As clear as MUD: government and opposition in Bolivarian Venezuela.

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Introduction

Since assuming power in February 1999, President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela has led a breathtaking process of change, which has generated huge academic and media interest in the oil rich country and its president[1]. Yet very little has been written about the Venezuelan opposition, despite many high profile insurrectionary attempts to dislodge Chávez from power, including a coup and a debilitating oil strike[2]. Currently the Venezuelan opposition seems to have abandoned such insurrectionary strategies in favour of a process of "partidization", that is the return of the predominance of politics and political parties, a privileging of electoralism and a unification of policy platforms and electoral strategies. This article seeks to redress this absence in analysis, concentrating particularly on these latter strategies.

The article seeks to do this by using Blondel's common comparative framework for opposition.[3] We choose this framework as it is the most comprehensive available, requiring consideration of the type of existing regime, the socio-politico situation, and the goals and objectives of opposition in a given polity. It is both rigorous and flexible as it provides a clear comparative structure, while offering opportunities to examine the phenomenon of opposition both within and beyond the political realm and hence place it within the wider social and

indeed historical context, essential steps needed to properly understand Bolivarian Venezuela. In this way, we not only hope to add to knowledge on Venezuela but also to shed light on opposition studies' methodology in general and Blondel's important contribution to it in particular.

The paper as a result has four parts. First, we will provide a brief summary of Blondel's framework, following it in an inverse fashion in each subsequent section. Using data yielded from extensive field research among opposition groups in Venezuela, both in politics and in civil society, and primary and secondary sources, we look at the nature of the Chávez regime, the relationship between inequalities and opposition politics in Venezuela, and at opposition unification strategies including their social, political and economic policies. Our conclusions centre around three main issues. First that Venezuela is in a state of transition, from a heterogeneous, socially fractured society to a more homogenous one. Second, the opposition is in consequence in a possible transition from a dispersed, anti-systemic condition towards a more unified, less conflictive strategy. Third, neither of these are givens and both will much depend on opposition willingness to learn from the errors of the preceding Punto Fijo regime as well as evaluating more objectively achievements of the current Bolivarian regime. Finally, we conclude that while methodologically Blondel's framework achieves its goal of being apt for universal, global application its design is overly framed by liberal conceptions of democracy to be fully applicable in the Venezuelan case.

Blondel's framework on opposition

Blondel, using Dahl's seminal 1966 work, *Political Opposition in Western Democracies* and other key texts, constructs a theoretical framework apt for studying opposition politics, parties and movements in any part of the globe. His framework consists of three broad elements: types of opposition; the "main factors which appear to account for variations in types of opposition" [4]and, "the conditions under which opposition is likely to emerge, grow and

decline"[5]. First, types of opposition are analysed from two-dimensions; the distance of the goals of the opposition from those of the government and the opposition's strength and cohesion. This requires in the first place a reading of opposition policy proposals, comparing these with the government's and secondly looking at electoral strength of opposition parties.

Second, three factors can account for the existence of different types of opposition: institutional, socio-economic and the liberal or authoritarian nature of the existing regime[6]. Institutional factors relates to the presence or not of characteristics such as separation of powers, federalism, proportional representation and the extent of concentration of powers in the executive. Second, socio-economic factor has two main dimensions, cultural and structural. The first relates to the degree to which a given polity has "widely shared cultural premises"[7], which can be either positive or negative, the second is dependent on the homogeneity or heterogeneity of a given society, depending on whether there are wide or insignificant inequalities and if these are cross-cutting or mutually reinforcing. Blondel also mentions Dahl's concept of a "record of grievances" which citizens may hold against the government and how the government has responded to these[8].

Finally, with regard to the impact of the authoritarian or liberal nature of the existing regime it is "truly the extent of liberalism which is relevant here, not the extent of democracy..."[9], as the first is a pre-requisite of the second. Key issues here are if the opposition is proscribed or not in an authoritarian regime, and the strength or influence of non-party opposition actors. Blondel identifies four types of situations in which oppositions can "emerge, grow and decline"[10]. Two of these are in liberal polities in which social cleavages are limited or have declined significantly: in the first case there is only one decision-making centre, in the second, decision-making centres are more dispersed. A third situation is in societies where marked social cleavages are found and here it is important to determine if such cleavages are cross-cutting or reinforce each other. The fourth and final situation is when

opposition has to work within non-liberal systems[11]. Hence, the types of opposition which emerge in a given polity, characterized primarily in terms of its relative level of cohesion and its relationship to the existing regime, will depend on a complex mix of factors based first on the nature of the regime in power, the existence, extent and nature of social cleavages, and the cohesiveness of the opposition. The different factors to be considered are set out more schematically in the following table:

TABLE 1 HERE:

In this article we will first describe the situation in Venezuela according to these identified elements, before then going on to assess them according to Blondel's criteria, in order to arrive at a characterization of the Venezuelan opposition. In this way, we can both throw light on this neglected area while simultaneously testing the aptness of Blondel's model for contemporary politics in a development context. As Blondel affirms that "the character of the opposition is tied to the character of the government"[12], our examination will start with the last of these factors, the regime situation in which the Venezuelan opposition finds itself, before moving upwards to cover the other factors, each with its own separate section.

The nature of contemporary Venezuela's ruling political regime

The placement of a polity in one of the four situations in which oppositions can "emerge, grow and decline"[13], can determine the nature of that polity's opposition. In the first and second cases of a liberal polity where social cleavages are absent or in decline, opposition will be concentrated or coherent depending on whether there is one or multiple decision making centres, with the former likely producing a two-party system, while the latter will tend to more dispersed oppositions which may form ad hoc coalitions between themselves and/or with social movements or other groups. These, however, may be primarily veto coalitions, in the sense that the strength of the opposition is primarily negative[14]. If social cleavages are marked and reinforce each other, this will also tend towards dispersion. The fourth and final situation

is when opposition has to work within non-liberal systems, resulting as often as not in "a varying mix of underground activity and of recognized or tolerated activity"[15], depending on the degree of authoritarianism of the regime.

