

# THE MONSTER UNDER THE BED: CHAVISMO AS A WEDGE ISSUE IN LATIN AMERICA

*El monstruo bajo la cama: el chavismo como un tema divisorio en América Latina*

*O monstro debaixo da cama: o chavismo como uma questão divisória na América Latina*

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## **Abstract**

There is a broad array of literature analyzing the interaction between domestic and foreign policy. In this regard, we have recently seen that strategic politicians use divisive foreign leaders as a tool to take advantage of in domestic politics. Nevertheless, the use of these leaders in domestic campaigns – and particularly the reasons why this occurs – has not received much attention in academia. In this paper, we attempt to approach this topic by identifying when conditions are ripe for this strategic use of foreign leaders in domestic politics. More specifically, we argue that the image of foreign leaders can be used when they present the conditions to become a wedge issue. We explore this question by using survey data on views of Chávez across Latin America together with political and economic indicators between 2005 and 2011. We find that perceptions of Chavismo are divisive in countries in which the incumbent government is ruled by a left-wing administration. Similarly, we show that, in those countries, Chavismo has all the conditions to become a wedge issue, as opponents have a homogeneously negative perception of that political movement, while government supporters are divided in their views of Chavismo.

**Palabras clave:**  
*Wedge issue;*  
*Chávez;*  
*América Latina;*  
*opinión pública;*  
*presidentes*

**Resumen**

Existe una amplia gama de literatura que analiza la interacción entre la política interna y externa. En este sentido, recientemente hemos visto que los políticos estratégicos utilizan líderes extranjeros divisivos como una herramienta para aprovechar en la política interna. Sin embargo, el uso de estos líderes en campañas nacionales, y particularmente las razones por las cuales esto ocurre, no ha recibido mucha atención en la academia. En este artículo, tratamos de abordar este tema identificando cuándo las condiciones están maduras para este uso estratégico de los líderes extranjeros en la política interna. Más específicamente, argumentamos que la imagen de los líderes extranjeros puede usarse cuando presentan las condiciones para convertirse en un problema de cuña. Exploramos esta pregunta mediante el uso de datos de encuestas sobre puntos de vista de Chávez en América Latina junto con indicadores políticos y económicos entre 2005 y 2011. Descubrimos que las percepciones del chavismo son divisivas en países en los que el gobierno en funciones está gobernado por una administración de izquierda. Del mismo modo, mostramos que, en esos países, el chavismo tiene todas las condiciones para convertirse en un problema de cuña, ya que los opositores tienen una percepción homogéneamente negativa de ese movimiento político, mientras que los partidarios del gobierno están divididos en sus puntos de vista sobre el chavismo.

**Palavras-chave:**  
*questão*  
*divisória;*  
*Chávez;*  
*América Latina;*  
*opinião pública;*  
*presidentes*

**Resumo**

Existe uma ampla gama de literatura analisando a interação entre política interna e política externa. Nesse sentido, temos visto recentemente que políticos estratégicos usam líderes estrangeiros divisionistas como uma ferramenta para tirar proveito na política doméstica. No entanto, o uso desses líderes em campanhas domésticas - e particularmente as razões pelas quais isso ocorre - não recebeu muita atenção na academia. Neste artigo, tentamos abordar esse tópico identificando quando as condições estão maduras para esse uso estratégico de líderes estrangeiros na política doméstica. Mais especificamente, argumentamos que a imagem de líderes estrangeiros pode ser usada quando eles apresentam condições para se tornar uma questão divisória. Exploramos essa questão usando dados de pesquisas sobre visões acerca de Chávez na América Latina, juntamente com indicadores políticos e econômicos entre 2005 e 2011. Descobrimos que as percepções sobre o Chavismo são divisórias nos países em que o governo em exercício é comandado por uma administração de esquerda. Da mesma forma, mostramos que, nesses países, o Chavismo tem todas as condições para se tornar uma questão divisória, pois os oponentes têm uma percepção negativa homogênea desse movimento político, enquanto os apoiadores do governo estão divididos em suas opiniões sobre o Chavismo.

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

The phenomenon of foreign affairs issues entering domestic debates has seldom been studied in contexts other than that of the United States (for an in-depth review, see Aldrich, 2006). This large amount of literature in the United States is explained by the US government's outsized influence throughout the world, making foreign policy expertise a must-have for presidential hopefuls. Nevertheless, beyond the US, we know little about how foreign affairs can shape local politics. In this paper, we argue that foreign affairs can have a space in the domestic realm when they meet the conditions to become wedge issues.

A wedge issue can have a major influence over certain segments of the population and has the ability to open cracks in the ruling party or coalition. This in contrast to issues that polarize the electorate as is. For example, while support for a Border Wall in the US or the war on drugs in Colombia might divide and polarize the electorate on left and right very clearly, support for affordable health care in the US or for the peace process in Colombia will secure the support of the left side of the spectrum and open cracks on the right. As such, a wedge issue is an issue that without polarizing the current division can create a new majority coalition by dividing those currently in power (Seo, 2010, Giasson and Dumouchel, 2012).

Recent studies have shown that *Chavismo* has been used as an issue to attack left-wing politicians in the vast majority of Latin American countries. *Chavismo* and its invasion of a country's domestic sphere has been addressed from two perspectives. On one hand, studies have shown that Hugo Chávez's image has been used to criticize some progressive policies by leftist administrations (for instance, see: Kitzberger, 2010). On the other hand, Sagarzazu and Mouron (2017) demonstrated that the relationship with Venezuela has successfully polarized the media and public opinion in Argentina along a government-opposition cleavage rather than an ideological one. Nevertheless, none of these studies has answered the question of why this strategy has been used by the right-wing opposition in Latin America, or what its correlates are in public opinion in other countries.

In this paper, we attempt to contribute to the understanding of this complex issue of foreign leaders' entry into domestic politics by studying the specific dynamics of *Chavismo* in Latin America. While we understand the uniqueness of this case, we also argue that it is not an isolated phenomenon (for instance, fear of Greece's

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Syriza was used in Portugal and Spain; Vladimir Putin's involvement in the 2016 US election; and the use that will be made – we presume – of Donald Trump's image in future elections), and thus, it deserves attention. As noted previously, it is public knowledge that *Chavismo* and the image of Chávez have been utilized negatively in Latin American countries. Thus, this paper attempts to answer the following question: Why is *Chavismo* an attractive issue in domestic politics? We argue that this use occurs because – in some contexts – it can be electorally strategic. Specifically, *Chavismo* has all the characteristics of a wedge issue, one that divides supporters in one political camp while keeping those of the other united (Giasson and Dumouchel, 2012).

