

INTRODUCTION

e future of **Chavez's**, the left-wing political movement in Venezuela created by populist former President Hugo Chávez, has never been more uncertain. e movement's current leader is the embattled President Nicolás Maduro, an experienced but unimaginative politician who has clung to power for six years. A former congressman, foreign minister, and Vice President, Maduro became interim President after the then-cancer-stricken Chávez named him his successor in December 2013. It bears underscoring that Maduro owes his **Chavez's** movement legitimacy to this personal appointment by Chávez, a figure whose legacy between that between 40-50 percent of Venezuelans consider positive, according to poll data from 2017 and 2018.¹

To be sure, Maduro cannot draw on any democratic or economic sources of legitimacy. Maduro has used fraudulent electoral processes and executive power grabs to block the opposition's Constitutional proposals for democratic change while relying on repression to persecute regime opponents. is turn toward hard authoritarian rule de00. up ami (oaeector1Nitarian r)-8 (ule6 (e,ca

Amid these deeply destabilizing changes, Maduro's persistence in power has represented the paradoxical state of affairs for Venezuela. Maduro symbolizes Venezuela's trouble-ridden future as well as its resilience. His ability to withstand the pressures of the economic crisis, international diplomatic isolation, and harsh economic sanctions has confounded observers. Why has Maduro survived?

The top-down factors are clear. Controlling an ideologically loyal and corrupt military and running an oil-rich economy supported by China and Russia helps keep a kleptocratic system going. It also helps that Maduro has access to sources of illegitimate income from drug trafficking, wields a powerful state communications apparatus, and has concentrated on dividing and repressing the opposition. The bottom-up factors that contribute to Maduro's resilience are less well understood. According to More Consulting, a Caracas-based polling firm, from January 2017 to March 2019, approval ratings for Maduro's Presidency swung between 20 and 40 percent, averaging 31.7 percent over this period.⁵ This raises the crucial question of why support for an incompetent dictator did not evaporate.

We argue that, despite extreme state fragility and the opposition political movement's decline, a part of Maduro's governing platform is central to the story behind Maduro's ability to secure core support. The chapter of the story we unpack here has been taking place at the grassroots level. According to fresh survey data we report on here, the Communal Councils, a Venezuelan institution for grassroots participation once thought to be obsolete, has been helping Maduro secure this support.

ABSTRACT: Communal Councils: Venezuela's Dictatorship's Grassroots Support

While representatives of Latin America's Pink Tide—the pattern of left-wing-tinged political change between 1999 and roughly 2014—have claimed a range of achievements from

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many scholars would have expected the Communal Councils (CCs), the movement's most important and expansive participatory experiment, to have receded into the revolutionary sunset years ago. To the contrary, as we detail below, they remain alive and well. Moreover, they play an important, though under-acknowledged role in preserving Maduro's power. The mere continuation of the CCs—200 to 400 family-sized block-level groups first created in 2006—amid the shocks of an unprecedented economic depression is noteworthy. The CCs' endurance is key to understanding what has helped *Chávez* maintain grassroots-level support. Though there is some evidence that participation has decreased over the last several years, involvement in the groups is still relatively high. This has allowed the CCs to play a critical role in sustaining the Maduro government over the past five years.

A Community-Centered Approach

How did grassroots participation live on as a relevant space for *Chávez*'s efforts to penetrate the population? What about the Councils has made them durable—so far—through thick and thin? What does the story of the Councils' continuation mean for *Chávez*'s survival and future as a left-wing political movement, for a broader understanding of the role of participatory institutions in Latin America's once-dominant Left Turn, and the relationship between grassroots power and state power? These are some of the questions we seek to answer as we analyze new field data and its implications.

We first address the empirical puzzle of Council endurance with fresh data from the field. Next, we offer a partisan politics-driven framework for understanding the conditions under which participatory institutions serve the ends of deepening democracy and centering the grassroots, and when they operate in the service of populist authoritarians—as in the case of Venezuela today. We illustrate this framework through a look at the historical development and changing political character of Venezuela's CCs. Finally, we discuss this story's broader implications and the uncertain future of participatory democracy in Latin America.