There are three main schools of analysis with regard to the nature of the current regime led by President Hugo Chávez in Venezuela: authoritarian, populist and *Bolivarian.* In our opinion, all three reflect a part of the Venezuelan socio-political reality. The first is the most prominent, and is often conflated with the second, whereas the third category is a minority opinion, but perhaps the most faithful in reflecting Venezuela's complexity.

Authoritarian analyses are the most dominant as much among Venezuelan opposition as abroad. Corrales[16] is quite representative of this school of analysis as, for example, he argues that Venezuela has weak or non-existent separation of powers with a strong tendency towards concentration of power in the executive, which in the final analysis "disqualify [Venezuela] from being called a democracy"[17]. Corrales and Penfold[18] further argue, that the current regime "crowds out" the opposition, which "finds itself on the short end of a sharp asymmetry in political resources vis á vis the state"[19], citing institutional restrictions, "clientelistic" government spending on services, partisan service and state employment distribution and media asymmetries etc.

The populist nature of the Chávez government has also been explored by numerous commentators and academics[20]. Populism can be seen as largely negative, or at least negative with some positive elements, most notably improved social situations for the poor, which nevertheless are sometimes ascribed to the leader's manipulative intentions to maintain power rather than genuine social concern, which in the long run will be damaging for the poor's interests. More generally, however, it is seen as being noxious for the main characteristics of liberal democracy, such as freedom of the press, separation of powers etc., in other words a restatement of the above-mentioned authoritarian analysis. Nevertheless,

others have seen it in a more benign light, including as a type of transition to a more emancipatory system of governance than that of liberal democracy, largely as a result of the introduction of a host of direct and participative democratic mechanisms[21]

The third school of thought considers the nature of the current system as *Bolivarian democracy*[22]. Here, importance is given to the wide variety of institutional mechanisms facilitating popular participation introduced by the Chávez government. These consist at the national level of referenda and civil society participation in the nomination processes of public officials amongst other mechanisms [23] while at the local level there are committees of local people making decisions on land ownership and organization, provision of water services, community media outlets, and grouped in communal councils which act as local coordinators and overseers of many of the Mission programmes and other government services. Such participation is also extended into the productive area with cooperatives, worker management and ownership schemes etc.[24]. Considerations of such mechanisms are either absent from most authoritarian and populist readings or dismissed as instruments for the construction of a "quasi-tyranny of the majority"[25]. Yet Smilde argues that these are part of wider construct showing an "emphasis on the mobilization and participation of citizens...coupled with an emphasis on executive power and strong leadership that interprets the will of the people"[26].

Buxton[27] also argues that Bolivarian democracy cannot be analysed strictly from a liberal democratic perspective, but rather analysis should be placed back into "the specific social, political, and cultural context of Venezuela's evolution"[28] in particular measuring progress "against the legacy of the [preceding] Punto Fijo democracy"[29]. Hence she argues that while from the liberal perspective, there is indeed "a deficit of checks and balances on government, the rule of law is weak, the military is not apolitical, and executive power is pronounced"[30], it is important to note that it "has never been the case that liberal democracy

was consolidated in Venezuela"[31] drawing attention to the fact that in this way Chávez represents more continuity than change. To remove analysis of the current regime from this wider context is in effect ahistorical as it "denies the structural legacies of Puntofijismo and negates the progress that has been made in extending social and political inclusion in a historical context characterized by disaffection with political parties, politicians, and institutions"[32]. Bolivarian democracy indeed has liberal democratic mechanisms, but these are in place in order to create a more "participatory democracy that engages all citizens on a routine and regular basis"[33].

Hence, from this reading, Bolivarian democracy cannot be considered liberal but neither can it be considered authoritarian, nor indeed a hybrid of the two. Rather it includes both of these but also goes beyond them, and as such fits into Blondel's liberal/authoritarian dichotomy with difficulty. Hence we suggest that the Bolivarian regime has elements of Blondel's second and third categorizations with a slight influence of the fourth. That is that Venezuela is primarily a liberal polity where social cleavages exist. Additionally it is important to note that important sectors of the opposition regard the Chávez administration as authoritarian. Hence, following Blondel, we should expect a dispersed opposition forming ad hoc coalitions between themselves and/or with social movements or other groups, but also with some level of clandestine activity due to extreme political polarization. This is due, we further suggest to a situation of present but lessening social inequalities in Venezuela which reinforce each other, but which are also trying to rearticulate themselves as cross-cutting, as we shall explain in the next section.

Inequalities, social cleavages and opposition politics in Venezuela

Blondel poses three questions with regard to institutional, cultural and socio-economic contexts which can account for the emergence of specific types of opposition. First, he asks us to consider state institutions which may impact on the nature of the opposition, citing

characteristics such as separation of powers, federalism, proportional representation and the extent of concentration of powers in the executive. Second, he identifies cultural factors, most notably "widely shared cultural premises"[34], which can be positive or negative. Third, these in turn are influenced by whether societies are homogenous or heterogeneous, which can be deduced from the prevalence of cross-cutting or reinforcing inequalities. Finally, he mentions Dahl's concept of a "record of grievances"[35] that citizens may hold against the government. This section will consider each of these within the context of contemporary Venezuela.