The contribution of this paper is twofold. First, it is an exploration of whether foreign policy topics can become wedge issues, i.e. whether the conditions in public opinion are such that they allow politicians for this strategy if they so choose. We believe this to be important because if public opinion sees no difference of opinion on a given issue, then it won't matter much what politicians do. Second, while much has been said about Chavez and Chavismo in the context of Latin American politics this is the first quantitative analysis to our knowledge which has been carried out across the region that shows where differences in the view of Chavismo exist, and what can explain these differences. This is important because while the opinion divide can be assumed to exist, or believed to be obvious by many, up until now there hasn't been an exploration of it.

Just as we clarify what our contribution is, we do for what this paper is not. Due to lack of rhetoric by politicians this paper is not an analysis of the uses of Chavismo as a wedge issue. While we use clear punctual examples of the uses of Chavism in electoral contexts in the region we aren't theorizing why politicians and parties will use it or not. Instead, we borrow from the literature on wedge issues as a way to explain that foreign policy topics can be used as wedge issues because the conditions are there for it, i.e. the split in public opinion and the diversity of views in one side.

To test whether conditions exist for *Chavismo* to become a wedge issue in Latin America, we use data from 7 Latinobarómetro waves, together with political and economic statistics, compiled from a wide array of sources in an attempt to control for important confounders. Our findings show that *Chavismo* is a divisive issue in countries ruled by center-left administrations. In turn, we also find that *Chavismo* is a topic that has all the conditions to become a wedge issue, as opponents of leftist administrations have homogeneously negative perceptions of it, while supporters' views vary widely. These findings pose interesting questions regarding the effect of a country's local politics in a broader region that are not necessarily limited to the negative effect of Chávez's image in Latin America.

This paper is structured as follows. The next section presents a theoretical discussion regarding the use of issues for political gain in the political realm, focusing

specifically on the strategies opponents employ to break governing coalitions. In this regard, it argues that opposition parties are particularly likely to use wedge issues for such a purpose. Second, it contextualizes our research, explaining how leftist administrations in Latin America have been associated in the last decade, and presents the hypotheses. In the third section, it describes the dataset constructed from 7 Latinobarómetro waves, retrieving data between 2005 and 2011, together with data regarding UN roll call votes, economic indicators, and parliamentary elites. In the fourth section, it shows that, where left-wing administrations rule, *Chavismo* is a divisive issue. Additionally, these perceptions appear to be more diverse within political blocks; supporters of left-wing governments demonstrate a more inconsistent range of views, making *Chavismo* a theme with all the conditions of becoming a wedge issue. Finally, the article's findings are discussed, considering that, while they are relevant for Latin America, the example of a foreign issue being advantage of in the domestic realm can be extrapolated to cases outside the region.

## A DIVIDE AND CONQUER STRATEGY

In one-dimensional political scenarios, two party competition must necessarily converge on the median voter (Downs, 1957). However, societies are far more complex than this, and normally more than one issue is relevant in the political debate (Albright, 2010). Consequently, political parties behave like large organizations or coalitions of many different partners, sometimes containing opposing interests (Kirchheimer, 1990; Aldrich, 1995). At the same time, voters with complex preferences can support a party with which they disagree on a particular issue because a topic closer to their ideology at that moment stands out in the political debate; these are what Hillygus and Shields (2014: 7) have called «persuadable voters».

There is a significant group of studies that, while understanding the existence of this complex reality and type of voters, have examined the strategic communications of political parties that selectively highlight issues in order to gain political office (for instance, see Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996). The two basic tenets of this literature state that parties can be strategic and play to their partisan advantages, or that they can be responsive to public preferences. Studies aligned with the former argument are based on the understanding that issues can be owned (Petrocik, 1996). This ownership emerges from the historical roots of the party, its traditional constituencies, or its performance in office (Petrocik 1996; Budge and Farlie 1983). In more personalistic systems, ownership can also be gained through candidates' personal characteristics (Arbour, 2013). However, parties cannot always choose to play to their partisan strengths (Vavreck, 2009;

Sagarzazu and Pardos-Prado, 2015; Klüver and Spoon, 2014; Spoon and Klüver, 2014, 2015b; Wagner and Meyer, 2014; Klüver and Sagarzazu, 2016), and, in cases in which they do not, it is argued that they are being responsive and 'riding the wave' of public opinion (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994).

Nevertheless, parties do not always follow these two strategies, as they can also bring new issues into the discussion in order to change the structure of competition (Riker, 1996; Carmines and Stimson 1986,1989; Hobolt and de Vries, 2015). Such 'issue entrepreneurs' are typically those in the minority in a two-party system (Carmines and Stimson 1986,1989), or those in a losing position in a multiparty system (Hobolt and de Vries, 2015). By raising new issues, parties not only differentiate themselves from their competitors, but also attempt to change the political dynamics.

Given these possibilities, parties will adopt different strategies in order to prevail in political debates. On one hand, those governing will seek to maintain their majority and therefore face restrictions in terms of issue entrepreneurship (i.e. they shouldn't be adding new issues to their politics). On the other hand, those in the opposition can mobilize new issues, especially if these issues divide the governing coalition, thus attracting possible voters to their side (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010; Van de Wart et al., 2014). As a consequence, instability in the composition of governing coalitions is the fundamental reason explaining why minority parties – when unable to win with their own base of support – resort to strategies designed to break up the majority coalition (Jeong et al., 2011; Hillygus and Shields, 2014).

This divide and conquer strategy revolves around what a longstanding body of literature has defined as wedge issues. A wedge issue is a topic that has a major influence over certain segments of the population, without necessarily polarizing the electorate (Giasson and Dumouchel, 2012). While a wedge issue cannot be easily subsumed into the dominant dimension of the party system, it has the ability to open cracks in the ruling party or coalition without simultaneously causing much damage to its mobilizer (Seo, 2010). For instance, when Chávez first ran for president in 1998, his main platform was a re-founding of the Venezuelan state through a new constitution. This issue was highly popular in that period, not only in circles that supported Chávez, but also among supporters of other candidates. The main difference was that Chávez was calling for a constituent assembly, while supporters of the main opposition candidate wanted Congress to make the changes – if indeed there were to be any (Pereira Almaso, 2004 p. 153). However, while Chávez embraced change in his platform, the other candidates did not – i.e., they did not support a re-write of the Constitution – leaving Chávez as the only standard bearer of reform (even if it was radical reform). Thus, this strategy – instead of being one of pandering to the base – is designed to undermine the base support of a political opponent by adding an issue that splits it (Snyder, 2009; Wilson and Turnbull, 2001).

Wedge issues, however, lie dormant in the political realm and, in order to have any effect on political debate, they must be intentionally constructed and activated by a political player (Wiant, 2002: 276). Hence, there are two ways in which wedge issues can be used against a party: they can be activated to exploit differences in the opposing coalition or used to convince «persuadable voters» that the other party will ignore their preferences.

