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**Patterns of Electoral Support in Hugo Chávez's Venezuela**

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# **Patterns of Electoral Support in Hugo Chávez's Venezuela**

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Recent surveys have found that Afro-Venezuelans vote disproportionately for Hugo Chávez as President. This paper seeks to explain why Chávez has received significant support from non-white voters. I argue that this support is not only due to his mixed racial background, but more importantly due to the tangible benefits from the Chávez regime in the form of policies directed specifically at redressing racial discrimination and class inequalities. These policies include legislation against racial discrimination, educational reform, the mass enfranchisement of Afro-Venezuelan voters, and the recruitment of Afro-Venezuelan political leaders within the Chávez administration.

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## **Introduction**

What has led to the support in Venezuela of Hugo Chávez as President? More specifically, what role if any, have Afro-Venezuelans played in Hugo Chávez's electoral victories? This research seeks to address whether or not race/ethnicity has been a key contributing factor to the electoral success of Chávez. If race/ethnicity has a significant relationship with the electoral success of Chávez it will be important for scholars in the field of political science to note this relationship in order to understand how future leaders may or may not mobilize voters based on race/ethnicity in Venezuela and Latin America more generally. For example, if Hugo Chávez has been able to garner support from non-white populations including Afro-Venezuelans, future leaders may also be able to assemble winning coalitions based on race or ethnicity to the same extent in future elections. Also, it will be an interesting point of analysis to determine whether future leaders will be more or less likely to highlight certain issues of race/ethnicity in order to gain electoral support.

The previous literature that has addressed the question of how Chávez has continuously gained electoral support in Venezuela has proposed a variety of explanations but it largely ignores the possibility that electoral support for the

president has been based on issues of race/ethnicity. Firstly, it has been argued that many citizens were disappointed with the past democratic system and this led to the widespread support for a radical leader who proposed to remedy the failures of the past. Secondly, there has been a tendency to focus on institutional and elite based factors that have led to the rise of Chávez as president. For example, the political party system of the past did not adequately address the needs of the public. Additionally, the revolutionary leader's rise to power might not have happened if President Caldera had not decided to release Chávez from prison in 1994. Thirdly, it has been argued that Chávez's economic policies and ideology appeal mostly to those of lower economic classes and that because of this those that are poorer are most likely to support the president. Fourthly, the retrospective economic voting theory argues that retrospective evaluations about the national economy have determined the vote for or against Chávez as president. Additionally, it has been argued that the president's rhetoric and charisma has led to the widespread support among Venezuelans for Chávez as president. However, race/ethnicity has not been systematically analyzed in terms of its effect on electoral support for Chávez as president.

I argue that race/ethnicity has in fact had an effect on the electoral support of Chávez as President. More specifically, I argue that Afro-Venezuelans have

supported the president due to his empathy with the Afro-Venezuelan population, the president's racially-oriented discourse, his racially oriented policies, and his redistributive policies. I use a survey that Latin American Public Opinion Project conducted in 2007 to test whether or not Afro-Venezuelans have supported Chávez disproportionately compared to other racial/ethnic groups. For this research, I also conducted informal interviews with prominent Afro-Venezuelans leaders including congressmen and the vice-president of the National Assembly, and carried out an informal survey of a convenience sample of citizens conducted in the capital city, Caracas. Before discussing the results of my analysis it is important to note the racial/ethnic demographics of Venezuela. According to one source, 68% of the population being mestizo (mixed Amerindian and European), 21% white, 10% African, and 1% indigenous (Library of Congress Country Studies 1990). While Chávez is of mixed ancestry (African, Indigenous, and Spanish), his background largely represents the majority of Venezuelans. The results of my quantitative analysis demonstrate that race/ethnicity is in fact significantly related to support for Chávez as president. More specifically, those that self-identify as being of African descent are more likely to support Chávez, while those that self-identify as white or mestizo are less likely to support the president.



Venezuela has a long history of racial inequality and discrimination. Many Venezuelans believe that they live in a racial democracy but scholarly research demonstrates that social and economic disparities in Venezuela and Latin America more generally are in fact highly racialized (Hoffman, Centeno 2003, 364). While Venezuela does not adhere to the specific definitions of race as in the United States, racist ideology may be observed throughout the society.

Throughout the present century, most Venezuelans have denied that they had a racial problem, especially one like that of the United States, with its segregationist practices. But nevertheless, they placed blacks in an inferior social position. In their minds they (have) a chromatic scale that linked dark skin and African characteristics with lower-class status (Wright 1990, 5).

Chávez has addressed issues of race that previous political leaders have ignored. He has addressed these issues of race not only in his use of racial rhetoric, but also in the form of policies directed specifically at redressing racial discrimination. These policies have included the recruitment of Afro-Venezuelan leaders, legislation against racial discrimination, educational reform, and voter registration reform that has led to the mass enfranchisement of Afro-Venezuelan voters and political leaders within the Chávez administration (Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the United States 1, 2011).