Institutionality in contemporary Venezuela

With regard to the first, institutional, considerations, Venezuela is divided into 23 states, alongside the Federal District of the capital Caracas, and 335 municipalities, as well as federal dependencies (mostly islands) and territories, which have no political representation. Each state has an elected leader, a governor in the case of states, a mayor in the case of municipalities, and elected representative houses, all elected by a system of proportional representation. States are also represented in the National Assembly, with a minimum of three deputies per state elected through PR, the rest through a list system. Hence, this federalized and decentralized system, with its mixed electoral system, allows important opportunities for opposition parties to gain power footholds and so experiment with policy alternatives and build constituencies, which it has successfully achieved, despite inherent and emerging centralization tendencies in the current national political context. It also, however, encourages dispersal as different parties have strongholds in different electoral areas.[36]

Social cleavages in contemporary Venezuela

In interviews held with representatives of opposition linked civil society groups and politicians there was little recognition of class, gender or race inequalities on the part of respondents as of any concern or urgency. Yet evidence does exist to signal the existence of class, gender and

race/ethnic inequalities in Venezuela. First, with regard to class, Venezuela has a GINI coefficient of 0.394 reduced from 0.498 in 1999[37]. Hence Venezuela has the lowest level of income inequality in the region, a situation which has been improving since President Chávez came to power, but which is still relatively high in comparison with some developed countries. Second, in terms of gender, Venezuela ranks 78 in the UNDP's Gender Inequality Index, with a value of 0.447, comparing slightly less favourably with the regional average, of 0.445 and substantially so with Very High Human Development states, with an average of 0.224[38]. It is difficult to gauge if there has been improvement during the Chávez period, although ECLAC reports a rise in female earnings between 2002 and 2010, going from slightly above 30 percent of all earnings to around 40 percent[39], indicating that perhaps there may have been some. Nevertheless, there is certainly room for improvement when compared with developed countries. Third, in terms of race Venezuela's main cleavage is between mestizo and white (51.9 percent to 38.4 respectively)[40]. Racism in Venezuela is expressed primarily in cultural terms[41], imbued with gendered discourses[42] and fused with discriminatory attitudes against the popular classes in general, reflecting an existing relationship between skin colour and poverty[43]. Nevertheless these cleavages are elided from elite discourse extolling social unity in function of a national modernization project, whereas Chávez capitalizes on them in order "to engage with the poorer, darker skinned majority"[44]. Yet while these cleavages are important, they are subsumed into a more generalized cleavage between what Smilde characterizes as a "postmodern clash between those with a place in organized formal society and those without"[45], which has as its political expression respectively a "project of radical democracy emphasizing social justice and equality.... [with] a project of liberal democracy based on economic freedom and the defence of private property"[46].

"Widely shared cultural premises"

Given findings presented in the previous section, can it be said that Venezuelans have "widely shared cultural premises"? Taking indicators of tolerance as a measure Venezuelans express relatively low levels of interpersonal trust (22 percent) and in citizens' willingness to abide by the law (32 percent) yet these are above regional averages[47]. Conversely Hellinger[48] finds, in his studies of popular and middle class neighbourhoods in Venezuela, a "surprisingly high degree of tolerance for the other's right to participate in local affairs" (ibid.: 56) as well as a generalized concern for "characteristics of democracy associated with inclusion and social equality – substantive measures, not merely procedural" (ibid.). Both these findings, he concludes, seem to suggest "some basis for consensual politics" (ibid.). In sum, Venezuelans can be said to have low levels of interpersonal trust, but higher than those found in the region, with a relatively well formed civic culture and respect for democratic norms. There is therefore evidence to suggest both a shared cultural premise of tolerance but with residues of intolerance especially on a day to day level of personal interactions.

"Records of grievances" with the government consist not only of opposition critiques around authoritarianism but most notably with regard to crime (61 percent), with unemployment scoring low (9 percent) at half the regional average (16 percent) (Latinobarómetro, 2011: 73). This seems to suggest that people are currently more concerned with quality of life rather than economic issues, perhaps confirming a lessening in inequalities. Additionally Blondel neglects to consider that voters may also have a "record of grievance" with the opposition, in Venezuela's case due to their previous insurrectionary strategies, not to mention the deleterious impact of neoliberal measures[49] implemented by previous opposition led governments during the Punto Fijor era and the violent repression that ensued.

To conclude, in this section we have offered evidence which indicates that Venezuela is a heterogenous society which is in possible *transition* to greater homogeneity. Moreover, while there are low levels of inter-citizen trust, there are nonetheless high levels of shared civic culture, particularly around democratic principles. This would lead us to expect, following

Blondel, a diffuse opposition with goals distant from those of the government, but nonetheless itself in transition, with conflicting influences in either direction. A closer examination of opposition unity strategies and policy programmes will help flesh out this hypothesis in greater detail.

Opposition unity and policy programmes

As stated in the first section of this article, Blondel puts forward a two-dimensional framework with regard to characterizing the type of opposition present in a given polity. Whereas the first dimension looks to measure the distance of opposition goals from those of the government, the second enquires into the strength of the opposition, looking particularly at electoral strength, and whether as a result it is cohesive or diffuse. In the following paragraphs we will deal with the question of opposition party coherence firstly, before going on to tackle ideological coherence and its proximity to government defined goals.

The search for unity

As noted in the introduction to this article, the Venezuelan opposition under Chávez has moved from insurrectionary strategies, to a more party based institutionalist strategy. The process consists of two phases, the first civil society based[50], the second party based. The first strategy was marked by the establishment of the Democratic Coordinator (*Coordinadora Democratica - CD*), a heterogeneous grouping of political parties, NGOs, the business association Fedecamaras, the trade union confederation, CTV (Venezuelan Workers Conferdaration/*Confederación de Trabajadores de Venezuela*), and with Catholic Church and media support. Lasting from October, 2002 to around August, 2004, its disappearance was attributed by interviewees to its very heterogeneity. The emergence of the second phase was heralded by opposition presidential candidate Manuel Rosales officially accepting defeat in the 2006 presidential elections, “the first time an opposition politician had recognized a *chavista*

victory"[51]. From thence on, extra-political tactics would continue to play an important part in opposition strategy,[52] yet political parties would dominate.

This move to a more institutionalist, party-based stage consisted of three elements reached through various agreements. First, moves to create a formal unified electoral vehicle were made in January, 2008, culminating in the formation of the Democratic Unity Coalition (*Mesa de la Unidad Democratica- MUD*), with around 30 parties being eventually affiliated[53], with a variety of ideological and programmatic positions and regional spreads. Second, a unified candidate system was adopted, in an attempt to end tendencies to diffusion, initially through party pacts and then through election primaries. Third, a unified discourse began to form, expressed most notably in the "Guidelines for a Government of National Unity Programme, (2013-2019)" (*Lineamientos para el Programa de Gobierno de Unidad Nacional, (2013-2019*), (January 2012) [54]. A notable feature of this document is the acceptance by the opposition of key elements of the present system, including the 1999 Constitution, the maintenance of state oil company PDVSA in state hands, and prioritizing social policy (see next section below).