Wedge issue strategies have been used since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Democrats in the U.S. raised the topic of Chinese immigration to erode support for the Republican Party (Seo 2010). Since then, studies of contemporary politics have highlighted a barrage of issues that have been utilized as wedges in political debates. This extensive list includes issues such as abortion (Adams, 1997), immigration (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup, 2008; Jeong et al., 2011), gay marriage (Smith et al., 2005), gun laws (Giasson and Dumouchel, 2012), racial issues (Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Abramowitz, 1994), and European integration (Marks and Wilson, 2000; Kriesi, 2007; Tzelgov, 2014).

More in keeping with our research agenda, Snyder et al. (2009) analyzed how foreign issues can be used as wedge issues. The authors suggest that the most common strategy for using this type of topic as a wedge issue is to emphasize looming foreign threats that are alleged to overshadow domestic class divisions (Snyder et al., 2009).

Foreign ‘threats’ are particularly attractive to politicians for several reasons. First, the public is less informed about foreign issues than domestic issues (Lippmann, 1932; Mueller, 2002). Second, the media tends to marginalize foreign news (Aalberg et al, 2013), and what they report on tends to index the views of politicians (Bennett, 1990; Entman, 2001, 2004). As such, it will be easier for informed politicians to make a case for why a foreign country or its leader poses a threat to the domestic electorate. Second, because of the rise in mediatized political personalization where media coverage of foreign countries focuses largely on heads of state «at the expense of the countries as such» (Balmas and Sheafer, 2013 p. 468), this is particularly true of charismatic leaders (Balmas and Sheafer, 2014). Third, for opposition politicians in particular, it is worthwhile to associate the incumbent with a foreign leader that can be portrayed as a threat because incumbent governments are in charge of foreign affairs and thus must make decisions on how closely they are allied with other nations. A strategic opposition can thus use these ties to associate the incumbent administration with a foreign country that is perceived negatively in the domestic realm.

This combined theoretical insight leads us to formulate our broader hypothesis:

*Hypothesis: the conditions for a foreign threat to become a wedge issue in the domestic realm will exist in countries governed by a party (or coalition) that is ideologically close to the ‘threat’.*

Taking this theoretical discussion as reference, in the next section, we will analyze the specific case of Latin American administrations and their association with Hugo Chávez. Furthermore, we will use the hypothesis stated above to test whether *Chavismo* has the conditions to become a wedge issue in Latin America.

## FEAR OF CHAVIZACIÓN AS A DOMESTIC ELECTORAL TOOL

In 1998, Hugo Chávez inaugurated a series of victories by left-wing presidents in Latin America. During the following eight years, a considerable number of regional administrations turned «red» in what authors have called Latin America's left turn (Petkoff, 2005). As a consequence, authors began to analyze these administrations comparatively, and while they did not arrive at the same conclusions, they agreed that there should be a distinction between different types of leftist governments, ranging from moderates to radicals, the latter led by Chávez's example (Gallegos, 2005; Castañeda, 2006; Leiras, 2007; Levistky and Murillo, 2008).

Meanwhile, this association with *Chavismo* made other authors question the implications for leftist governments of approaching Caracas (for instance, see Paramio, 2006; Nielsen, 2009; Kitzberger, 2010; or Sagarzazu and Mouron, 2017). While Chávez' contagious leftist ideology has been perceived by Washington as making Latin American regimes less receptive to US policies and objectives (Nielsen, 2009), most of the aforementioned studies analyzed the degree to which polarization in Venezuela, or negative views of the Venezuelan leader, could be used in domestic politics in other Latin American countries.

Nevertheless, we argue that *Chavismo* is not a simple divisive issue explained by the degree of support it enjoys among local governments. Kitzberger (2010) was the first to suggest that the use of *Chavismo* in domestic politics was tied in particular to left-of-center governments that attempted to pursue more progressive policies, specifically regarding the media system. Similarly, Sagarzazu and Mouron (2017) recently demonstrated that this argument applies to the Argentinean case, where the opposition press has since 2008 steadily sought to associate *Chavismo* and *Kirchnerismo* in a negative way in order to criticize the latter.

These findings posit interesting questions: Why have tightening relations with *Chavismo* been so costly for center-left governments? While not for right-wing administrations? We believe the answer to this question is threefold.

First, the *Chavismo* has a mixed record of leftist policies. When elected, and during its first years, *Chavismo* was strongly supported by most elements of the Venezuelan (and Latin American) left (Lopez-Maya 2011, Strønen, 2017). Its promise to incorporate the forgotten, to re-construct the state in a more inclusive manner, and to expand and improve the welfare state were in line with the left's goals after the policies of the Washington Consensus (Ellner and Hellinger, 2003).

However, these progressive pushes were not always fully realized and were often met with increased authoritarian practices, an erratic economic policy, and an uninspiring and disorganized opposition (Banon, 2014; Buxton, 2019). As such, while many – on the left – can side and support with the narrative that Chavez incorporated the «forgotten» to the electorate and to the political life, there is less consistent public support for the authoritarianism and sharp turn to the left in the later years of his administration.

Second, the media – in Latin America and elsewhere – has provided an almost homogeneously negative view of *Chavismo* (Kitzberger, 2010). For instance, in an analysis of news stories published by the BBC, Salter and Weltman (2011) conclude that the outlet fails to analyze the emergence of Chávez as a «political response to historical conditions», but instead presents it as «an unruly mob reacting to, and led by, the ‘totalitarian autocrat’» (261). Similarly, in a comparison of coverage of Venezuela and Bolivia, Lupien (2013) and Young (2013) view coverage of Venezuela as distinct from that of other countries of the «good left» (Brazil, Uruguay, Chile) and similar to countries portrayed as the «bad left» (Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua). Therefore, if we take into account the fact that the media strongly influences public opinion regarding foreign issues (Hill, 2003), it is expected that citizens will – on average – have a negative view of *Chavismo*.

Second, incumbent governments must manage foreign affairs, and, as such, are required to take positions regarding other countries. To be or not to be friendly, that is the question. Therefore, if we consider that *Chavismo* is situated on the left side of the Latin American ideological spectrum (Saiegh, 2015) and that the left in Latin America is deeply divided on issues (Cannon, 2016), this can cause problems for center-left administrations in the region when dealing with their neighbor. Getting closer to *Chavismo* can please their more leftist followers, while frightening those in the center who may not agree with Venezuelan policies and rhetoric. In contrast, when the right wing is in power, these governments can foment public opinion portraying Venezuela and *Chavismo* in a negative light without worrying that this will displease their electorate.

These two dynamics can confuse government supporters as they perceive conflicting reports: a negative view of Chávez from most media outlets and a positive view of Chávez from the government. This, of course, is mediated by the proximity of the government to Chávez and the intensity with which the media criticizes *Chavismo*.

