social change:
Which phrase is closest to your own views?*

	WVS	WVS (MVR)	CB Survey
Our society must undergo deep change through revolutionary actions.	12.2	16.8	41.5
Our society should be gradually changed through reforms.	56.4	52.4	26.4
Our current society should be defended from any subversive force.	29.1	29.0	30.2
Don't know/NA	2.3	1.8	1.9
N	1200	452	106

* Numbers show percent of total respondents.

man who wouldn't have to worry about elections or listening to the National Assembly; a government of experts rather than elected politicians; a military government; and democracy. Attitudes of most Venezuelans and Chavista voters towards democracy in the abstract were a little equivocal. As the data in table 2 indicate, with the exception of a military government, only about half of the respondents from either of these groups in the WVS felt that the non-democratic regimes would be "bad" or "very bad"; only around two-thirds felt that a democratic regime would be "very good." In contrast, nearly three-fourths of the members of *Círculos* that we interviewed felt that the non-democratic regime types would be "bad" or "very bad," and 80 percent felt that democracy would be "very good." Whether or not the Chávez government closely conforms to the ideal of a democratic regime, the members of *Círculos* that we surveyed held these ideals much more strongly than the average Venezuelan.

To understand the political methods of the *Círculos*, we asked an additional series of questions drawn from the WVS. The first of these asked quite bluntly if the respondent agreed with the statement that violence is never justified in politics. Because this particular question was only included in the 1995–97 WVS, we were not able to compare our results with the responses of Chavista voters, but the average Venezuelan was again somewhat equivocal: only 38 percent of respondents in the 1995–97 WVS strongly agreed with the idea that violence is never justified. In contrast, 65 percent of the members of *Círculos* that we interviewed strongly agreed with this statement. At the same time, slightly more of our respondents strongly *disagreed* with this statement than did average Venezuelans: 14 percent of our sample as opposed to 12 percent of the general population. This suggests a slight bimodality in the

Table 2 Attitudes Towards Regime Types

<i>How would it be for our country to have the following types of government?*</i>	WVS	WVS (MVR)	CB Survey
<i>A strong political leader that doesn't have to bother with the National Assembly or elections</i>			
Very good	17.9	18.6	7.6
Good	27.3	28.5	13.2
Bad	28.6	28.8	31.1
Very bad	20.4	19.0	45.3
Don't know/NA	5.8	5.1	2.8
N	1200	452	106
<i>Experts, not a government, to make decisions based on what they think is best</i>			
Very good	25.6	25.2	11.3
Good	39.6	42.9	17.0
Bad	19.9	18.1	28.3
Very bad	10.0	10.8	41.5
Don't know/NA	4.9	2.9	1.9
N	1200	452	106
<i>A military government</i>			
Very good	7.8	10.8	1.9
Good	13.9	19.5	22.9
Bad	31.4	29.0	26.7
Very bad	43.0	37.2	46.7
Don't know/NA	3.8	3.5	1.9
N	1200	452	105
<i>A democratic political system</i>			
Very good	63.9	62.2	80.0
Good	28.3	31.4	15.2
Bad	4.3	4.0	1.0
Very bad	2.2	1.3	1.9
Don't know/NA	1.4	1.1	1.9
N	1200	452	105

* Numbers show percent of total respondents.

distribution and supports the idea that a small minority of Círculo members do participate in violent acts against the opposition. However, the size of this group is not much different than its counterpart in the WVS.