These moves resulted in a run of three electoral successes, two national one internal. First, in local elections in November 2008, the opposition won six of the most important states in the country, in terms both of population and/or wealth [55]. Second, in legislative elections in September, 2010 it won only 1 percent less of votes than the governing party, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), an unprecedented result for the opposition since Chávez's arrival to power[56]. This win, however, translated into a PSUV majority in the Assembly of 98 seats as opposed to the Opposition's 67, due to Venezuela's parallel electoral system.[57] Nevertheless, it deprived the government of the two thirds majority needed to select officials with constitutional powers and to grant the president enabling powers allowing him to enact extraordinary legislation, an important power which had been used to great effect by the

government up until then.[58] Finally, what was hailed as an "exemplary" [59] primaries process on February, 12, 2012, to choose the opposition candidate for the October 7, 2012 presidential elections, resulted in an overwhelming triumph for the thirty nine year old Justice First (*Primero Justicia*) candidate, Henrique Capriles Radonski, governor of Miranda state.[60]

Hence, to conclude, Blondel suggests with regard to opposition strength that if one party is dominant this will foster greater opposition coherence, whereas if there are a number of strong forces it will be more dispersed. What we find here then, is that the opposition is dispersed regionally and in the sense that no one party dominates electorally. Nevertheless there is an important will to unity, which is driven as much by electoral logic. It is also important to note here heavy United States support, both financial and moral in this process. One estimate calculates US financial support at approximately US$100 million since 2002, and US discourse on Chávez, from key US establishment figures of both major parties is generally hostile, showing important parallels with opposition discourse, most notably in terms of Chávez's supposed authoritarianism[61]. Hence external encouragement is also an important factor in the push for unification. This also manifests itself in a parallel attempt to agree common policy platforms, which will be examined in more detail in the next section.

Opposition policies: change or continuity?

Opposition critiques of the current Chávez led government can be summarized in political, economic and social terms. While politically, as already stated, the opposition accuses the Chávez government of authoritarianism a further consistent criticism is the supposed ineptitude of the government's handling of the economy due to its heterodox policies of state intervention, such as currency exchange controls and nationalizations in key sectors, such as in electricity and telecommunications, not to mention enhanced state involvement in the oil sector. These policies, it is argued, has led to investment flight, shortages of basic goods, threats to private property, including expropriation, and general economic crisis. Finally,

socially, the government is accused of wasting resources, principally the oil rent, through a clientelistic use of social programmes in an attempt to shore up popular support. The opposition in turn, are offering three main policy strategies in an attempt to remedy these critiques: economic "reactivation", democratic "reconstruction", and social "recomposition".

In the following section each of these will be examined in turn. The question we will seek to ask is if these policies indicate, in Blondel's terms, a coherent or dispersed opposition, close or distant from government goals. What we argue, however, is that in order to answer that question, a longer term view must be taken, including the present regime but beyond it to the preceding Punto Fijo period. McCoy and Myers refer to Punto Fijo democracy (1948-1998) as a "limited pluralist polyarchy", with "deeply entrenched political parties that shared power and operated multi-party patronage networks".[62] The authors identify four reasons why the Punto Fijo system failed: an over dependence of the state on oil revenue; a degradation of state regulative capacity leading to a compensatory over-reliance on distributive policies, including corruption; the fossilization of party hierarchies; and, the institutionalization of political and social exclusion, especially of marginalized groups.[63] On examining opposition policy proposals[64] in the light of these failings we find potential for continuity, which put in doubt the feasibility, and perhaps the intention, of moves closer to government goals. On this basis we contend that the opposition policies tend more to dispersal, mostly between hard-line neoliberalism and a more socially sensitive version. Currently the latter tendency is hegemonic, but this may be reversed due to the heterogeneous nature of the opposition party composition and the mixed motives behind unity strategies signaled above.

Economic "reactivation"

Economically, MUD policies aim to develop what subjects referred to as a "productive economy", as opposed to the existing rentier economy, and consist of three main elements. First, a double strategy of endogenous and foreign private investment, using oil rents to

stimulate the internal private sector. Second, a slimming down of the state to that of arbiter, overseer and regulator but with simultaneous public investment in infrastructure and basic public services – "a strong but restricted state"[65]. Third, PDVSA, the all-important state oil company, will remain in state hands, but subject to market disciplines, competing with foreign oil companies in a more open internal market. Moreover, it will become "autonomous", that is not governed by government or ministries as is the case now and in general oil production will be allowed to increase. Hence we could term opposition economic policy as *gradual pragmatic productivism* and as such would represent a major reverse of current government policy, despite some important continuities.

Nevertheless, the key issue of the role of oil remains unclear. While the long-term strategy is to reduce dependence on oil, the short- to medium-term strategy still admits much of the oil industry and revenue remaining in state hands. This is due to recognition that oil revenue will be central to funding services, particularly social provision, but also for the construction of the "productive" economy. Here, however, a potential conflict arises as increased coincidences between the private and public sector in Venezuela historically fostered clientelistic and corrupt relations between these two, to the detriment of popular sectors and state social provision. In interviews the main response to this was that fear of the return of *chavismo* would inhibit such behaviour and ensure social provision remains a priority, and that there would be a greater sense of social responsibility and ethics in the business sector. This, however, does not reflect any great consideration on what was one of the principal reasons for the fall of the *puntofijista* regime and the rise of Chávez.