Thus, we suggest:

*Hypothesis: The conditions for Chavismo to become a wedge issue will exist in countries governed by a left-of-center party (or coalition).*

Therefore, if – as our hypothesis states – the conditions for *Chavismo* to become a wedge issue, two related dynamics must be present. First, differing views

of *Chavismo* must exist within a country (there must be a space for a divisive issue, as stated in Hypothesis 1), and second, the target group must have less consistent views on the issue than the group that mobilizes the issue. That is, the distribution of preferences must be wider in the group under attack, effectively opening up space for a wedge issue. As such, left-wing government supporters will be more likely to have inconsistent views regarding *Chavismo*, while right-wing opponents will have a homogeneously negative perception of Chávez and the Venezuelan government. In fact, this inconsistency among left-wing government supporters would explain why opponents in those countries take advantage of *Chavismo* in the domestic realm, as they know it is an issue that divides the ruling coalition but does not affect their own. As such we define our two corollaries from our hypothesis:

*Corollary 1: Supporters and opponents of the government will differ in their views of Chavismo*

*Corollary 2: Supporters of the government will have a wider variation in their views of Chavismo, than government opponents.*

In the next section, we will explain how we will test our hypotheses and their two necessary conditions.

## DATA

To test the hypothesis presented in the previous section, we created a unique time series cross-sectional dataset with observations for 17 Latin American countries for each year between 2005 and 2011. One significant aspect of this dataset is that it must provide not only a measure of public opinion (to serve as the dependent variable in our hypothesis), but also a measure of the complexity of domestic and foreign relations. As such, we obtained independent measures of government ideology (from the Project on Parliamentary Elites in Latin America), ideal points for the political orientations of Latin American administrations (based on UN voting data), trade with Venezuela (from the UN Comtrade Database), and data on internal polarization, ideology, and demographics (from Latinobarómetro). This mix of data, while varied, provides the leverage we need. We will proceed to describe it in detail below.

### *Dependent variables*

As we are measuring the extent to which views of *Chavismo* can create space for this topic to be used as a wedge issue, we will use the Latinobarómetro survey as

a reference. This public opinion research is carried out annually by the non-profit, non-governmental Latinobarómetro Corporation, which uses local firms to apply the same survey instrument in 18 Latin American countries and Spain (a total of 19 countries). The sample in each country is representative of 100% of its population and oscillates between 1,000 and 1,200 respondents, providing a good representative sample of the region's inhabitants. As such, the Latinobarómetro survey has consistently been used to measure public opinion in Latin America (for instance, see Jones, 2010; Lewis-Beck and Ratto, 2013; Saiegh 2015).

In addition to its representativeness and wide use from 2005 to 2011, the Latinobarómetro survey included a battery of questions evaluating presidents in the region including Chávez as well as leaders from other countries (such as King Juan Carlos of Spain). Respondents were asked to evaluate these leaders on an 11-point scale ranging from Very Bad (0) to Very Good (10). Using this measure, we created the two dependent variables necessary to test both components of our hypotheses, namely, a measure to evaluate whether significantly differing views of Chávez exist between supporters and opponents of the incumbent government, and a measure to test whether these views are mostly similar or dissimilar within each group.

To capture the extent to which views of Chávez differ between government supporters and opponents, we averaged the responses by these two groups (per country year), thus creating our *average evaluation of Hugo Chávez*. Figure 1 shows this measure for 17 countries (excluding Venezuela). As can be seen, there is wide variation. For the most part, countries closer to Venezuela (ALBA members, for example) reflect greater distance between government supporters and opponents. In turn, these views react to changes in government ideology (for example, El Salvador in 2009 when the left reached power, or Chile in 2010 when the right gained power) and relevant political events (the 2010 coup in Honduras affected views of Chávez in Mexico, Nicaragua, and Honduras, for instance). For the most part, we see countries with very divergent views and countries with significant consistency of evaluations.

To test our second corollary, we must be able to estimate the degree to which evaluations vary within government opponents and supporters. To measure the *consistency of evaluations of Chavismo*, we obtained the percentage of responses that fell within one standard deviation of the mean for each 'case.' While the standard deviation may provide a good measure of dispersion, it does not measure how that dispersion exists. As such, two – or more – distributions can have the same standard deviation but very different spreads of observations. For our purposes, the higher the percentage of observations falling within one standard deviation of the mean, the greater the consistency in views of Chávez in that subset of the population. Similarly, the lower the percentage of observations falling within one standard deviation of the mean, the lower the consistency of evaluations.