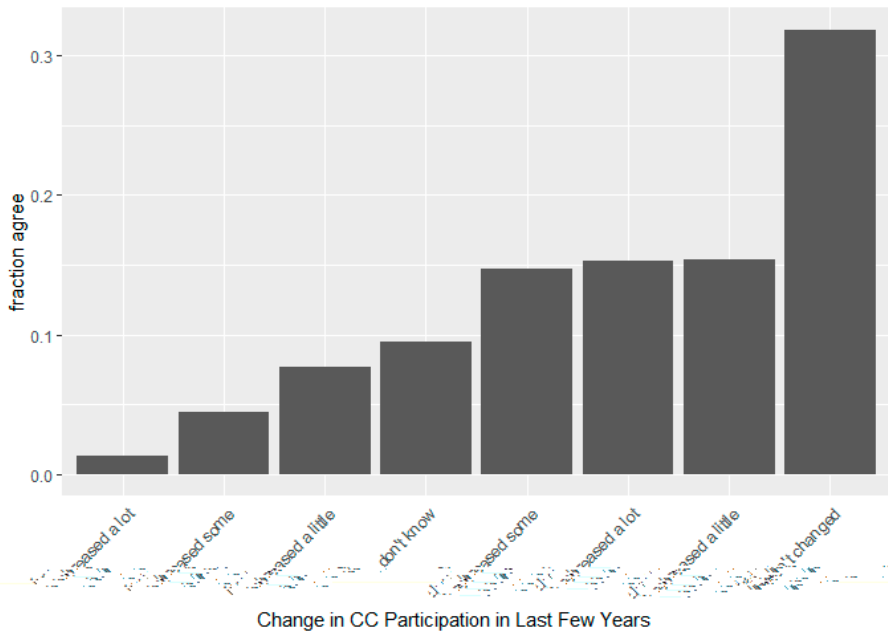
EXPLAINING THE COMMUNAL COUNCIL'S SUPRISING ENDURANCE

Communal Councils

Results from a nationally representative survey of Venezuelan adults carried out by one of the authors (Abbott) in late 2018 suggest that participation in CCs has indeed decreased in the last three years. Figure 1 shows

that 45 percent of Venezuelans believe CC participation has decreased over the last several years, while 32 percent believe participation has not changed, and only 13 percent believe participation has increased.⁶