Democratic "reconstruction"

A second discourse emerges on the need to "reconstruct" the country's institutions, seen as dominated by *chavismo* and used for its own party political ends. This discourse has three

elements. First, in a major departure, the current 1999 Bolivarian Constitution will be maintained, despite some minority voices insisting on its replacement. Second, "respect" must be re-established for the rule of law, and particularly for the "right" to property, the "independence of public powers", such as the judiciary must be re-established, and greater accountability and transparency achieved. Third, the state must become more efficient and more effective, in tax collection for example (although few advocated raising taxes to fund, for example, social or other state programmes suggested). Hence the "reconstruction" of institutions is synonymous with the "reconstruction" of the country's democracy, envisaged in this case as classic *liberal democracy*, rather than the actual *participative and protagonistic* Bolivarian democracy, which, as noted is perceived as authoritarian in its forms and its intent. Importantly, few discussed the current participative mechanisms (see above), although one subject ventured that they will be maintained but will be made more "autonomous" from politics while at the same time being linked to the "local", meaning state and municipal governments.

Nevertheless, these objectives are subject to a number of qualifications. First, opposition strategies to construct a united opposition have largely been based on pacts[66]. In Venezuela such strategies led during the Punto Fijo period, to a *partidocracia* (partyarchy), that is the privileging of the main political parties (first AD and COPEI then other parties, such as MAS) and their institutional needs over popular demands. This eventually resulted in the parties, and their system, losing legitimacy leading to their subsequent downfall. Chávez was a direct response to this process, incorporating a new narrative built upon the community and the marginalized sectors, and so creating a sense of empowerment among these groups, leading arguably to the construction of a new political subject in Venezuela. Second, while there has been a generational change in leadership in the opposition, this leadership has emerged primarily from the same political sources prominent during the Punto Fijo era. One director of a well known NGO for example stated that the current opposition is "a salad of the

three tendencies, AD, Copei and MAS with their sons their new parties" and that "opposition elites have persisted in time"[67].

Third, despite opposition policy accepting the 1999 Bolivarian Constitution, doubts remain regarding the compatibility of participative mechanisms with the "recuperation" of democratic institutions. Existing participative mechanisms historically emerged from within popular sectors[68], as a response to the perceived corruption and unresponsiveness of the *puntofijista* representative system and its attendant ills of party dominance. Opposition plans to "restore" the prominence of state institutions could result in the return to party dominance that is the possible return to a *partyarchy* similar to that of the Punto Fijo period. Recent analysis suggests that where liberal democratic institutions and participative mechanisms co-exist, the former can become hegemonic[69] and/or participative mechanisms can be used for party political gain[70]. Finally, the emphasis in Opposition discourse in *re*-establishing, *re*-building, and *re*-constructing democratic institutions suggests that these functioned well before Chávez, yet as we have seen this was not the case. Such considerations do not seem to have informed MUD proposals, putting into question their interest in popular participation mechanisms or indeed the problems of political representation which prompted their adoption in the first place.

Social "recomposition"

Opposition social policy has several notable characteristics. First, as we have already indicated, there is little recognition of class, gender or race inequalities. These rather were often regarded as non-existent or as demagogic tactics on the part of President Chávez to maintain power.[71] Second, there is a nevertheless commitment to enact a strong, vigorous social policy to combat poverty (which those interviewed seemed to equate with inequality). This should be targeted at the poor, be non-assistentialist, and oriented at creating opportunities to achieve

employment, in order, ultimately, to foster individual autonomy (whereas under Chávez, "the poor are servants"[72]). While this task was seen to be primarily that of the state, some suggested that this could be in partnership with the private sector through corporate social responsibility and the enactment of a "genuinely" ethical capitalism. Third, education and health services should be of the best quality, delivered in a non-partisan manner, funded primarily by the oil rent, but subject to competition from the private sector, especially in education. The existing Mission programmes installed by the Chávez government will be continued, but tied to other services, "professionalized" and integrated into the pertinent ministries and their existing service provision. The overall aim is to break a perceived dependence on the state by individuals, which seemed to be identified as common in popular sectors. The ideal rather, is to provide a "lifebelt to the poor", but striving to achieve a situation whereby "there would be no need for social services"[73]. Hence, one could summarize opposition social policy as *social market* policy in the sense that social services are provided in function of people's participation in the labour market, which is the ideal path to achieve individual autonomy equated, in the final analysis, to an *absence* of the state in social provision.

Hence, a strengthened opposition discourse in favour of social provision combined with assurances that some of the more important Missions will be maintained suggest some level of continuity with the existing regime. Yet little is offered by way of guaranteeing that the alleged "populist", clientelist and partisan nature of the current regime's governance of the Missions will be effectively ended. Experience in the Punto Fijo period indeed suggests otherwise. Nor is there recognition of structural impediments to market participation in opposition proposals, betraying what Buxton[74] identifies as a "failure to engage with the popular experience" in any meaningful sense. Hence, there do not seem to be any explicit measures to ensure that opposition policies will remedy the defects in social provision identified by them of current policies.

A new order?

These developments therefore demonstrate a number of important changes in Opposition discourse. First, it signals the abandonment of a strategy of total rupture with the existing order for a more "gradualist" approach to change. Second, it shows a certain distancing from neoliberalism *puro y duro*, with its abandonment of an insistence on privatizations of strategic state enterprises, most importantly PDVSA, also signalling to some extent an approximation in goals with the government. Both moves are understandable in a heavily statist economy and society such as that of Venezuela.

Yet, there are elements to suggest dangers of continuities with the preceding Punto Fijo regime as there are elements in opposition proposals which could repeat some of the scenarios leading Punto Fijo's collapse as outlined by McCoy and Myers. First, policy is unclear as to how the over-dependence of the state on oil revenue will be surmounted and leaves open a possible return to a close alliance between state and private sectors, with no effective guarantees against corruption. Second, there is a risk of a return to party dominance as there is a lack of policy on popular participation, which could lead to new forms of political exclusion. Third, in social policy there are no effective guarantees against clientelism or against social exclusion, especially of marginalized groups, as it is unclear if access to social services will be on a rights basis or in function of the market, with the latter more likely. In the end, the main element of change offered is negative in the sense that the opposition is *not Chávez* and hence by default things can only improve.