The results of an additional battery of questions about methods speak just as positively about the Círculos. The 2000 WVS asked respondents

if they had ever or would be willing to participate in a variety of kinds of political action, including signing a petition, joining a sabotage or boycott, attending a legal demonstration, joining an illegal strike, and taking over a building or other location. The results are in table 3. Once again, the average Venezuelan and the average Chavista voter were not much different in their willingness to use these methods, although in this case they were more peaceful than their equivocal attitudes towards regime types suggested. A large majority of Venezuelans and Chavista voters in the WVS were willing to sign a petition, and an even larger majority claimed they would never join a sabotage/boycott, illegal strike or takeover/sit-in. Oddly, a bare majority also indicated that they would never participate in a legal demonstration, although a sizeable minority indicated they would be willing to do so. In any case, it is clear that most Venezuelans and Chavista voters were not extremely politically active, as few respondents had actually done any of these actions even in cases where they would clearly be willing. At most, only 14 to 18 percent of these average respondents to the WVS had ever carried out any of them.

The members of *Círculos* that we surveyed generally agreed with their fellow Venezuelans on their willingness to do these activities, although the vast majority of them had actually engaged in the legitimate activities as well. In the case of the two legitimate kinds of activities, 44 percent were willing to sign a petition and 55 percent had actually done so; and fully 74 percent had participated in legal demonstrations.³ Interestingly, our respondents were even less willing to carry out illegitimate kinds of activities: 95 to 96 percent indicated they would never join an illegal strike or sabotage/boycott, and a slightly more equivocal 88 percent indicated they would never take over a building or engage in a sit-in—but these numbers were not any worse than those of the rest of the population. Critics might argue that our respondents were underreporting their participation in these kinds of illegal activities, and we must admit that respondents were clearly concerned about conveying a positive, peaceful image of the *Círculos* when we spoke with them. However, even if this were the case, it is clear that the members of the *Círculos* at least understood the same norms of nonviolent, legal political participation that the rest of the Venezuelan population did.

Thus, members of *Círculos* that we interviewed showed at least the same appreciation for democratic norms and a noticeably higher respect for democracy-in-the-abstract than the rest of the Venezuelan population. We think it was mistaken to criticize most of the *Círculos* on these grounds, although we again acknowledge the existence of organized

3. If the World Values Survey had been carried out in 2004, we suspect that the numbers of demonstrators would be higher among the general population as well.

Table 3 *Democratic Methods*

<i>Tell me if you have carried out, would carry out, or would never carry out the following political activities.*</i>	WVS	WVS (MVR)	CB Survey
<i>Sign a request or petition</i>			
Have done it	14.4	17.9	54.5
Might do it	65.9	68.4	43.6
Would never do it	16.3	11.9	2.0
Don't know/NA	3.3	1.8	0.0
N	1200	452	101
<i>Join a sabotage/boycott</i>			
Have done it	1.5	1.3	0.0
Might do it	5.8	6.0	4.0
Would never do it	88.9	90.9	95.0
Don't know/NA	3.8	1.8	1.0
N	1200	452	100
<i>Attend a legal demonstration</i>			
Have done it	7.6	10.0	74.3
Might do it	33.5	36.1	17.8
Would never do it	56.2	52.7	7.9
Don't know/NA	2.8	1.3	0.0
N	1200	452	101
<i>Join an illegal strike</i>			
Have done it	2.4	2.7	2.0
Might do it	6.1	6.0	2.0
Would never do it	87.9	89.4	96.0
Don't know/NA	3.6	2.0	0.0
N	1200	452	101
<i>Take over a building, factory, or other location</i>			
Have done it	1.7	2.0	1.0
Might do it	8.0	7.5	10.9
Would never do it	87.3	88.5	88.1
Don't know/NA	3.0	2.0	0.0
N	1200	452	101

* Numbers show percent of total respondents.

groups that used violence against the opposition, and we admit the possibility that members of Círculos may have justified the breaking of these norms when dealing with members of the opposition that they considered illegitimate. However, there is one additional area of conduct in

which we feel the *Círculos* deserved greater criticism but in which they have not received as much attention, perhaps because of the lack of popular awareness of their actual activities. We speak here of the tendency of the *Círculos* to function as clientelistic brokers.