In this paper I will first discuss the previous literature on what has led to the electoral success of Chávez as president. I will then address how

race/ethnicity in Venezuela has had an effect on the electoral success of Chávez. This explanation will include a historical analysis of race in Venezuela. Next, I will discuss how Chávez has addressed issues of race that previous leaders have ignored. Subsequently, I will present the statistical results for this research. Lastly, I will present my conclusions and the implications this research has for future electoral politics in Venezuela.

## **Previous Literature**

### *Disenchantment with Democracy*

The first argument in the literature that seeks to explain the widespread support for Hugo Chávez as president is based on the failure of the past democratic system. The Punto Fijo system of the past consisted of two alternating political parties; however, this system of democracy failed due to its exclusion of the masses. According to Ellner and Hellinger:

Bolivarianism was a response to disillusionment with the efficacy of that project, and it succeeded in sweeping away much of the old regime. Hugo Chávez capitalized on the profound mistrust and anger directed toward those associated with the old regime and the sense of Venezuela's poor majority that he is one of their own (Ellner and Hellinger 2003, 52).

Furthermore, in order to understand the crisis of democratic legitimacy in Venezuela, the issue of political corruption must also be analyzed (Rey in Canache and Kulisheck 1998, 113). As Canache and Kulisheck point out, "(c)orruption was allegedly, the principal reason for the two attempted military coups d'état on 4 February and 27 November 1992" (113).

The widespread loss of faith in the past democratic system engendered political instability and violence that allowed for the rise of Chávez (Ellner 2002, 181). Canache, for example, explains that he was able to capture growing support between 1992 and 1998 due to his previous attempt to topple the past

democratic system. Her findings suggest that Chávez constructed his electoral coalition among Venezuelans who believed that he no longer represented a threat to democracy, and among those who were ambivalent towards democracy.

However, it is imperative to analyze support for Chávez at the level of the masses in order to understand why the current leader has been successful. According to Canache, “(i)nstitutional and elite level factors may explain why the traditional parties failed in 1998, but do not explain why Chávez won the presidential election...it remains plausible that voters could have rejected the former coup leader....to ascertain why they did we must focus attention at the mass level” (Canache 2002, 72). In other words, we must analyze public opinion and electoral support more closely in order to understand the basis for his widespread support.

#### *Institutional/Elite-Based Arguments*

Some political scientists have made the argument that Venezuela’s political institutions allowed for the rise of Chávez as President. McCoy and Myers, for example, argue in their edited volume that “(u)nderstanding what happened to

the party system after 1993 is especially important for identifying how and why Hugo Chávez Frias's Bolivarian Revolution triumphed..." (McCoy and Myers 2004, 152). The past democratic system of the alternating political parties Acción Democrática (Democratic Action) and Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente (Political Electoral Independent Organization Committee) led to widespread disillusionment with democracy among Venezuelan citizens.

According to Crisp:

To understand how Venezuela could move from the epitome of political stability to become one of the region's most threatened democracies, we must focus on the particular nature of the democratic institutions of Venezuela...these same institutional features explain the political crisis because they failed to evolve to reflect new social and economic realities(Crisp 2000, 4).

The inability of Venezuela's democratic system to preserve the rule of law and to honor principles of citizenship made it possible for Chávez and other leaders to interpret these policy failures as manifestations of a struggle between the people versus the elite (Hawkins 2010, 93). Additionally, Leonardo Vivas argues that elite decisions gave Chávez the opportunity to rise to power. This includes, for example, Caldera's decision to release Chávez from prison in 1994, and the poor campaign tactics of Saez and Romer (Cited in Canache 2002, 72). Additionally, Vivas argues that Chávez's victory was due to the struggle for power among economic elites and their political allies, and that the leader's

formation of an alliance of military and civilian actors opposed to the established political system provided an ample resource of support for Chávez (72). While these authors adequately address factors at the elite and institutional level, the issue of race and its effect on the opportunity for Chávez to rise to power is not factored into their account.

### *Class-Based Explanations*

Third, the vote for Hugo Chávez as president has been attributed to a class struggle with members of the poorer classes being more likely to support the president while those who come from a more privileged economic status being more likely to oppose him. For example, Canache argues in her 2004 chapter titled “Urban Poor and Political Order” that the urban poor are the sector of the population that is most likely to support Chávez (McCoy and Myers 2004). She explains that because poorer individuals were more vulnerable to the economic crises of the 1980s and 1990s that they were more likely to support the radical economic and political policies that were proposed by Chávez.