Figure 1: Change in CC Participation in Last Few Years

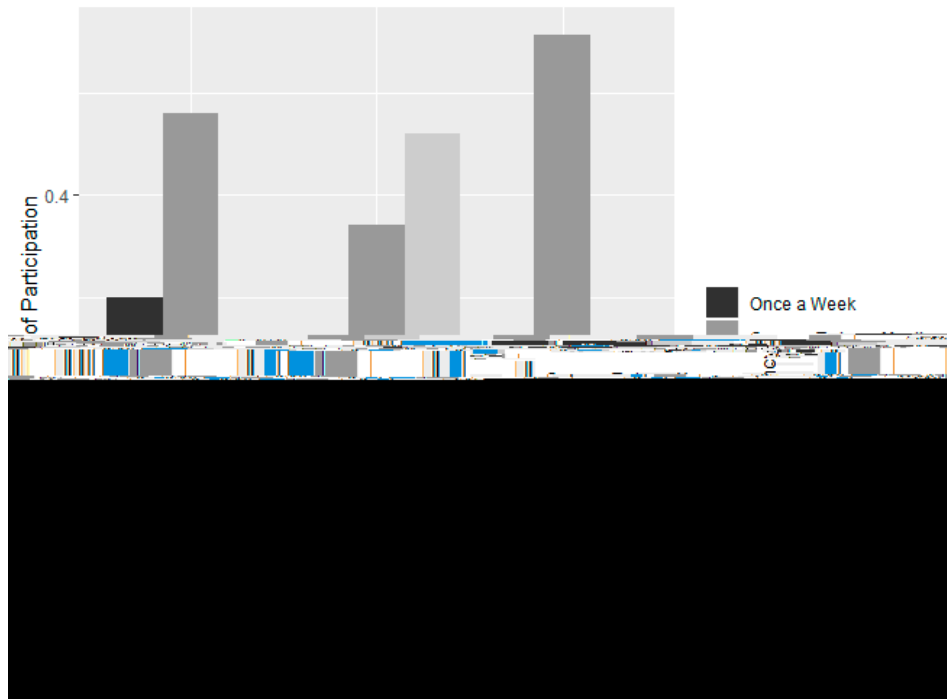


Source: Author's survey of 1,135 Venezuelans in late 2018.

Not surprisingly, factors related to the economic crisis, such as lack of financing and services provided by the CCs, are by far the most important reasons given by Venezuelans to explain why participation has decreased. In fact, 50 percent responded that lack of financing or lack of services is the reason participation has declined. This provides evidence that, beginning in 2014, Venezuela's economic crisis indeed had a negative impact on CC participation. Nonetheless, over 50 percent of Venezuelans reported that CC participation has not decreased over the past several years, and 62 percent of respondents who reported ever participating in their local CC reported that they still participated in late 2018. Crucially, we estimate that around 31 percent of the adult Venezuelan population participated in CCs as of 2018, a figure only slightly lower than 2014 levels. Additionally, as Figure 2 demonstrates, if anything, the frequency at which individuals participate in CC activities has increased since the beginning of Venezuela's economic crisis in 2014. This is far from the virtual disappearance of the

CCs predicted by some notable pieces of scholarship.⁷

FIGURE 2: Expected vs. Actual CCs, by Frequency



ranks of grassroots CC leaders have rallied to his defense during the recent constitutional crisis.

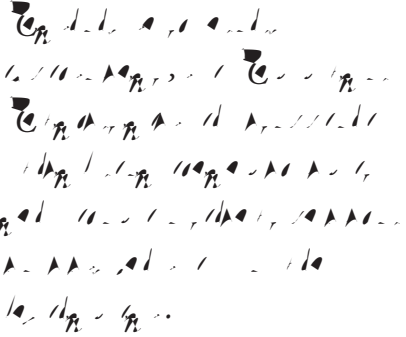
While the CCs and Communes have opened up spaces for internal critique within Maduro's government, the pressure they have applied on Maduro is far outweighed by their central role in sustaining his government during Venezuela's economic and political crises. This article highlights the darker side of grassroots participatory institutions closely linked to the ruling party: thanks in no small part to the CCs,

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Contrary to scholarly expectations, the CCs neither disappeared during lean economic times nor became a serious political liability for the Maduro government. The CCs are not obsolete; they remain useful and necessary to *U*. Confirming fears that politically motivated targeting of benefits to regime supporters would become the dominant pattern, CCs have been central to the government's survival amid unprecedented political and economic crises.¹⁴ Three primary factors help explain this outcome.

First, despite the fact that state officials who promote the Councils commonly use pro-Bolivarian Revolution rhetoric when helping form the groups, the situation is different on the ground. Councils are not necessarily ideologically soaked spaces where