Scholars have long acknowledged the tendency of the traditional Venezuelan political parties to build political support through patron-client networks, that is, by creating a relationship in which government goods and services were granted to voters in a conditional exchange for votes and other political support rather than an unconditional exchange using universalistic criteria that respected full rights of citizenship (Coppedge 1993). When Chávez came to power, he did so with promises of eliminating this “corrupt” system that all too often ignored the effectively disenfranchised poor in the informal sector that lacked access to labor unions and other associations tied to the parties.

Although the *Círculos* performed an important and valuable work through their attempts to organize the poor, especially in the *barrios*, and help them address their real basic needs, this work often took the form of petitions to the government to establish offices, clinics, or stores associated with the missions and other government aid programs initiated in the past few years. Once these programs were obtained, members of *Círculos* often remained and helped administer them, often without compensation. The problem was that the *Círculos* unwittingly (and sometimes wittingly) served as new clientelistic brokers, ensuring the provision of these programs in neighborhoods *that supported Chávez*. The advocacy of the *Círculos* was often important for helping neighborhoods receive these government services or receive them ahead of other neighborhoods. In addition, many of these programs were subsequently run with the understanding that only people who supported the Chávez government were entitled to benefits. This was very clear in the efforts to issue new government ID cards before the election (cards were routinely denied to citizens that had signed recall petitions), an activity that many *Círculos* actively participated in as part of their work with the recall campaign. It was less of an overt problem in some of the government’s programs where people were not generally asked for any identification before receiving services. In other programs, such as the remedial education missions, some directors and teachers made it clear to us that only those who supported Chávez were eligible (Author interview 2004). During the period of the recall campaign when we visited these Missions, students were regularly required to participate in demonstrations that supported Chávez (Author interviews 2004).

In other words, the *Círculos* were directly involved in requesting and administering programs that granted their goods and services conditionally, with conditionality maintained through a variety of active and passive sanctions. In doing so, the *Círculos* undermined the norms of

citizenship required for democracy. This does not mean that government programs could not be directed to addressing the needs of the poor or that the Círculos should not have been involved in helping the barrios organize and meet their own needs, but that the Círculos needed to use their position of influence to ensure that supporters of the opposition were free to use these government programs and that support for Chavismo was not a criterion for access. The Círculos that failed to do this were increasing the civil society among certain sectors of the poor while simultaneously diminishing the “civic” quality of that society.

Institutionalization

Another area of concern that has not received much attention in public debates is the degree of institutionalization of the Círculos. According to Diamond (1999, 228–31), civil society must be institutionalized in order to have a lasting, positive effect on democracy. Drawing on the work of Selznick (1957) and Panebianco (1988), we define institutionalization as the process of developing a unique identity as an organization (an ideational component) and a set of rules to guide the organization’s decisions and activities (a material component). Unfortunately, we found that the Círculos in our sample had only a moderate level of institutionalization. Specifically, the Círculos embodied a *charismatic mode of linkage* between Chávez and his supporters, by which we mean that they had a relationship in which votes and other support were primarily exchanged for the promise of reform by a charismatic leader, rather than because of the specific policy content of his platform (a *programmatic mode of linkage*) or because of a direct exchange of particularistic benefits (a *clientelistic mode of linkage*).⁴ This mode of linkage created an internal contradiction or tension between the Círculos’ stated goals of autonomy/internal democracy and serving Chávez, and it undermined their efforts at institutionalization. In making this characterization, we are not arguing that the Círculos lacked clientelistic or programmatic aspects—we have pointed out important areas where these existed—but that the members’ relationship to a charismatic leader played a disproportionate and even dominant role in helping them organize.

To measure the kind of political linkage that the Círculos embodied, we asked a question very early in our survey about what the respondent’s principal motive was in creating or joining their Círculo. Respondents were evenly divided between two responses, with 41 percent indicating that their principal motive was “to work in some

4. These modes of linkage are discussed at length in Kitschelt (2000), Lyne (2001), Roberts (2001), and Hawkins (2003).

project to improve the community” and another 42 percent indicating that it was “to support President Chávez.” We later asked a follow-up question to see if perhaps these motives had changed over time, in a direction favoring the more programmatic objective of a community project, but less than 10 percent of respondents indicated any kind of change had taken place.