To conclude Blondel hypothesizes that the closer the goals between government and opposition, the more likely the opposition will be pro-system, with the opposite being true if there are wide differences. In this section we have found that in general, with regard to the current regime, policy differences are greater than policy similarities, but with Punto Fijo, the opposite is the case. We suggest this state of tension between change and continuity is due to

the diffuse nature of the opposition, which despite attempts at unity, does not have a hegemonic party which can give it coherence and a clear sense of direction. Rather we suggest that it is an ad hoc coalition, which is still primarily unified around rejection of Chávez, a fact admitted by various interviewees. In such a scenario policy unity is still subject to conflicting narratives of what a post-Chávez era will look like, differences which may resurface once power is regained. In this respect also, it is difficult to disentangle to what extent changes in thinking around key issues signalled here are genuinely ideological or simply conjunctural, resulting from a confluence of internal, mostly electoral, and external pressures to open up markets, particularly from the opposition's US sponsors.

The Venezuelan opposition according to Blondel's framework.

To conclude Blondel's framework consists of three broad elements: the types of opposition; the "main factors which appear to account for variations in types of opposition"[75]; and, "the conditions under which opposition is likely to emerge, grow and decline"[76]. In Venezuela we find, with respect to the first element, a dispersed opposition, with, however, important efforts to achieve coherence, both on an organizational and ideological level. Furthermore, while initially opposition positions were distant from government goals, these have narrowed to a certain extent, with opposition acceptance of the 1999 Constitution, state ownership of strategic industries, notably oil, and government aims to reduce poverty as their own. Nevertheless, in looking more closely at opposition policy proposals this unity and these approximations in objectives are still subject to qualifications.

Blondel's second element looks to the conditions from which the opposition emerges in order to help understand its character. Identifying three key factors, institutional, socio-economic and the nature of the ruling regime, these can help explain why an opposition is diffuse or coherent, competitive or co-operative with the government. In this case we have

provided evidence to conclude that Venezuela is a heterogenous society *in transition* to greater homogeneity. In support of this we found that while on the one hand it has low levels of inter-citizen trust, on the other there are high levels of shared civic culture, particularly around democratic principles. This would support our contention that, following Blondel, the opposition is diffuse and primarily anti-system, with goals distant from those of the government and hence intensely competitive. Nonetheless we also argue that the opposition is itself in transition, with conflicting influences in either direction, although the motivations behind these are unclear.

With the third element, "the conditions under which opposition is likely to emerge, grow and decline"[77], we find that the current regime in Venezuela is difficult to classify within the four types of regime offered by Blondel. We argue the current regime in Venezuela is, as Buxton argues, a *state-sponsored participative democracy*.[78] In this it has elements of liberalism and what could be seen, from a liberal perspective, as authoritarianism, but also important mechanisms facilitating popular participation. Hence Bolivarian democracy includes, but goes beyond, Blondel's liberal/authoritarian dichotomy, and is neither one or the other, nor indeed a hybrid of the two, but rather is something novel and distinct. In this sense, we argue that the current regime in Venezuela has elements of Blondel's second and third options, in that it has elements of a liberal polity where social cleavages are limited or have declined significantly, yet reinforce one another and in which decision-making centres are dispersed. Hence, this would support our contention that the opposition is dispersed but forms ad hoc coalitions, which, in the present conjuncture is primarily a negative veto coalition, in the sense that the most salient element of cohesion remains opposition to President Chávez. Nevertheless, as we have shown there are important attempts to achieve greater programmatic unity. These different factors are summarized in the following table:

Table 2

Throughout this article, however, we have offered a number of qualifications regarding these unification strategies which lead us to doubt their ultimate efficacy in offering real change to Venezuela. These can be grouped into three main critiques. First, opposition diagnoses of Bolivarianism are almost entirely within what Buxton[79] terms "the analytical framework of liberal democracy" prevalent in Venezuelan and foreign academic and policy circles, especially at the highest levels. Guided by such critiques it is unsurprising that opposition proposals fail both to recognize and grapple sufficiently with many of the problems outlined here and recommend orthodox liberal democracy – and a market economy – as solutions. In other words it could be argued they are primarily ideologically rather than empirically motivated. Second, such proposals seem to be built on largely short historical timelines, responding primarily to their own partial narrative of the failures of Bolivarian democracy, without fully taking into consideration deep rooted structural problems in Venezuelan democracy, particularly as practiced during the Punto Fijo era and the resulting popular dissatisfaction which led to its collapse. Finally, proposals underestimate the possible positive impacts of Bolivarian democracy, which "cannot simply be rolled back"[80] hence opening the possibility of conflict if, in power, the opposition attempts to do just that.

In sum the Venezuelan opposition in essence seems to propose a return to a situation similar to the pre-Chávez *status quo ante* without undergoing a thorough rethink of the basic premises of the Punto Fijo system. This betrays a lack of appreciation of the subtle reasoning for the continued, remarkable popular support for Bolivarianism, rooted in multi-layered "experiences of participation"[81]. While such omissions on a discursive level are understandable, in the long term they may be risky as they show a failure to understand the importance of these experiences for many of the sectors which the opposition is trying to attract.

Finally, methodologically Blondel's framework has provided a comprehensive means to provide a detailed and structured examination of Venezuela's opposition. Nevertheless, we found Blondel's framework itself framed by a liberal/authoritarian dichotomy which does not fully encapsulate the complexity of politics in Venezuela and hence by extension possibly in other developing world polities, particularly in terms of regime classification. We do not wish to argue that this distinction is not of importance, but suggest that a greater emphasis on democratic openings at the social and economic levels, as well as in terms of political institutions, would go some way to help to remedy this. In other words, the type of democracy *does* impact on the types of opposition.