In his article, “Who Votes for Chavismo?: Class Voting in Hugo Chávez’s Venezuela” Lupu clears up the class argument by distinguishing between

monotonic and non-monotonic associations between class and vote choice. He finds that only in 1998 was class background directly correlated with support for Chávez (Lupu 2010, 7). After 1998, class voting became non-monotonic because support increased mostly among the middle class and not the poor (7). While these scholars critically examine issues of class, race is not factored into any of their analyses. The authors focus too exclusively on class.

#### *Retrospective Economic Voting*

The argument has also been made that retrospective evaluations about the national economy have determined the vote for or against Chávez as president. In his article, "Economic Voting Reconsidered: Crisis and Charisma in the Election of Hugo Chávez" Kurt Weyland finds that those who had a negative retrospective assessment of the economy at the national level were most likely to vote for Chávez as President. By contrast, those who had a positive retrospective economic assessment at the personal level were more likely to support Chávez's main opponent, Salas Romer. This argument implies that those who supported Romer were those receiving personal benefits from the past regime. At the same time, national economic assessments are more important than personal economic

assessments for those who support Chávez. All in all, economic assessments have a significant impact on the electoral preference for or against Chávez.

### *Rhetoric and Charisma*

The continued electoral success of Chávez has also been attributed to his popular and charismatic characteristics. José Luis Uzcategui characterizes Chávez as a “magician of emotions’ using a combination of psychological and sociological elements that created a political climate favorable to the diffusion and reception of the message of the young, charismatic leader...Chávez tapped into emotions, expectations, illusions, fears, doubts, and worries in a population profoundly disenchanted with the existing regime” (Uzcategui in Canache 2002, 71). In other words, Chávez’s persuasive rhetoric has proven to be a powerful means of retaining electoral support and a positive mass public opinion. This Chávez phenomenon has been widely labeled by political scientists as pure populism.

Populism is defined by some as a “charismatic mode of linkage between voters and politicians, a relationship largely unmediated by any institutionalized party, and that it bases itself on a powerful Manichaeian discourse of ‘the people versus the elite’ “(Hawkins 2010, 1137). In his article, “Venezuela’s Chavismo



and Populism in Comparative Perspective” Hawkins argues that the populist tendencies of Chavismo have encouraged an ‘anything goes’ attitude among Chávez’s supporters and that this has led to his continued electoral success (Hawkins 2010, 1137). In other words, because of his appealing personality, there is no effective system to check the power of the president because the citizens like him too much to criticize his government.

#### *Race and Support for Chávez*

There are ample reasons to suspect that racial voting may have played a role in the rise of Hugo Chávez, given that the political history of Venezuela includes the political and economic marginalization of non-white populations. Precious little work has been done on race and its effect on electoral support in Venezuela, but Barry Cannon did address this issue in his working paper “*Class/race polarisation in Venezuela and the electoral success of Hugo Chávez: a break with the past or the song remains the same?*” He argues that “race is an important subtext to (the) class based support, and that there is indeed a correlation between class and race within the Venezuelan context” (Cannon 2008, 2). While Chávez has utilized elements of class and race in his rhetoric appeal to the masses, the opposition has used these elements negatively (Cannon 2008, 2). The racial rhetoric of the

president has been bold due to “his aware (ness) of economic exploitation and racial discrimination” (Kozloff 2005, 2). He has also pursued a connection with poor communities of color in the United States by providing financial assistance to the mostly poor and African-American victims of Hurricane Katrina (Kozloff 2005, 1).

The political and economic divide in Venezuela based on skin color was largely evident during the demonstrations both for and against Chávez in the days before the coup in 2002 (2005, 2). However, overall, racial/ethnic identity and its effect on electoral support in Venezuela have largely been understudied in the field of political science. I argue that because of his racial background and personal experience with racism, Chávez has brought previously ignored issues of race to the forefront of Venezuelan politics.

## **History of Race Relations in Venezuela**

Contrary to the popular belief that there is racial “democracy” or equal opportunity in Latin America, Venezuela has been plagued by the residual effects of colonialism and slavery. The myth of racial democracy, however, has been used to deny and diminish the violent characteristics of racism in Venezuela. It has had the deleterious effect of convincing individuals into honestly believing that there are no discriminatory and/or violent conflicts of race in Venezuela (Garcia n.d., 36). “This ideology views the European as ‘the civilizing agent, (and) makes those of African and indigenous descent largely invisible” (Cannon 2008-2009, 28).

In order to understand the relationship between race and class in Latin America the historical context must be analyzed. The historical legacy of the economic marginalization of Afro-descendants is largely due to the colonial project of slavery. White settlers in Latin America “seized the *land* of the indigenous peoples, and they appropriated the *labour* of the black slaves that they had imported. Additionally, at the end of slavery, 60 per cent of Venezuelans had African origins... (Cannon 2008-2009, 10).