The *Círculos*’ focus on their relationship to Chávez as a charismatic leader was evident in their responses to many other survey questions and more generally in the conversations we had with members of the *Círculos*. As noted earlier, one of the most important activities of the *Círculos* was “to participate in rallies, demonstrations, or campaigns in favor of President Chávez,” and all of the *Círculos* that we spoke with were dedicating the bulk of their time to work in the recall campaign. The *casas bolivarianas* that we visited (houses or offices that had been rented or donated to service the *Círculos* in the neighborhood) displayed posters, poetry, and other messages dedicated to Chávez and the recall campaign. On at least a few occasions, members of the *Círculos* that came out to meet us expressed their faith in Chávez in spontaneous speeches, often using very religious language. Even when their faith and affection were not expressed so emotionally, as in our interviews with some of the state-level leaders of the *Círculos*, respondents expressed great respect for Chávez and openly acknowledged his role as a focal point for organization.

The result of this charismatic linkage was that only a minority of the *Círculo* members that we interviewed had a unique sense of identity. We included a question in our survey that asked respondents with which they identified most: the national Bolivarian movement or their own *Círculo*. Only 30 percent of respondents indicated that they identified most with their own *Círculo*. Another 26 percent indicated that they identified with both equally, and the largest portion of the respondents—44 percent—indicated that they identified most strongly with the national movement. We also asked respondents what they thought the relationship between the *Círculos* and Chávez should be. Not surprisingly, all of the respondents indicated that the relationship should at least be a positive one. However, of those that gave a more specific response, 51 percent felt that this relationship should be one of the *Círculos*’ dependence on Chávez, while only 31 percent felt that this relationship should be one of equality and just 18 percent felt that the *Círculos* should occupy a position of sovereignty or superiority. While we lacked the ability to compare the *Círculos* with more traditional organizations in Venezuelan civil society, the level of unique self-identity seemed low and their sense of dependence appeared very high.

These patterns carried over into the organizational complexity and rule-basis of the *Círculos*. On the negative side, most of the *Círculos* that

we examined relied on a small booklet (the *pequeño libro amarillo*) published by the national leadership of the movement for their internal rules and general mission. These rules were not very explicit on such issues as how collective decisions would be made or leadership chosen. Thus, when asked if the member had some kind of specialized role inside their Círculos, only 55 percent of our respondents said yes, the remainder saying that they did “a little of everything.” On the positive side, the fact that 93 percent of the Círculos had some kind of leader indicated at least a small degree of organization based on rules and a division of labor, and 79 percent of respondents indicated that their Círculo met weekly, although it was hard to tell if this meant a formal meeting with all members present or conversations and informal meetings between sets of members in the course of their work.

Pluralism and Density

According to Diamond, a civil society must have multiple, competing organizations in order to best contribute to democracy—neither a high level of fragmentation, which could weaken civil society, nor an extreme monopolization of membership in a given sector or issue area, as this could enervate leadership and undermine democratic norms (1999, 232). A civil society should also simply have a large number of organizations in order to allow individual citizens to be members of multiple organizations (233).

Here again there was a mixed picture. The Círculos added to the density and plurality of Venezuela’s civil society, but largely only *within* the Chavista movement; considering Venezuela’s civil society as a whole, they were part of a process that seemed to disenfranchise members of the opposition and limit or at least disadvantage organizations that were not part of the movement.

For example, as quasi-party organizations the Círculos competed with and added to the organizational density of Chavismo. Our conversations revealed that members of Círculos generally mistrusted or at least had an uneasy relationship with many of the leaders of MVR. The clearest manifestation of this tension was evident in states where the Círculos proposed alternative candidates for the local elections in October 2004 and created new regional parties to campaign for these candidates, such as the Movimiento de Concentración Gente Nueva (MCGN) in Guatire-Guarenas (State of Miranda) or the Unidad Patriótica de Carabobo (UPC).