only pro-regime behavior takes place.¹⁵



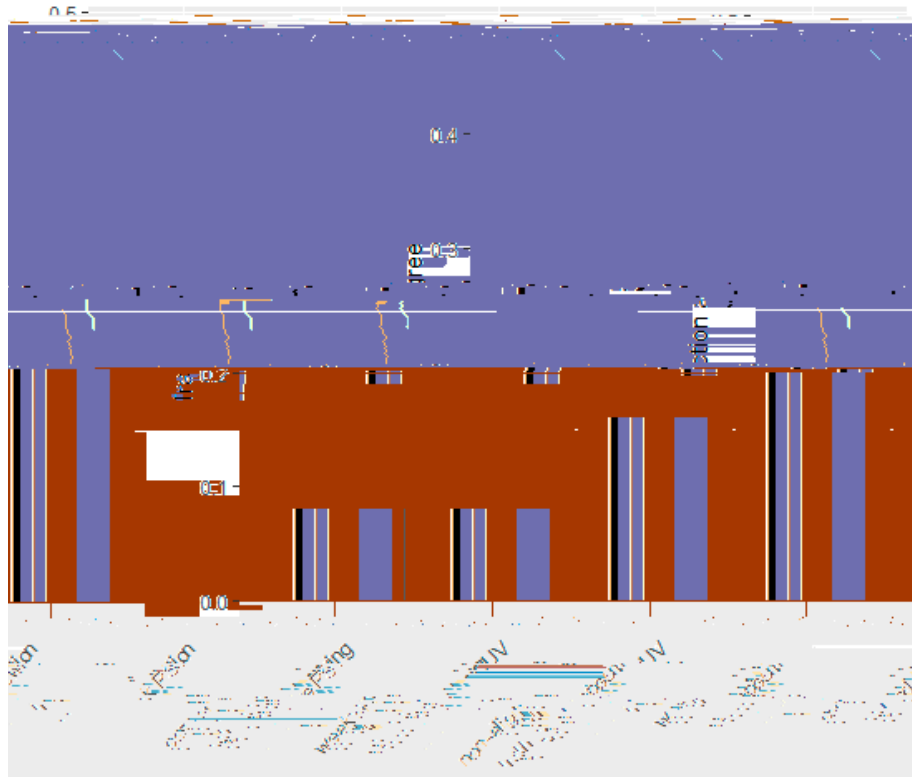
is allows *U* with distinct and sometimes contradictory conceptions of the Bolivarian revolution to work together. Figure 3 provides a sense of the vast range of understandings *U* hold regarding the purpose of the CCs. Some view the Councils as primarily non-ideological spaces intended to solve community problems or to obtain more resources for the

community. Others understand them in highly political terms, believing the purpose of the Councils is to win votes, to defend the revolution against opposition attacks, or to serve as the foundation for a fundamental transformation of the Venezuelan state.

Flexibility allows the Councils to absorb important political differences that have produced damaging internal tensions in other more ideologically rigid *U* organizations, including the PSUV itself. It also allows the Councils to weather economic and political shocks more effectively than other *U* mass organizations by providing a range of substitute motivations for participation when political or economic conditions undermine a given participatory incentive. For example, if the Councils were purely non-ideological vehicles for distributing resources to local communities, most participants would lose interest in participating during lean economic times when Council budgets shrink. While there is some evidence, discussed above, that shrinking budgets did negatively

is helps to explain why over 70 percent of Venezuelans in a 2011 survey reported that the CCs are the key institutions responsible for resolving problems in their communities, and why in December 2018 over 60 percent of Venezuelans reported that CCs benefit the whole community and not just members of the PSUV.¹⁶

Figure 4: Community Councils, 2011-2018



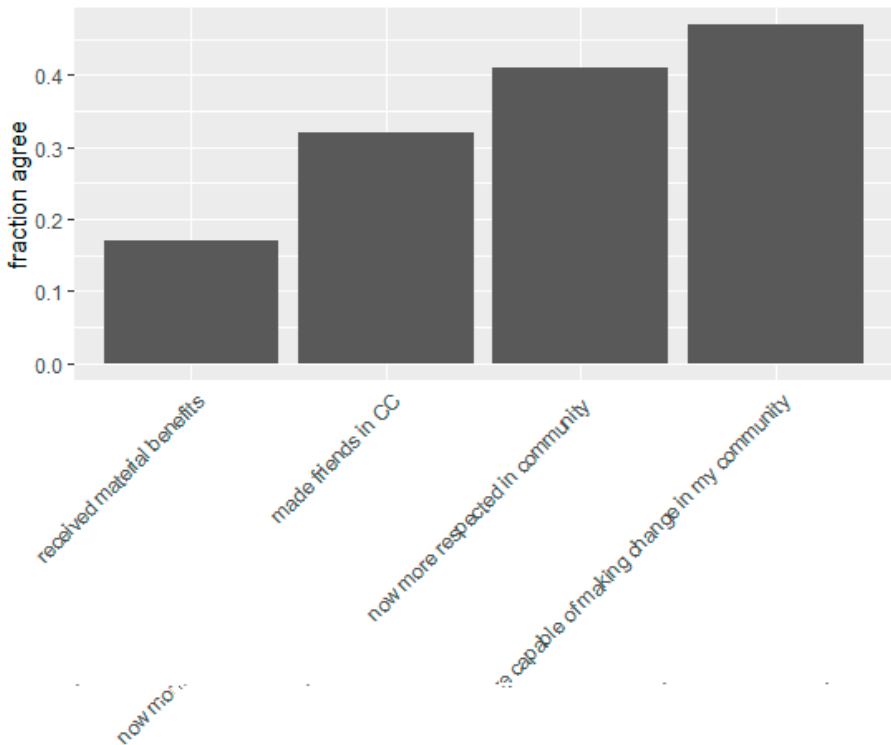
Source: Survey of 1,078 Venezuelans in 2018.