APPENDIX I: LIST OF ORGANIZATIONS WITH INDIVIDUALS INTERVIEWED[82]

ORGANIZATION
Camara de Comercio Industria y Servicios de Caracas (Caracas Chamber of Commerce)
Universidad Central de Caracas (UCV) (State University)
Centro de Divulgación de Concimiento Economico para la Libertad (CEDICE) (Liberal Think Tank).
Centro de Reflexion y Planificación Educativa (CERPE) (Jesuit-run educational think tank).
Universidad Simón Bolívar (USB) (State Univeristy)
Fedecamaras (Leading Peak Business Association)
Associación Civil Sumaté (Electoral NGO and democracy think tank)
Liderazgo y Visión (NGO promoting dialogue and political action and participation, including leadership formation)

Universidad Catolica Andrés Bello (UCAB - Jesuit Catholic University)
Leading Independent Politician
Centro de Estudios del Desarrollo (CENDES) (State owned development studies centre associated with UCV)
Universidad Metropolitana (Business oriented private university)
Opinion columnist from *El Nacional*, a leading national daily.
PODEMOS Party (Opposition party with social democratic orientation).
Primera Justicia Party (Centre right party).

[1] Some examples are: Barry Cannon, Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution: Populism and Democracy in a Globalised Age, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), Javier Corrales, and Michael Penfold, Dragon in the Tropics: Hugo Chávez and the Political Economy of Revolution in Venezuela. (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2011), Steve Ellner, Rethinking Venezuelan Politics: Class, Conflict, and the Chávez Phenomenon, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Reinner Publishers, 2008), Richard Gott, Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution (London and New York: Verso, 2011), David Smilde and Daniel Hellinger, (eds.), Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy: Participation, Politics, and Culture under Chávez. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), among others.

[2] Francisco Dominguez, 'Venezuela's opposition: desperately seeking to overthrow Chávez', in Francisco Dominguez, Geraldine Lievesley, and Steve Ludlum (eds.), Right Wing Politics in the New Latin America: Reaction and Revolt. (London and New York: Zed. 2011), pps. 113-130.

[3] Blondel, Jean, 'Political Opposition in the Contemporary World', in Government and Opposition 32 (4), 1997, pps. 462-486.

[4] Blondel, 'Political Opposition', p. 464.

[5] ibid.

[6] Ibid., p. 472

[7] Ibid., p. 475

[8] Ibid., p. 477

[9] Ibid., p. 473

[10] ibid., p. 464

[11] Ibid., p. 483

[12] ibid., p.486.

[13] ibid., p.464

[14] ibid., p. 480

[15] ibid., p. 483

[16] Corrales, Javier. 'The Repeating Revolution: Chávez's New Politics and Old Economics', in Weyland, Kurt, Raúl L. Madrid, Wendy Hunter (eds.), Leftist Governments in Latin America: Successes and Shortcomings. (Cambridge University Press: New York, 2010), pps. 28-57.

[17] ibid., p.29

[18] Corrales, Javier and Michael Penfold, 'Venezuela: Crowding out the Opposition', in Journal of Democracy, 18 (2), April, 2007, pps. 100-113.

[19] ibid., p.111

[20] See for example Reid, Michael, Forgotten Continent: The Battle for Latin America's Soul. (Yale University Press: New Haven), 2007; Weyland, Kurt, 'Venezuela's Worsening Political Crisis', in Foreign Affairs, in January/February, 2003, www.foreignaffairs.com. (Accessed: 1 August, 2012).

[21] See for example Cannon, 'Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution'; Raby, D.L., Democracy and Revolution: Latin America and Socialism Today (Pluto Press, London and Ann Arbor, MI. and Between the Lines, Toronto, 2006).

[22] Hellinger and Smilde, eds., 'Bolivarian Democracy'.

[23] Smilde, David, 'Introduction: Participation, Politics, and Culture – Emerging Fragments of Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy', p. 8 in Smilde and Hellinger (eds.) 'Bolivarian Democracy', 2011, pp. 1-28.

[24] ibid.

[25] Corrales and Penfold, 'Crowding out', p.100.

[26] Smilde, 'Introduction', p.7.

[27] Buxton, Julia, 'Foreword: Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy', in Smilde and Hellinger (eds.) 'Bolivarian Democracy', pp. ix-xxii.

[28] ibid., p.xiii

[29] ibid.

[30] ibid., p.xv

[31] ibid.

[32] ibid.

[33] ibid.

[34] Blondel, 'Political Opposition', p.475.

[35] Ibid.

[36] For example UNT (A New Era) has its stronghold in Zulia province; Justice First in Miranda state: COPEI in Tachira state; AD in Nueva Esparta; PV (Project Venezuela) in Carabobo state etc. See www.cne.gov.ve, Results of Parliamentary Elections. (Accessed: 2, August, 2012).

[37] Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Social Panorama of Latin America 2011 (United Nations: Santiago de Chile), 2011, p.62.

[38] United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Human Development Report, 2011: Sustainability and Equity, A Better Future for All. (Palgrave Macmillan: Houndsmills and New York), 2011, Table 4, pps.139-142.

[39] ECLAC, 'Social Panorama 2011', p.59

[40] World Values Survey 1981-2008 Official Aggregate v. 20090901, 2009. World Values Survey Association, www.worldvaluessurvey.org. (Accessed: 30 July, 2012).

[41] Duno Gottberg, Luis, 'The Color of Mobs: Racial Politics, Ethnopopulism, and Representation in the Chávez Era', in Smilde and Hellinger (eds.), 'Bolivarian Democracy', 2011, pps. 273-298.

[42] ibid., p.287

[43] Cannon, Barry, 'Class/Race Polarisation in Venezuela and the Electoral Success of Hugo Chávez: a break with the past or the song remains the same?', in Third World Quarterly 29 (4), 2008, pp. 731-748.

[44] Ibid., p.732

[45] Smilde, 'Introduction', p.5.

[46] García-Guadilla, 'Democratization of Democracy', 2005, p.113.

[47] Latinobarómetro, Informe 2011, 2011, pp. 52-60. www.latinobarometro.org. (Accessed: 30 July, 2012).