On the other hand, the Círculos coexisted uncomfortably with traditional civil society organizations and were often used by the government to supplant these. While many Círculos coexisted with other organizations in the barrios, there was often tension between the Círculos and traditional NGOs that either tried to maintain political neutrality or

Table 4 Membership in Organizations and Activities

Organization/Activity	WVS	WVS (MVR)	CB Survey
Social welfare services for the elderly, handicapped, or poor	6.6	7.3	33.0
Church or religious organization	22.9	21.5	24.5
Educational, artistic, musical, cultural activities	17.8	15.9	57.0
Unions	3.0	4.6	8.7
Community work on issues of poverty, employment, housing, or equal rights	10.3	11.3	69.2
Human rights	8.9	10.0	37.5
Environmental conservation, ecology, or animal rights	11.9	11.5	33.0
Professional organizations	9.3	9.5	31.8
Youth work (such as Boy Scouts, guias, youth clubs, etc.)	8.4	10.6	30.8
Sports or recreation	21.1	21.7	43.0
Women's organizations	5.1	6.2	28.3
Peace movement	5.8	7.7	27.2
Volunteer organizations related to health	9.8	12.2	63.2
Other	0.7	1.1	14.3
Average (not including "other")	10.8	11.5	35.8
N	1200	452	107

were associated with the opposition. Like other Chavistas, the members of the *Círculos* tended to see opposition members as illegitimate *golpistas* (coup-plotters) and the Bolivarian movement as a true expression of the Venezuelan people. Cases have been reported of the government denying funding and jurisdiction to existing charitable organizations and giving it to local Chavista organizations (Peñaloza 2004, 7).

We also saw evidence of this insularity within our survey. On the positive side, our respondents showed very high levels of membership in a variety of associations. To gauge membership, we asked members of *Círculos* a standard series of questions from the 2000 WVS about whether they were members of any of several possible organizations and activities. The results of the 2000 WVS and our own survey are given in table 4. While both Venezuelans in general and Chavista voters in particular had relatively low levels of membership in voluntary associations, the members of *Círculos* that we interviewed had high levels.

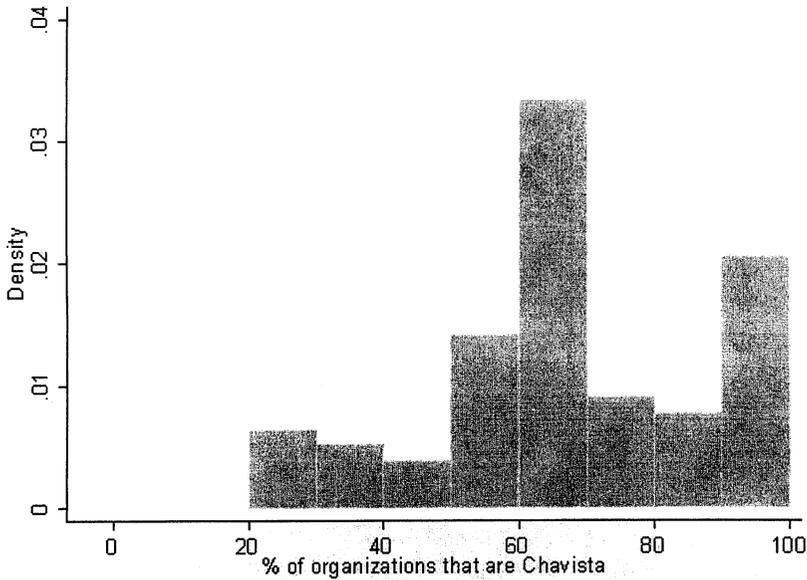


Figure 1 *Individual Participation in Chavista Organizations*

Specifically, while only 11 percent of Venezuelans and Chavista voters in the WVS belonged to any of these associations—moderate or low levels in comparison with many of the advanced industrial democracies, and similar to levels in the rest of Latin America—36 percent of our respondents from the *Círculos* belonged to these same associations.