In his working paper, Cannon explains that the white Latin American elite had “a deep mistrust of native and African conceptions of community and

society” (2008-2009, 10). Because of this, Latin American politicians had more in common with the elites of the United States and Europe than their fellow Latin Americans (Cannon 2008-09, 10). Furthermore, white elites expressed an “ingrained racist fear and hatred” that was “alarmed by the continuing presence of the expropriated underclass...” (Cannon 2008-09, 10).

The white settler minority in Latin America has also promulgated the false ideology that racism does not exist in order to dilute and eventually expel the non-white majority (Nascimento 1989, 8). For example, in 1944, the poet politician Andrés Eloy Blanco wrote a column in the partisan *El País* in which he compared race in Venezuela to “*café con leche*” (Wright 1990, 1). He did so in response to the Brazilian government’s strategy of solving the “Negro problem” by offering stipends to whites and European immigrants who married blacks. In comparison to the U.S., Blanco stated that, “That is how it is, dear professor, with the question of your blacks. In my humble opinion, you have never known how to treat coffee or Negroes. The former you leave too light, the latter too black” (1). He concluded: “Therefore, if it is proven that America ought to be white, I prefer our method of roasting coffee. And our form of preparing *café con leche*. It will prove a bit slower, but it is better” (1).

This citation clearly highlights the distinct characteristic of racist ideology in Latin America and its attempt to extinguish darker races. The strategies used to repress blacks in Latin America have included forced miscegenation, color prejudice, racial discrimination, and immigration policy designed for the specific purpose of whitening the country and taking the means of survival away from Africans (Nascimento 1989, 8). These strategies slowly led the Caracas based elites who ruled most of Venezuela to agree that they could indeed improve their nation's population by whitening" (Wright 1990, 43).

Winthrop Wright's book titled *Café con Leche: Race, class, and national image in Venezuela*, sheds light on the history of racist ideology in Venezuela. He demonstrates that the "official doctrine of nondiscrimination and lack of prejudice have permeated all levels of Venezuelan thinking on the subject" (Wright 1990, 127). In contrast to race relations in the U.S. where a drop of black blood makes an individual black from the viewpoint of the dominant white group, Venezuelans only consider those with very dark skin and African features as black (Wright 1990, 3). Additionally, those that are mixed and that have lighter skin are more socially acceptable. Wright explains that "elites rewarded such individuals by bestowing upon them the advantages that accrued from whiteness and penalized nonwhites for their blackness" (Wright 1990, 3).

Another example of the state's racist ideology includes its endorsement of European immigration after slavery rather than creating policies to alleviate the social and economic inequality of blacks after the abolition of slavery. After the abolishment of slavery, blacks continued to live with the effects of slavery.

Additionally, in the 1950's Marcos Perez Jimenez included in his Plan for the Nation "an official plan for 'whitening' the population. As he pointed out in his own words:

Within the big ideas of the national ideal it has been said, with full knowledge, that it is necessary to improve the...ethnic component. We have a number of physical and hereditary defects that must be corrected (...) Therefore, among the questions of the New National Ideal, the first necessity is to mix our race with European peoples, (...) looking for a selective immigration, in simpler words, we want the very best we can find" (1).

Leaders such as Jimenez have encouraged European immigration and the eradication of the African and indigenous populations. This historical and anecdotal evidence substantiates the claim that the Venezuelan elite have implemented and enforced racist ideology. In reality, the legacy of colonialism has remained in Venezuela. Contrary to the mainstream belief that Venezuela is a mixed racial democracy, the general quality of life for African descendants in Venezuela reflects their unequal status in the nation's democratic processes, economic, health and education programs (33).

## Chávez's Response to Race and Racism in Venezuela

Unlike previous political leaders in Venezuela, Chávez has highlighted issues of race. I propose Afro-Venezuelans have voted for Chávez because of his racial background, his racially-oriented policies, but also because of his class-oriented policies.

### *Chávez's Mixed Racial Background*

Hugo Chávez's mixed racial/ethnic ancestry is one of the primary reasons that Afro-Venezuelans have demonstrated a disproportionate amount of electoral support for him as president compared to other racial/ethnic groups. As a result of the president's own experience with anti-black racism he has demonstrated empathy towards the Afro-Venezuelan community by utilizing positive racial rhetoric and by also implementing policies against racial discrimination. We would expect that because Chávez is sensitive to these issues and therefore willing to address issues of race, the Afro-Venezuelan population would demonstrate an overwhelming support for the president.

The racial discrimination that the president has personally endured has encouraged him to empathize with non-white populations including indigenous and Afro-Venezuelan citizens. To cite just one example:

President Chávez's invitation to the TransAfrica Forum of Washington,DC, USA to visit Venezuela in January 2004 to commemorate Martin Luther King, Jr...was a flash point for the President's opponents and for racist commentary throughout mainstream press (Garcia n.d., 36).