Figure 1. Average view of Chávez by country and year

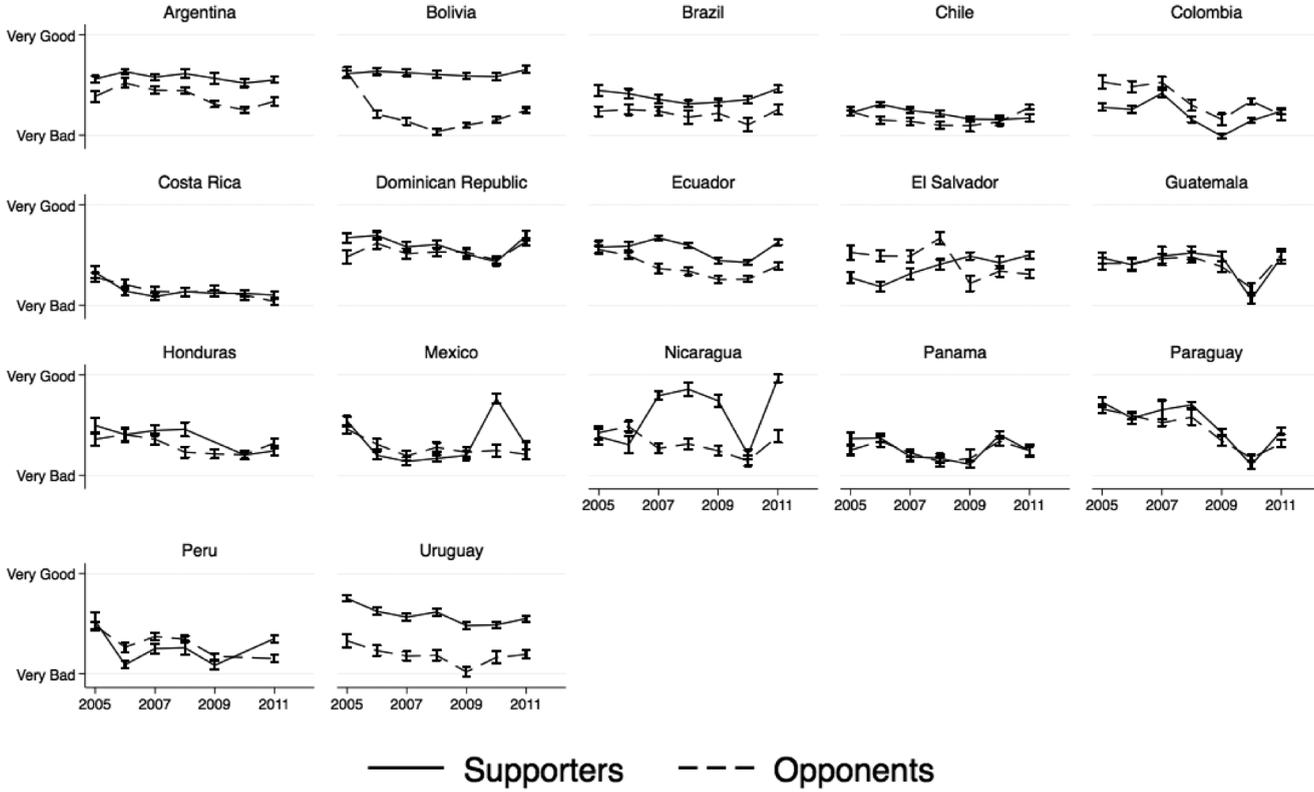
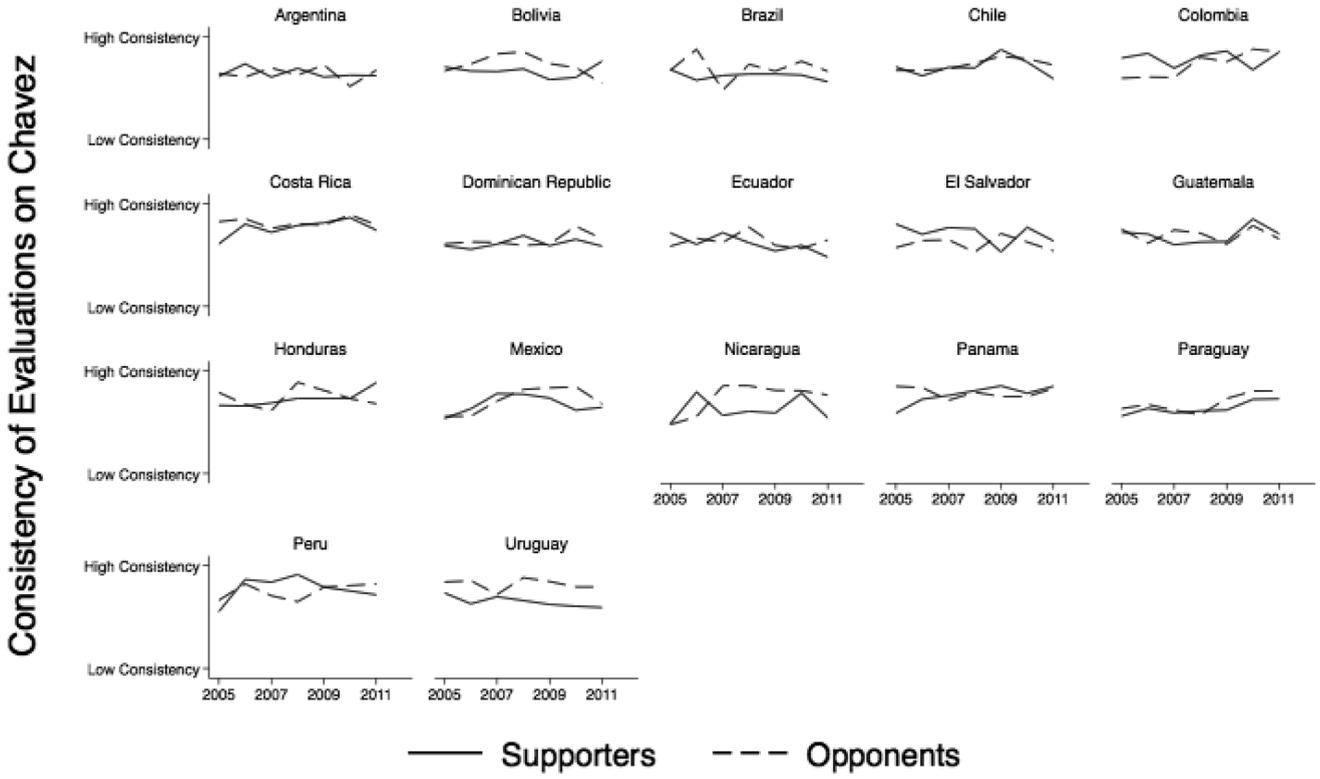


Figure 2. Consistency of Chávez's evaluations by country and year



Consistency of Evaluations on Chavez

— Supporters    - - - Opponents

Figure 2 shows the distribution of the estimated consistency measure for all countries in our sample, distinguishing between government opponents (dashed line) and supporters (solid line). As can be seen, in countries historically associated with *Chavismo* (such as Ecuador, Bolivia and Argentina), the percentage of observations within one standard deviation of the mean (consistency coefficients) is much lower for government supporters than opponents, meaning that perceptions of Chávez are more varied among supporters of leftist Latin American administrations than among opponents. In contrast, in countries ruled by center and right-of-center political administrations (Paraguay and Panama, for instance), government opponents and supporters have the same distribution of perceptions. Finally, although no less important, we can see that, in countries where extreme political events occurred (for example, the change in government in Peru or coup in Honduras), during those years, perceptions among supporters of leftist rulers were much more widespread than among opponents.

Our unit of analysis is the country-year level; for each country-year, we possess values of average evaluations and consistency for both government supporters and opponents.

### *Explanatory variables*

Having defined our dependent variables, we can proceed to create our two explanatory variables, i) support for the government, and ii) president's ideology.

Government supporters are those respondents who approve how the government led by the President is running the country. While not a direct metric of support it is the closest available variable and furthermore a significant predictor of support.