On the negative side, the variety of these memberships was limited. To determine this, we immediately followed up on the above series of questions about membership by asking the respondents to name the actual organizations they belonged to. This generated a smaller number of organizations, as in many cases the respondents belonged to organizations that carried out multiple activities and covered various issues—the *Círculos Bolivarianos* themselves being one of the most frequently mentioned multi-issue organizations. Based on this response, we were able to determine the degree of closure or encapsulation of their affiliations, that is, how much a member of a *Círculo* belonged to other organizations inside the Chavista movement. The results are shown in the histogram in figure 1. We found that at least one-fifth of the respondents belonged only to Chavista organizations, and a total of at least two-thirds of our respondents belonged to organizations of which at least two-thirds were Chavista. Keeping in mind that these estimates are almost certainly low (if we were unsure about the identity of an organization, we coded it as non-Chavista), this suggests a fairly high level of exclusive involvement in Chavista organizations. The level of closure was

not total, however; about 15 percent of respondents belonged to at least as many non-Chavista organizations as they did Chavista.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of our surveys and interviews indicate that the *Círculos* made a mixed contribution to Venezuelan civil society and democracy. As their supporters claimed, the members of *Círculos* that we interviewed had strong participatory democratic values and were engaged in significant social work. At the same time, however, their organizations embodied a charismatic linkage to Chávez that undermined their capacity to become institutionalized, and they often reinforced a clientelistic relationship between Chávez and Venezuelan voters. While they enhanced the density and pluralism of civil society within Chavismo, it is less clear that they did so within the broader Venezuelan society. Thus, while they incorporated many of the attributes of a civil society that could contribute to either a liberal representative democracy or a participatory one, they lacked the autonomy that would make that contribution meaningful and lasting.

Events since our interviews have tended to confirm this portrait of the *Círculos*. If they were not already in decline at the time, the *Círculos* have since ceased to have a meaningful organizational presence in the Chavista movement or in that segment of Venezuelan civil society that seeks to organize and empower the barrios and informal sectors (Botía 2005a, 2005b). The *Círculos* have not been disbanded, but many if not most of them have ceased to be active. In follow-up interviews that we carried out by telephone during May 2005, about one year after the original survey, former leaders and participants in the *Círculos* said that they continue to participate in a variety of other organizations associated with the movement, including the missions, the Urban Land Committees (designed to give shantytowns legal identity), the various electoral organizations associated with the movements (both MVR and the special election committees established for the recall election), and other ad hoc efforts; their impression is that most of their fellow members of *Círculos* are doing the same (González 2005; de Juliac 2005; Vivas 2005). However, they no longer meet as *Círculos* to carry out these tasks.

What explains this decline of the *Círculos*? At this point we can only speculate about the causes, but we suggest at least three possibilities. First, the *Círculos* have had a hard time competing with the government's newer organizations for poverty relief and popular mobilization. All of these new programs are much better financed and provide important, tangible benefits that address some of the most pressing needs of the poor, including education, health care, food, housing, and employment.

In contrast, while the Círculos met important goals of diffusing revolutionary ideals and providing “non-partisan” political organization for Chavistas, they never had consistent material objectives and were not well funded or provided with the infrastructure needed to carry out long-term projects. In our follow-up interviews during 2005, some of our contacts mentioned these as reasons why they and their friends had stopped participating in the Círculos (González 2005; Juliac 2005; Maldonado 2005). We also saw evidence of this in our original survey. Although the survey primarily sampled active Círculos, we interviewed several persons who had belonged to a Círculo sometime in the past but were no longer participating. All of these individuals had become involved in other forms of activism in the movement, and they said that these activities had taken a toll on their time and resources.