This racial hostility is not exceptional as President Chávez has frequently endured racial commentary that either overtly or inadvertently refers to his mixed ancestry (36). The president's tendency to be empathetic toward non-white populations might lead Afro-Venezuelans to be more likely than whites to vote for Chávez as president. This should also lead key social movements such as the Afro-Venezuelan Network to seek political, social, and economic redress from the government.

Many have observed the racial differences between those who support Chávez versus those who are against the current regime. Skin color seems to be a dividing factor in the demonstrations both for and against Chávez."The Venezuelan TV media, which is dominated by whites or light skinned individuals, and which relegates black or dark-skinned people to play roles as criminals or servants in soap operas" has continuously aired anti-Chávez propaganda (Kozloff 3).

The majority of Venezuelans support Chávez based in part on the fact that he is also from a poor background and *pardo* (of mixed Indigenous, African and



European descent) like the majority of Venezuelans (Cannon 2008-9, 7). Most individuals who dislike the president are those of the middle and mostly upper classes and who reject those who are poor and darker skinned (7). Afro-Venezuelan organizations have been fighting against the historical marginalization of non-whites, and blacks in particular. Jesus *Chucho* Garcia, leader and founder of the Afro-Venezuelan network explains that while there is in fact a fight between classes, there is also a cultural fight against the belief that ‘whiter’ is better” (Garcia n.d., 36).

In an article published by the Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the United States, the specifics of Chávez’s ethnic/racial background is discussed. Hugo Chávez is the first president in Venezuela’s history to publicly recognize his indigenous and African ancestry (Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the United States 2011, 2). In an interview with Amy Goodman in 2005, President Chávez said “(h)ate against me has a lot to do with racism. Because of my big mouth, because of my curly hair. And I’m so proud to have this mouth and this hair, because it’s African” (Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the United States 2).

Electoral support among the Afro-Venezuelan population may be due in part to Chávez’s empathy toward the black and indigenous populations. Many

blacks have found the Chávez government to be more empathetic to the needs of the population than opposing parties. While the legacy of racism and discrimination against Afro-descendants has not been completely resolved, the Chávez government “has started working with the Afro-Venezuela community and has taken some important steps to recognize and correct it” (Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the United States 2011, 3).

### *Racially-Oriented Policies*

I argue that if in fact Afro-Venezuelans support Chávez disproportionately compared to other groups this support may not only be due to his ancestry and appearance, but more importantly due to the tangible benefits they have received from the Chávez regime in the form of policies directed specifically at redressing racial inequalities. These policies include legislation against racial discrimination, educational reform, and the mass enfranchisement of Afro-Venezuelan voters and the recruitment of Afro-Venezuelan political leaders within the Chávez administration. The legislation against racial discrimination includes the 2005 presidential decree that approved the Presidential Commission for the Prevention and Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination in the Venezuelan Educational System (Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of

Venezuela to the United States 2011, 1). The mass enfranchisement of Afro-Venezuelan voters is due to Article 56 of the 1999 Constitution that guarantees rights for all citizens to have free registration with the Civil Registry Office ((Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the United States 2011, 1). This section seeks to explain how these policies have been aimed at specifically addressing the social, political, and economic needs of the Afro-Venezuelan population.

After the election of Hugo Chávez as president a new constitution was established. As stated previously, Article 56 of the 1999 Constitution has guaranteed all persons the right to free registration with the Civil Registry Office (2). Furthermore, this article has led to an increased level of registration among Afro-Venezuelans and the opportunity for more Afro-Venezuelans to participate electorally (2). In their article “Afro-Venezuelans And The Struggle Against Racism,” The Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the United States explains that:

Since 2003, millions of Afro-Venezuelans have been issued national ID cards guaranteeing them the right to free registration with the Civil Registry Office. Afro-Venezuelans have exercised their right to vote as well as to run for political office in unprecedented numbers over the course of the 16 elections that have taken place in Venezuela since 1998 (2).

In the Chávez administration, Afro-Venezuelans now occupy important posts as legislators, ambassadors, and assemblymen. For example, Aristobulo Isturiz is the first black person to be, vice-president of the National Assembly (2).

Evidence from my field research also suggests that Afro-Venezuelans disproportionately support Hugo Chávez as President due to the racially oriented policies of the president. This research included meetings with leaders of La Red de Organizaciones Afrodescendientes (The Afro-Venezuelan Network), and prominent black political leaders including congressmen and the vice-president of the National Assembly. These leaders all stated that previous to the Chávez government they would not have held these positions because of their skin color. Furthermore, they expressed strong support for Hugo Chávez as President.

While some admitted that the black movement does not support everything that the president has done and that the Revolution has just started they still support him in general and would not vote for any other candidate as president. Furthermore, they explained that there has been more political inclusion for non-whites. More specifically, Afro-Venezuelan political leaders now have access to Miraflores, the presidential palace which allows them to participate in the law-making processes. Congressman Modesto Ruiz, the author

of the recent law against racial discrimination, explained that recent measures of the administration are aimed at reversing past efforts to eradicate African and indigenous culture from the national culture.