[48] Hellinger, Daniel, 'Defying the Iron Law of Oligarchy I: How Does "El Pueblo" Conceive Democracy?', in Smilde and Hellinger (eds.) 'Bolivarian Democracy', pp. 28-58.

[49] Implemented by the second Democratic Action (AD) government led by Carlos Andrés Peréz (1989-1993), and the second Rafael Caldera government (1994-1999), with leading figures of the current opposition such as Teodoro Petkoff as Minister of Planning , and including existing opposition parties such as MAS, to which Petkoff belonged (See Cannon, 2004).

[50] García-Guadilla, 'Democratization of Democracy'.

[51] Dominguez, 'Venezuela's Opposition', p.125

[52] Such as student involvement in campaigns against the referendum proposals of 2007, seeking unlimited re-election first for the president and then in 2009 for all elected officials, the campaign in support of television channel RCTV amongst other issues.

[53] The most important of which are: A New Era (Un Nuevo Tiempo - UNT), Democratic Action (Acción Democrática – AD), Justice First (Primero Justicia – PJ), Venezuela Project (Proyecto Venezuela – PV), Independent Committee for Political and Electoral Organization (Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente – COPEI), The Radical Cause (La Causa R – LCR), Fearless People's Alliance (Alianza al Bravo Pueblo ABP), Movement towards Socialism (Movimiento al Socialismo – MAS) y Popular Vanguard (Vanguardia Popular – VP). For content of agreement see MUD, 'La Alternativa para el Cambio', 23,January, 2008, http://www.globovision.com/news.php?nid=76943. (Accessed: 4 April, 2012).

[54] MUD, Lineamientos para el Programa de Gobierno de Unidad Nacional (2013-2019*)*, 23, January, 2012. http://www.unidadvenezuela.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/lineamientos2012.pdf.(Accessed: 4 April, 2012).

[55] The states were: Carabobo, Distrito Capital (Caracas Federal District), Miranda, Nueva Esparta, Táchira, Zulia.

[56] Votes in list achieved by: MUD 5,320,364 (47.9%); PSUV 5,424,324 (48.9%); PPT 353,709 (3.2%), Consejo Nacional Electoral, www.cne.gov.ve (Accessed: 30 July, 2012).

[57] A mix of proportional representation and a nominal representation system, with a prominence of the latter over the former. For example, if a electoral district requires, according to the population base, a number equal to or greater than 10 representatives or deputies, three of these correspond to proportional representation while the rest corresponds to the principle of nominal representation.

[58] Four Enabling Laws have been ratified since Chávez took Office in 1999, published in the Official Gazette on the 26 April 1999, 13 November 2000, 01 February 2007, and 17 December 2010.

[59] Although not by any means unanimously, due to, for example, the burning of voting registers by the opposition shortly after the elections, amongst other anomalies (see for example see Tamara Pearson,'The Sham that was the Opposition Primaries', in Venezuelanalysis February, 15, 2012, http://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/6811. Accessed: 4 April, 2012).

[60] According to opposition figures, with almost 3 million voters participating, Capriles Radonski won 64.2 percent of the vote (1,900,528 votes) as opposed to that of his nearest rival Pablo Perez of the UNT (Un Nuevo Tiempo – A New Era) with 30.3 percent (896,070). For a detailed breakdown of results see: http://www.unidadvenezuela.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/12Fcalculos_presentacion-1-1.pdf. Accessed: 12 April, 2012.

[61] Robertson, Ewan, 'US policy increasingly out of touch with Latin America's new political reality", April, 11, 2012. http://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/6916. (Accessed: 31 July, 2012).

[62] Jennifer McCoy, and David Myers, (eds.), The Unraveling of Representative Democracy in Venezuela. (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press), 2004, p.3.

[63] McCoy and Myers, The Unravelling...pp.6-7.

[64] The following sections are based on face to face in-depth interviews held with representatives of opposition political parties and some key opposition politicians. A list of organizations participating is available in Appendix I.

[65] Interview, representative civil society organization, Februrary, 2012.

[66] See for example MUD, La Alternativa para el Cambio, 23, January, 008. Available from: http://www.globovision.com/news.php?nid=76943. Accessed: 4 April, 2012.

[67] Interview, Director of NGO, February, 2012.

[68] López Maya, Margarita and Luis E. Lander, 'Participatory Democracy in Venezuela: Origins, Ideas, and Implementations', in Smilde and Hellinger (eds.), 'Bolivarian Democracy', pp. 58-80.

[69] Stefano Stortone, 'Participatory Budgeting: Heading towards a "civil" democracy?', in Matthias Freise, Miikka Pyykkönen, Eglė Vaidelytė (eds.), A Panacea for All Seasons?: Civil Society and Governance in Europe (European Civil Society) (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2010), pps. 99-121.

[70] See for example on participatory budgeting in Brazil Bernhard Leubolt, Wagner Romão, Joachim Becker, and Andreas Novy, 'Re-evaluating Participatory Governance in Brazil', in Cannon, Barry and Peadar Kirby (eds), Civil Society and the State in Left-led Latin America: Challenges and Limitations to Democratisation,. (London and New York: Zed, forthcoming), pps.78-94.

[71] See Capriles, Colette. 'The politics of identity: Bolívar and beyond', in 'Venezuela: the Chávez effect', Harvard Review of Latin America VIII (1), Fall, 2008, pp. 8-10.

[72] Interview with academic in private university, February, 2012.

[73] Interview with senior opposition politician, February, 2012.

[74]Buxton, 'Foreword', p.xi.

[75] Blondel, 'Political Opposition', p.464.

[76] ibid.

[77] ibid., p.464

[78] Julia Buxton, 'Foreword: Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy', in Smilde and Hellinger,(eds.) 'Bolivarian Democracy' pps.ix-xxii, p. xii

[79] Buxton, 'Foreword', p.x.

[80] Buxton, 'Foreword', p. xviii

[81] Gino Germani, Politica y Sociedad en una Epoca de Transicion: de la Sociedad Tradicional a la Sociedad de Masas. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Paidos, 1965).

[82] More than one person may have been interviewed from each institution.