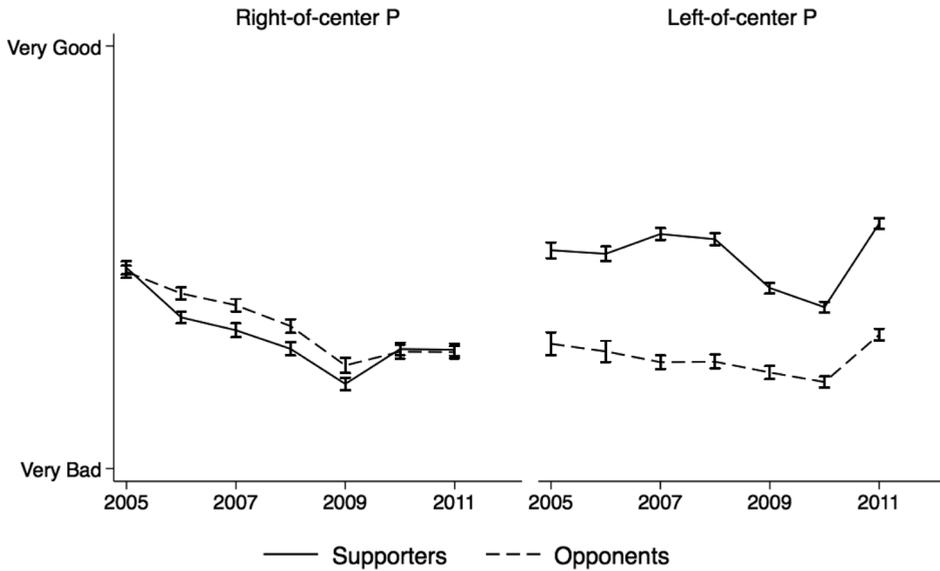
As we are interested in assessing internal political dynamics for each country/year to measure presidents' domestic ideological positions, we used data from the Project on Parliamentary Elites in Latin America (PELA). This initiative, carried out by the University of Salamanca since 1994, estimates ideological positions for parties by conducting personal interviews with deputies from all Latin American countries. Specifically, deputies are asked to locate themselves and other relevant political actors on a spectrum from left (0) to right (10). Using this data, we constructed our second explanatory variable (*left-of-center president*) which measured whether the president was on the left (1), or not (0)<sup>2</sup>. Figure 3 shows the average view of Chávez based on whether or not a country has a left-of-center president.

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<sup>2</sup> We measured against the middle of the scale (5), as a left-of-center president is one with a position of less than 5.

As can be seen, countries with leftist presidents have more widely differing views of Chávez than countries with right-of-center presidents.

**Figure 3. Average view of Chávez per year**



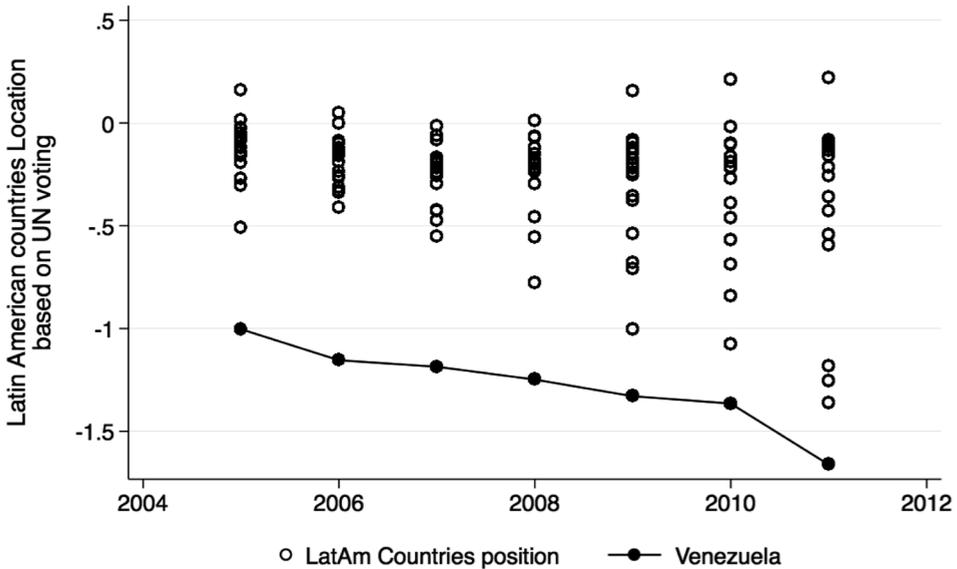
### Control Variables

Having described our key independent variables, we can now explain our control variables. First, in order to control for political closeness between the Chávez administration and its Latin American counterparts, we use ideal point estimates of voting in the United Nations General Assembly (Bailey et al 2015). This measure of foreign policy positions allows us to determine how close governments are to one another ideologically; as such, this measure allows us to obtain the location of Latin American countries compared to each other, and specifically vis-à-vis Venezuela<sup>3</sup>. Figure 4 shows the evolution of these scores from 2005 to 2011 for both right-of-center and left-of-center governments. The dashed line represents the location of Venezuela’s government, while the circles show the different Latin American countries. Two clear dynamics can be seen: first, countries were much closer

3 Ideal points have been used extensively in the literature to measure foreign policy positions and closeness between countries (for instance, see Rieselbach, 1960; Bailey et al 2015; Steiner 2014).

in 2005 than in 2011, and second, Venezuela has consistently led this dispersion throughout these years, with some of the close followers being Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua. A final point worth mentioning is that a nucleus of left-of-center governments exists that follows Chávez, while a second group behaves such as right-of-center governments. Using this measure, we estimate the *distance from Venezuela* as the absolute distance between each country's annual score and Venezuela's score for the same year.

Figure 4. Location of Latin American countries 2005-2011



Second, because much political closeness comes from economic closeness, we measure economic relations with Venezuela. We control for economic closeness using data regarding bilateral economic relations between Venezuela and 17 other Latin American countries<sup>4</sup>. To measure how economically relevant Venezuela is for each Latin American country, we calculated the *proportion of exports to Venezuela* in relation to total exports to the world for each country and normalized it by using the log function, as it was particularly skewed for larger countries. A second variable of interest created was *trade balance*, which is a dummy considering whether trade flows between Venezuela and each nation yielded a surplus for the country

4 These data were retrieved from the UN Comtrade Database (<http://comtrade.un.org>).

at hand (1) or instead benefited Venezuela, in which case it would mean a deficit for the other country (0).

Finally, we must further control for domestic political dynamics that can influence a government's behavior, such as polarization, the ideological location of a country's population, and its average socio-economic status. To control for the degree to which domestic *polarization* exists in each country, we used the standard deviation of respondents' left-right placements (as suggested by Ezrow et al (2014)). To control for the overall location of voters, we estimated the *mean ideological location* on the left-right spectrum in each country. For both of these measures, we used the ideological self-identification question (0-left to 10-right) for each country/year from Latinobarómetro data. Finally, to control for a country's average socio-economic situation, we estimated the *mean socioeconomic status* per country/year. To estimate this value, we used Latinobarómetro data on the condition of respondents' homes<sup>5</sup>. These questions provide an overview of items that signal a higher standard of living, and thus higher socioeconomic status. Moreover, and as previously done in other studies (for instance, see Singer and Carlin, 2013; Kasara and Suryanarayan, 2015), we used factor analysis to generate a measure for each respondent and averaged these by country per year<sup>6</sup>.

## RESULTS

Having constructed the dataset, the next task is to test our hypotheses. To examine under what circumstances *Chavismo* can become a wedge issue in Latin America, we must first see whether citizens have differing views of *Chavismo* depending on whether they support or oppose their own country's government. First, we evaluate the degree to which being ideologically closer to Venezuela causes perceptions of *Chavismo* to be more polarized; or, in other words, whether it makes supporters and opponents have distant and differing views of Chávez. Second, we test to what extent government supporters have less consistent views of *Chavismo* in countries governed by leftist administrations. For both tests, we will employ a linear regression with clustered errors by country.