The current level of political and social inclusion of Afro-descendants has led to a new pattern of influence and political inclusion in Venezuela (Garcia n.d., 32). In his essay "The Political Status of Afro-Venezuelans in the Bolivarian Revolution" Jesus *Chucho* Garcia, the founder of La Red AfroVenezolano, states that

The emergence of Afro-Venezuelans into national and international public spheres is primarily related to decades of hard work at the margins of Venezuelan society...The dramatically unfolding Bolivarian Revolution under the commanding and controversial leadership of the energetic and charismatic Hugo Chávez, President of Venezuela has certainly helped Afro-Venezuelans to amplify, although not formally position, their demands for full inclusion in national development in the nation's consciousness...Hugo Chávez's strong leadership and the stated participatory democracy programs of the Bolivarian Revolution could, if fully and broadly enacted in collaboration with Afro-Venezuelans, achieve unprecedented progress (Garcia n.d., 32).

In addition to the increase in political participation and inclusion due to the constitutional reformation of 1999, Venezuela's 2011 Census will include for the first time a question that allows individuals to identify themselves as being Afro-descendant (Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the United States 2011, 2). "This move came at the behest of social organizations fighting for

the explicit recognition of the Afro-descendent population in Venezuela” and will allow the Venezuelan government to recognize its diversity and respond accordingly to the specific needs of different racial/ethnic groups (Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the United States 2011, 2). The Census was also a main point of discussion in the interviews I conducted. The leaders explained that this reformation will allow for key social questions to be answered including how many Afro-Venezuelans there are, where they live, their living conditions, and their public opinion among other vital statistics. The officials continued to repeat how important it is for the Afro-Venezuelan population to know these questions and to be able to demonstrate the answers to the government in order to petition for the developmental needs within these communities.

Additionally, legislative reforms have taken place including the Law against Racial Discrimination, the recognition of intercultural education in the 1999 Constitution, and a Presidential Decree that established the Presidential Commission for the Prevention and Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination in the Venezuelan Educational System. Additionally, a significant reform for the Afro-Venezuelan population includes a government initiative to establish multiculturalism in the popular culture of Venezuela. All of these

racially-oriented policies have led to Afro-Venezuelans to support Chávez as president. Due to efforts of the Chávez administration and key movements such as the Afro-Venezuelan Network, constitutional and social inclusion has begun to take place for the Afro-Venezuelan population.

The new law of equal education includes for the first time the recognition of afro-descendants. The Organic Law of Education states for the first time that the Venezuelan identity includes those who are Afro-Venezuelan including the idea that “the principles of sovereignty and self-determination of peoples, with the values of local identity, regional, national, with an indigenous vision, Afro, Latin American, Caribbean, and universal” (Organic Law of Education 2009, 18).

### *The Intersection of Class and Race*

In addition, Chávez’s policies that are targeted at wealth redistribution and the nationalization of the country’s resources have appealed to the Afro-Venezuelan population due to their history of being the underclass. The president stated in his 2005 speech to the United Nations that: “open market policies were and continue to be ... the fundamental cause of the great evils and the great tragedies currently suffered by the Third World” (Chávez 2005). In contrast to these policies, he noted the accomplishments of his social

welfare programs: “One million four hundred and six thousand Venezuelans learned to read and write. We are 25 million total ... And three million Venezuelans, who had always been excluded because of poverty, are now part of primary, secondary and higher studies” (Chávez 2005). In addition to this, there are now 12 million people who have access to food at a subsidized price (Chávez 2005).

National social welfare programs called Bolivarian Missions have been employed by the government. These missions include social programs that are specifically aimed at providing assistance to marginalized populations. It is estimated that in 2006 out of a \$40.5 billion dollar budget, 41% was dedicated to these social programs and social spending increased by three times what it was before Chávez became president (Cannon 2008, 24).

According to Venezuela’s Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Comunicación y la Información, the Chávez government has made profound macroeconomic transformations that have benefited those that are more likely to be socially and economically disadvantaged. For example, since the creation of Misiones Socialistas in 2003 the level of poverty according to income was reduced from 62.1% in 2003 to 28.5% in 2009, and the rate of extreme poverty was reduced from 29.8% in 2003 to 7.2% in 2009. According to the Ministry of



Popular Power of Communication and Information the National Index of Human Development has also increased due to the government's politics of social inclusion and due to the significant increase in the level of income among those that are poor. The National Index of Human Development calculates three factors including life expectancy at birth, the mean years of schooling and expected years of schooling, and also the standard of living which is measured by the gross domestic product at purchasing power parity. The level of human development in Venezuela has increased from 74% in 1990 to 84% in 2009 (Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Comunicación y la Información).