A second possible reason is conflict over leadership and the disaffection that this has produced for many activists (Botía 2005a, 2005b). We have already mentioned the appearance of parallel national organizations responding to disaffection with the top-down approach of the National Coordination. This reveals a cycle of mobilization-bureaucratization-disaffection that has continued to play itself out more recently as the Red Nacional itself has become increasingly distanced from its remaining base of activists. Some of the members of the Red that we spoke with again in 2005 seemed to have assumed a mantle of leadership out of keeping with their original responsibilities or popular mandate (a mandate that was admittedly vague to begin with, since most of the leaders that we met were chosen by consensus rather than an internal election) and out of touch with the realities of the movement, as they spoke of ambitious efforts to “re-found” (*relanzar*) the Círculos and to reach some sort of compromise with the official national leadership (Author interview 2005). That said, the Círculos are not alone in this regard. According to one of our contacts, many of the other popular organizations sponsored by the government have become distanced from their national coordinating offices, pursuing their activities through local networks that disregard or distrust the actions of national leadership (Maldonado 2005). This frustration with movement bureaucratization has been heightened by the internal primaries for city council and neighborhood association candidacies held by MVR in April 2005. In our follow-up interviews, some of our contacts were clearly upset with local party leaders, who often used old-style tactics to ensure the victory of their favored candidates at the expense of candidates favored by the Círculos and other popular organizations (Mendoza 2005; Silva 2005). For the moment, this kind of generalized disaffection has not diminished activism in the broader movement, but an earlier and more concentrated disaffection with the Círculos may explain some of the shift of Círculo members to other organizations.

A third reason emphasized by our own research is the charismatic basis of the *Círculos* and the weak foundation that this provided for popular organization. The low levels of institutionalization evidenced by *Círculo* members, both in terms of the weak rule-basis of the *Círculos* and the absence of an identity distinct from Chávez, made it very unlikely that their organization would persist if Chávez advocated new programs or new forms of organization—which he did. This charismatic linkage may go a long way towards explaining the power of the other two causes we have mentioned. The newer government-sponsored organizations are not only better financed, but they respond to Chávez's directives and are each the result of a new campaign or a new call to action. The fact that they are more formally dependent on the state (in particular, on cabinet-level agencies or the president himself) may be an advantage in attracting supporters because it means they are closer to the charismatic leader. In like fashion, the limited effect of internal leadership squabbles may also be explained by charisma. As long as *Chavistas* see this infighting as the result of corrupt opportunists that have temporarily infiltrated the movement, they will keep their affection for Chávez and remain active while awaiting or initiating a new purge; however, if the infighting continues and Chávez is implicated, *Chavistas* will lose faith in the leader and cease to participate in the movement. The fact that so many of our contacts remain actively committed to the movement leads us to believe that the former is still the case.

The experience of the *Círculos* provides an important lesson for popular activists and points out a possibility not seen in much of the literature on the new social movements and civil society in Latin America: charismatic leadership may undermine popular organization. Previous studies have either focused on the problems created by electoral competition (Roberts 1997) or have expressed optimism about the possibility of popular organizations to act with autonomy once mobilized (Stokes 1995). In Venezuela we see a process with significant popular mobilization under democratic conditions, but with a very high level of dependence on leadership. Our sense is that charismatic leadership has allowed popular mobilization to avoid some of the problems created by electoral competition—candidates must have the leader's seal of approval in order to be successful—but that it comes with a high price. Experienced activists in Venezuela have hitched their wagon to Chávez because he provides a needed focal point for mobilization and (finally!) makes radical social change possible; however, in doing so, they have lost control over the process of change. Activists that challenge the charismatic leader in an effort to assert their autonomy are likely to find themselves marginalized and frustrated. While we remain hopeful that *Chavismo* in Venezuela has permanently enhanced the mobilizational capacity of the poorest and most marginalized segments of society, we

worry that much of what we currently see is unsustainable and incapable of acting with the kind of autonomy that democracy requires.