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5 The items included questions asked in all country/years regarding whether the respondent's home had sewage, hot water, drinking water, phone service, a washing machine, fridge, or computer; we also included whether the respondent had a car or owned their home. The specific question reads, «Do you or any member of your family have any of the following goods?» and is followed by the list of goods.

6 Additional models also controlled for the average level of support for democracy and satisfaction with democracy as measured by the Latinobarómetro survey. However, for parsimony – and because the results of our simple model hold – we decided to not include these. Results will be provided upon request.

As stated previously, our first model will test the degree to which *space for Chavismo to become a divisive issue is dependent on the government's ideological orientation* (H1). To test this hypothesis, we will regress the mean evaluation of Chávez in each country considering whether the president is right of center or left of center. We regress our dependent variable on whether respondents were government supporters (1) or opponents (0). We expect that government opponents of left-of-center presidents will have lower average evaluations than supporters of left-of-center presidents and that the opposite will be true of right-of-center presidents. In addition to these variables, we control for other factors that could influence this relationship, such as political closeness between administrations, internal polarization, trade closeness, and the overall ideological location of respondents in each country.

The results of this first analysis are reported in Table 1. As expected, in countries ruled by left-wing parties, political closeness to Venezuela opens up space between government supporters and opponents in their views of *Chavismo*. All else being equal, in these countries, government supporters have a more positive perception of Chávez than opponents. We can see this relationship in Figure 5, in which we predict Chávez's average evaluation using simulated values, as suggested by King, Tomz and Wittenberg (2000). The left-hand side of the graph shows predictions for supporters and opponents of left-of-center presidents and the 95% confidence interval around the estimates. The right-hand side shows similar estimates for right-of-center presidents. In the latter cases, we see that where right-of-center presidents are in power, differences in views of Chávez among government supporters and opponents are not statistically significant. This difference increases significantly under left-of-center presidents, as the average view of Chávez decreases (becomes worse) for opponents and increases for supporters.

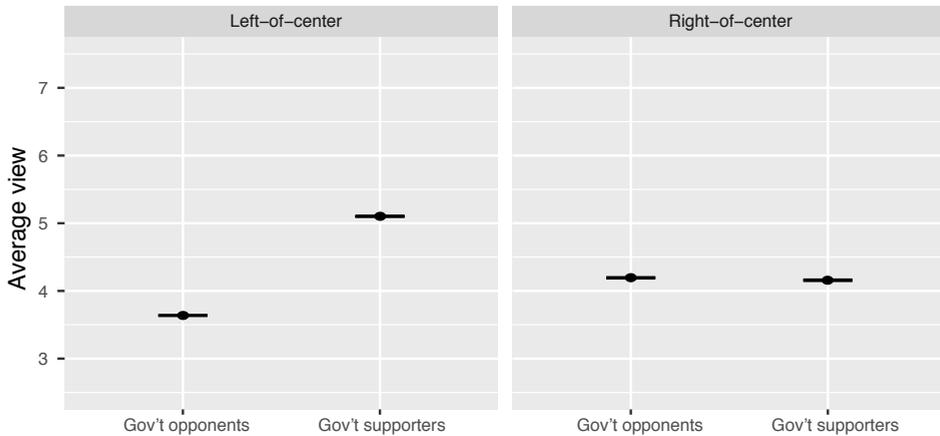
Another interesting finding is that, while support for right-of-center administrations is not significant, their ideological proximity to Venezuela is, in fact, significant (a variable that is not significant for leftist presidents). Supporters and opponents of right-of-center administrations that are more distant ideologically from Venezuela have worse views of Chávez than do those that are closer. In other words, in countries ruled by right-wing administrations with foreign policies that are politically close to *Chavismo*, citizens have better perceptions of the Venezuelan regime than in countries politically distant from Caracas. The only other variable that is significant in these models is socio-economic status, which only affects right-wing administrations. Where citizens have the lowest average socio-economic status (SES), they have a better perception of Chávez. This is consistent with what one would expect considering Chávez's heavy discursive emphasis on the poor and disparities in the region.

**Table 1. Regression with country clustered standard errors for explaining Average evaluations of Hugo Chávez**

	Left-of-center President	Right-of-center President
Government supporters	1.469*** (0.31)	-0.037 (0.15)
Political closeness to Venezuela	0.210 (0.64)	-1.146** (0.49)
Internal polarization	0.202 (0.31)	0.086 (0.30)
Proportion of Exports to Venezuela (log)	0.166 (0.17)	-0.050 (0.06)
Trade Balance	-0.247 (0.33)	-0.103 (0.27)
Left-Right Average Ideological Location	-0.010 (0.65)	-0.079 (0.27)
Average Socio-Economic Status	-0.246 (0.55)	-0.734** (0.28)
Satisfaction with Democracy	-0.567 (0.42)	-0.737 (0.50)
Constant	3.692 (3.78)	6.454*** (1.73)
N	98	132
AIC	276	359
R <sup>2</sup>	0.434	0.331

Notes: Standard errors in parenthesis. Significance level \*  $p < 0.1$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

**Figure 5. Predicted Chávez Evaluation based on results reported in Table 1**



Having demonstrated that space for *Chavismo* to become a divisive issue exists in countries with left-of-center presidents, we can move on to test our second corollary, which is that countries where the left governs will also have more space for *Chavismo* to become a wedge issue. To carry out this test, we looked at the consistency of views in both groups – left-of-center and right-of-center governments – and used the same independent variables that were used previously. To measure consistency within groups, we used the percentage of respondents that fell within one standard deviation of the mean view of Chávez (as described above). A lower percentage indicates greater inconsistency in the distribution of views among members of the group. As such, we are examining whether greater political closeness with Venezuela makes views of Chávez more cohesive among government opponents (higher percentage) than government supporters.