### **Relationship between Being Afro-Venezuelan and Support for Chávez**

A number of sources have suggested large numbers of Afro-descendants and Indigenous peoples have voted for Chávez. According to the Afro-Venezuelan Network:

80 percent of Afro-Venezuelans voted for Chávez in the presidential election and in the August 15, 2004 referendum, and in the October 31, 2004 regional elections. The majority of the states where Afro-Descendants live Chávez's candidates won including 40 mayoral positions in 11 states (Colectivo Red Afrovenezolana n.d.,33).

Also, many media outlets suggest that Venezuelan society has been sharply polarized and divided between the largely wealthy and middle-class opposition movement whose members tend to be of European ancestry, and the president's followers, who are largely poor and dark-skinned" (Cannon 2008, 34). These studies do not typically present data to buttress their findings, however.

The survey data that I utilized to explore this question is the Latin American Public Opinion Project conducted in 2007. Questions about respondents' presidential vote in the 2006 elections and also specific questions about their race/ethnicity were included in this survey. In the cross-tabulation below I include the response for vote for president in the last election, and whether the person identifies themselves as white, mestiza, indigena, negra (afrovenezolana), mulata, or other. I use the term Afro-Venezuelan for both the

black and mulatto categories. Otherwise, the population sample for these two categories alone would be too small. The statistics from this survey data suggests that Afro-Venezuelans and mulattos were more likely than other racial/ethnic groups to vote for Hugo Chávez as President. Specifically, 86.4% of blacks and 87% mulattos voted for Chávez as opposed to 72.5% of whites, 79.5% of mestizos, and 70% of indigenous, voted for Chávez as president. We can see that there is in fact a particularly large difference among the rate of support between Afro-Venezuelans (blacks and mulattos) versus the self-identified white population. The support for Chávez among self-identified whites is still relatively high perhaps in part because post-election surveys tend to exaggerate the level of support of the winner. Somewhat surprisingly, those who identify as indigenous are less likely than self-identified whites and mestizos to vote for Chávez. However, this may be an artifact of the small sample size of only 20 respondents.

Additionally, whites, mestizos, and indigenous are all much more likely than Afro-descendants to support the candidate of the opposition, Manuel Rosales. Whites are almost three times as likely to support Manuel Rosales, while Afro-Venezuelans and mulattos are three times less likely than whites to support Rosales. More specifically, 23.3% of whites reported voting for Rosales,

while only 8.5% of Afro-Venezuelan and mulattos vote for him. Mestizos were almost twice as likely to vote for Rosales, 14.7% of them reported voting for him versus the 8.5% of Afro-Venezuelans and mulattos that supported Rosales.

**Table 1**  
**Race and Self-Reported Vote in the 2006 Presidential Elections**

	White	Mestiza	Indigenous	Afro- Venezuelans (Black & Mulatto)	Other	Total
No One	5 (1%)	2 (.5%)	1 (5%)	2 (2.41%)	0 (0%)	10 (1%)
Hugo Chávez	336 (72.5%)	303 (79.5%)	14 (70%)	71 (87.6%)	18 (51.4%)	742 (75.6%)
Manuel Rosales	108 (23.3%)	56 (14.7%)	4 (20%)	7 (8.5%)	17 (48.6%)	192 (19.5%)
Other	14 (3.0%)	20 (5.2%)	1 (5%)	2 (2.4%)	0 (0%)	37 (3.7%)
<b>Total Ethnic Group's Share of the Population</b>	<b>463 (47.1%)</b>	<b>381 (38.8%)</b>	<b>20 (2%)</b>	<b>82 (8.4%)</b>	<b>35 (3.6%)</b>	<b>981 (100%)</b>

*Source:* Latin American Public Opinion Project 2007

The 2<sup>nd</sup> cross-tabulation analyzes the relationship between how citizens rate the work that is being done by Chávez, and whether people identify themselves as white, mestizo, indigenous, black (Afro-Venezuelan), mulatto, or other. This cross-tabulation demonstrates that indigenous people and Afro-Venezuelans are much more likely to approve of Chávez's performance. Whereas 54 percent of Afro-Venezuelans and a similar percentage of indigenous people rate his performance as good or very good, only 43 percent of whites and mestizos do.

Whites and mestizos, by contrast, were much more likely than indigenous and Afro-Venezuelans to have a neutral rating of the president. Specifically, 43% of whites and 41% of mestizos are neutral toward Chávez, while only 28% of indigenous people and 34% of Afro-Venezuelans have a neutral opinion of him. Whites are twice as likely as Afro-Venezuelans to have a bad opinion of him, but mestizos are only slightly more likely than Afro-Venezuelans to have a bad opinion of his performance. Indigenous people, on the other hand, were the least likely to rate the work being done by the Chávez government as very bad. Overall, most individuals across all racial/ethnic categories either agree that the Chávez government is doing good work or they express a neutral opinion.