APPENDIX

Our data are derived from a survey of 110 members of seventy-two different *Círculos Bolivarianos* performed between 15 June and 4 August 2004 in four states of Venezuela: Aragua (26 interviews), the Capital District (Caracas—Libertador) (30), Carabobo (21), and Miranda (32). Interviews averaged fifty minutes, but some were only twenty-five minutes long while others were 2.5 hours, depending mostly on how talkative the respondent was—most of our respondents were very glad for the chance to “tell their story,” especially to scholars from outside Venezuela. Interviews were carried out by the authors and a trained team of seven undergraduate university students from Venezuela (Universidad Simón Bolívar, Universidad Bolivariana de Caracas, Universidad de las Fuerzas Armadas) and the United States (Brigham Young University). The interviewers came from various economic strata (mostly middle class) and all political persuasions (pro-Chávez and anti-Chávez).

Because national membership records were not available to us, respondents were chosen through a chain-referral or “snowball” technique rather than through random or probabilistic sampling. Snowball sampling is best suited for identifying qualities of social networks, not individual-level attributes of larger populations (Coleman 1958; Salganik and Heckathorn 2004). Because the sample is not randomly drawn from a known population, we can only make subjective judgments about its representativeness (Kalton 1983, 90). To help the readers make these judgments, we briefly describe the contours of our sample and some data that compare it to the larger population.

First, in order to limit the chances of oversampling particular segments of the population, we worked through a variety of contacts to find our interviewees. There were seven independent seeds that included friends at a local church, a community radio station in western Caracas, each of our Venezuelan research assistants, and the Web master of a *Círculos* Web site.⁵ These contacts allowed us to reach much farther beyond Caracas than we had originally hoped. The resulting sample of states comprises one-third of Venezuela’s population; only 28 percent of our sample is from Caracas.

Second, the sociodemographic indicators we have of our sample—in particular the marital status, age, and employment of respondents—vary from the national population of Venezuelans and Chavistas in predictable

5. Details on each of these referral chains are available from the authors.

Table 5 *Marital Status and Sex of Respondents*

<i>Marital Status</i>	<i>WVS</i>	<i>WVS (MVR)</i>	<i>CB Survey</i>
Married	40.3	42.0	39.6
Living together as if married	16.1	17.0	6.6
Divorced	3.2	4.2	13.2
Separated	4.0	5.1	6.6
Widowed	4.0	4.0	2.8
Single	32.3	27.0	31.1
Don't know/NA	0.3	0.7	0.0
<hr/>			
<i>Sex</i>	<i>WVS</i>	<i>WVS (MVR)</i>	<i>CB Survey</i>
Male	50.4	59.7	64.2
Female	49.6	40.3	35.9
<hr/>			
N	1200	452	106

ways. As the comparison with 2000 WVS data in table 5 indicates, the marital profile of our sample nearly matches that of the total Venezuelan population. However, there are two noticeable differences: fewer of our respondents are single but living with someone, and more of them are divorced. Also, the average age of our sample (forty-six) is higher than the average age of the overall Venezuelan population (thirty-six). These differences may be a result of our failure to sample more university students—although Chavismo has a significant organized presence in Venezuelan universities, we ended up interviewing no more than four students, and university students are generally younger and unmarried. The other key differences we see are in the employment profile of our respondents: we have a larger number of self-employed and a smaller number of housewives than in the general Venezuelan population. In this case, we feel the sample is possibly correct: active membership in a *Círculo* made significant demands on a person's time and energy, and, given continuing social norms about the participation of women in politics, we think that relatively few young mothers were likely to be active members of *Círculos*. In any case, as the numbers in table 5 also indicate, Chavismo appealed much more strongly to male than female voters. We were also not surprised at the higher percentage of self-employed respondents. Chávez's appeal to members of the informal sector is well known, and the *Círculos* focused many of their efforts on the *barrios* and members of the informal sector, especially street vendors.

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