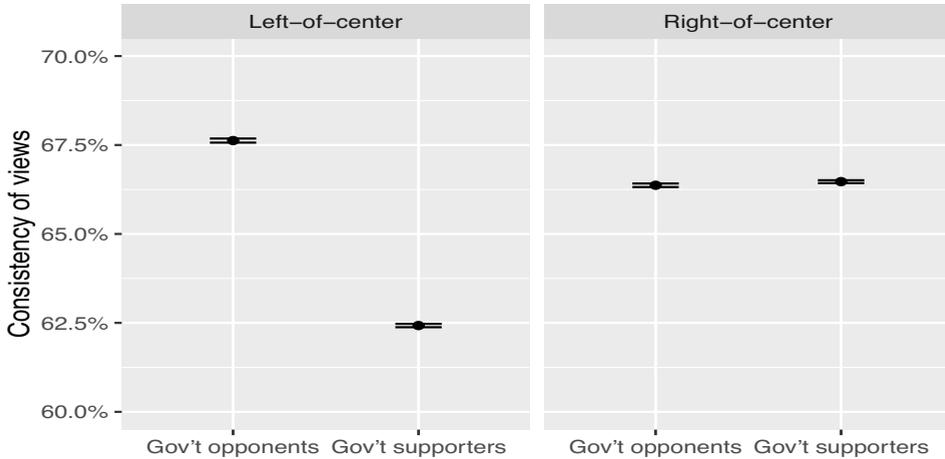
Table 2 shows the results of the analysis of the consistency of views in each group (left-of-center and right-of-center presidents). As can be seen, government opponents in countries with left-of-center presidents have more consistent views than supporters, for which the coefficient is larger; once again, being more politically distant from Venezuela does not make views of Chávez more cohesive *ceteris paribus*. We can further see this relationship in Figure 6, where we predict the consistency of Chávez’s evaluations, as before. The left-hand side of the graph shows predictions for left-of-center presidents and the 95% confidence interval around the estimates, while the right-hand side shows predictions for right-of-center presidents. The space for *Chavismo* to become a wedge issue can be seen clearly in this figure in the difference in consistency between opponents and supporters of left-of-center presidents. As expected, views of Chávez among government opponents are more consistent than among government supporters.

**Table 2. Regression with country clustered standard errors for explaining within group Consistency of evaluations of Hugo Chávez**

	Left-of-center President	Right-of-center President
Government supporters	-0.052** (0.02)	0.000 (0.01)
Political closeness to Venezuela	-0.018 (0.05)	0.076*** (0.02)
Internal polarization	0.021 (0.02)	-0.031 (0.02)
Proportion of Exports to Venezuela (log)	-0.007 (0.01)	0.008* (0.00)
Trade Balance	-0.008 (0.03)	0.007 (0.01)
Left-Right Average Ideological Location	0.033 (0.03)	0.014 (0.02)
Average Socio-Economic Status	-0.005 (0.04)	-0.001 (0.02)
Satisfaction with Democracy	0.098** (0.03)	0.056 (0.03)
Constant	0.342* (0.17)	0.515*** (0.11)
N	98	132
AIC	-230	-309
R <sup>2</sup>	0.228	0.241

Note: Standard errors in parenthesis. Significance level \*  $p < 0.1$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

**Figure 6. Predicted Group Consistency of Chávez Evaluation based on results reported in Table 2**



## CONCLUSIONS

Even after Chávez’s death, authors have recently shown that concepts such as *Chavización* and *Venezuelización* continue to be used as a strategy in domestic debates in Argentina (Sagarzazu and Mouron, 2017)<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, the main objective of our study was to expand this analysis to 17 Latin American countries and examine whether and why *Chavismo* can be used as a tool to take advantage of in domestic politics. As Kitzberger (2010) suggested seven years ago, we corroborate with empirical data the fact that *Chavismo* has all the conditions to operate as a wedge issue. Further analysis, however, with individual survey data together with political advertisements collected during election campaigns could further expand this analysis by looking at the effectiveness of this approach as a campaign mechanism. Similarly, analysis of communications of political actors can further expand the findings of this study. Regardless, however, this paper’s findings opens an interesting discussion.

In the first place, and leaving aside our case study, our findings posit some concerns regarding the foreign policy formulation process itself. Since its inception in

<sup>7</sup> The authors show that, between 2010 to 2015, one of the main Argentine newspapers published 6 editorials and 16 opinion pieces using the idea of *Chavización* in order to negatively compare the Argentine and Venezuelan administrations.

the 1930s, public opinion literature suggested that the average citizen would have little interest in international affairs (Lippmann, 1932; Almond, 1970), which in turn partly explains why public opinion historically has not influenced foreign policy formulation (Jacobs and Page, 2005). Nevertheless, as processes of economic liberalization and global governance have increasingly included civil society in discussions on international policy issues, in democratic regimes, public perceptions constrain foreign policy choices at critical moments (Foyle, 2004). For instance, more recent articles have shown that foreign policy issues have turned repeatedly into electoral agenda items (Holsti, 1992; Aldrich et al., 2006), while at the same time, as stated in the theoretical discussion, foreign threats can be used to overshadow domestic class divisions and taken advantage of in the domestic realm (Snyder et al., 2009). Additionally, if foreign issues are introduced in electoral debates and possess the conditions to be used as a wedge issue, as shown in this article, the creation of such cleavages will have an impact on the foreign policy formulation process.

Second, regarding our region of analysis, if, as we have demonstrated, *Chavismo* can be used as a wedge issue in Latin America, this may affect foreign policy strategies toward Venezuela. Strengthened ties with Caracas appear to have a domestic political cost, even when this would be extremely beneficial for a country's economy. For example, due to opposition from right-wing parties in the Brazilian and Paraguayan Congresses, the process of incorporation of Venezuela into Mercosur took more than seven years, even when all members of the bloc had a trade surplus with their Caribbean neighbor and such an agreement promised new business opportunities. Similarly, the outcome of a challenging peace negotiation in Colombia between the Santos government and the FARC was narrowly defeated in a referendum in which the opposition highlighted the relationship between the FARC, Cuba, and the already deceased Hugo Chávez<sup>8</sup>. In sum, even after Chávez's passing, it is politically costly for Latin American rulers to present an image of closeness with Caracas to their electorates, which may affect regional political dynamics.

Finally, if – as we have shown – a foreign topic can be taken advantage of in domestic politics, this strategy likely is not limited to *Chavismo* and Latin America. Specific studies are needed, but we expect that the same may apply to other controversial countries and international figures such as Russia's Putin and neighboring states or the effect of Syriza's win in Greece and subsequent support for new parties in Spain. The key is to determine the appropriate cleavage into which the foreign topic falls. In the end, as we are moving toward a globalized world in which the boundaries between domestic and international affairs appear increasingly blurred, we expect that there will be a growing trend toward globalized politics.

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8 <http://www.eltiempo.com/opinion/columnistas/la-batalla-sin-fin-gabriel-silva-lujan-columnista-el-tiempo/16717012>.  
<http://www.eltiempo.com/politica/proceso-de-paz/camapanas-por-el-si-y-el-no-al-plebiscito/16715664>.

Therefore, more comparative research on these new types of interactions will be needed to understand these dynamics.

On this point it is good to acknowledge that our test is done in a system of presidential democracies. These regimes have their own unique characteristics about clarity of accountability (Powell and Whitten, 1993), personalized elections (Samuels, 2002) and popularity (Carlin et al. 2018), among others. As such this might make our theory less applicable to other non-presidential contexts. However, given the increase in personalization of politics in some parliamentary systems (Holtz-Barcha et al. 2014, Langer 2011, Langer Sagarzazu 2018, Karvonen 2010) it might just be the case that our argument might travel -with some caveats- to some highly personalized parliamentary system.

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