**Table 2**

**Race and Approval of Hugo Chávez's Job Performance**

	White	Mestizo	Indigenous	Afro- Venezuelan (Black& Mulatto)	Other	Total
Very Good & Good	296 (43.2%)	239 (42.6%)	19 (54.2%)	70 (54.3%)	29 (50%)	653 (44.5%)
Neutral	233 (43.0%)	231 (41.2%)	10 (28.5%)	44 (34.1%)	14 (24%)	532 (36.2%)
Bad	72 (10.5%)	49 (8.7%)	5 (14.2%)	7 (5.4%)	5 (8.6%)	138 (9.4%)
Very Bad	84 (12.2%)	41 (7.3%)	1 (2.8%)	8 (6.2%)	10 (17.2%)	144 (9.8%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>685</b>	<b>560</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>1467</b>
<b>Ethnic Group's Share Of the Population</b>	<b>(46.7%)</b>	<b>(38.2%)</b>	<b>(2.4%)</b>	<b>(8.8%)</b>	<b>(4%)</b>	<b>(100%)</b>

\*Categories Very Good and Good were combined because I am measuring those who generally support him as president.

Source: Latin American Public Opinion Project 2007

Next, I carried out a multivariate analysis of the impact of race on support for Hugo Chávez controlling for a variety of other factors that the literature has

identified as important. If the variable Afro-Venezuelan is in fact significant while controlling for other variables such as class and ideology, then we can conclude that Afro-Venezuelans have supported Chávez disproportionately compared to other racial/ethnic groups and that race/ethnicity has been a significant factor in the electoral support for Chávez as president.

I use an ordered probit analysis to carry out this test. The dependent variable for this regression is how well individuals think the government is doing. The responses for this variable include: 1) very good 2) good 3) neither bad nor good 4) bad 5) very bad. The main independent variable is whether or not an individual identifies as black. Ideology was measured by whether someone was on the left or the right of the ideological spectrum (1 represented the far left of the spectrum and 10 represented the far right). The respondent's level of income, gender, age, and view of the economy are also included in the analysis. I also include a variable measuring whether or not the respondent agrees that Venezuela is democratic. The choices include 1) very democratic 2) something democratic 3) little democratic 4) not at all democratic.

Table 3

The Determinants of Support for Chávez as President  
(Ordered Probit Analyses)

	Estimate	Std. Error	Wald	DF	Sig.
<b>Black</b>	<b>.569</b>	<b>.177</b>	<b>10.404</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>.001</b>
Gender	-.187	.101	3.463	1	.063
Age	.005	.004	2.184	1	.139
<b>Ideology</b>	<b>-.161</b>	<b>.018</b>	<b>71.197</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>.000</b>
Income	-.032	.025	1.565	1	.211
<b>View of the economy</b>	<b>-.959</b>	<b>.063</b>	<b>232.704</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>.000</b>
<b>Democracy</b>	<b>-1.073</b>	<b>.066</b>	<b>260.762</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>.000</b>

The results indicate that even controlling for a host of variables identified by the literature, being Afro-Venezuelan is a significant factor in support for Chávez as president. Afro-Venezuelans are indeed more likely to think that the government is doing a good job. Gender, age, and income, however, are not significant in determining support for the president. Ideology is significant, and there is a positive correlation with those being on the left end of the ideological spectrum being more likely to support the president. Those people who have a negative view of the economy are less likely to approve of Chávez's performance as president. Lastly, the democracy variable is negative and significant. Those



people who think that Venezuela Chávez is very democratic are more likely to support the Chávez government.

## **Conclusion**

This study has shown that Afro-Venezuelans are more likely to have voted for Chávez and more likely to approve of his performance compared to other racial/ethnic groups. I have argued that Afro-Venezuelans have supported Chávez because of his racial/ethnic background, and his racially-oriented policies, as well as his class-based policies. While political elites of the past have ignored issues of race and suggested that Venezuela is a racial democracy, Chávez has acknowledged that Venezuela has problems of racial inequality and discrimination. Chávez has repeatedly expressed his empathy with the injustice that has been committed against non-white populations. Furthermore, his mixed racial/ethnic ancestry is one of the primary reasons that Afro-Venezuelans have demonstrated a disproportionate amount of electoral support for him as president compared to other racial/ethnic groups. His acknowledgement of racial difference and the past political institutions that have led to racial inequality has created the level of support he has found among Afro-Venezuelans. Not only has he used positive racial rhetoric, he has also implemented specific policies that are directed at redressing racial discrimination. Lastly, the historical legacy of economic exclusion of African descendants has attracted the population to the redistributive policies of Chávez.

Chávez's policies that are targeted at wealth redistribution and the nationalization of the country's resources have appealed to the Afro-Venezuelan population due to their long history of being economically marginalized. For all of these reasons, citizens of African descent in Venezuela have supported Chávez in large numbers.

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