Another critical factor in sustaining participation in CCs beyond the commodities boom and Chávez’s popularity is the range of non-material benefits the Councils offer participants that other mass organizations do not. If CCs only offered material benefits, we would expect participation to decrease significantly as the financing for CC projects decreased. However, if participants received meaningful benefits regardless of financing levels, we would expect their participation to continue even as their Council’s resources decreased. Our survey indicates that CCs offer significant benefits beyond the material. Over 50 percent of CC participants reported that a substantial part of their social life takes place

within their Communal Council. Over 60 percent reported that their CC participation is an important part of their identity and that they are more respected in their community thanks to CC participation. In addition, over 80 percent reported that CC participation allows them to be more informed about what is going on in their community.

Not only do CC participants report that they obtain significant non-material benefits from their CC work, they also value those benefits highly compared to material benefits they receive through CC participation. As shown in Figure 5, among CC participants who reported their opinion of the PSUV improved as a result of CC participation, the percentage who credited their improved opinion of the party to receiving material benefits is dramatically lower than the percentages who pointed to non-material benefits, such as gaining new friends and feeling more respected in their community. Consequently, even if the level of material benefits decreases, participants may still benefit significantly from non-material benefits, and their incentive to participate will endure.

Figure 5: *Improved Opinion of the PSUV as a Result of CC Participation*



Source: *Survey of Communal Council Members*, 1078 respondents, 2018.

Finally, Venezuela's increasingly dire economic crisis has played a role in maintaining significant levels of CC participation. The increasingly severe lack of access to food, water, and other basic services during the crisis appears to have created a survival mentality. For example, a crucial data point from our survey is that 45 percent of the Venezuelans who reported an increase in CC participation credited the increase to a lack of services.

The hypothesis that Venezuelans appear more likely to turn to any available avenue appears to be confirmed as the CCs represent one of the few remaining avenues.

Further, the percentage of CC projects approved related to food provision increased from 4 percent in 2009 to nearly 15 percent in 2018, and the percentage of approved projects related to water provision increased from 5 percent in 2009 to 12 percent in 2018. Finally, the percentage of CC participants active in a food committee increased from 0 percent in 2009 to nearly 20 percent in 2018, making food committees the most popular of all CC committees in 2018.¹⁷

THE LEFT, STATE POWER, AND PARTY-GRASSROOTS RELATIONS

To take stock of the broader implications of the CCs' endurance for the future of the Left, populist authoritarianism, and participatory democracy in Latin America, we first have to understand the various ways in which political parties and participatory institutions interact. This relationship plays a major role in determining whether a participatory institution deepens democracy and expands political inclusion, or devolves into a cynically deployed tool of populist autocrats. The evolving relationship between the PSUV and CCs sheds important light on this question, with unsettling implications for the future of participatory democracy in Latin America.

We argue that the most constructive role participatory institutions can play in the political life of a society is to institutionalize the direct participation of grassroots voices in political decision making. This requires: 1) mobilization of significant degrees of grassroots-level participation, and 2) the full and equal participation of voices from across the political spectrum and from all socioeconomic strata. When these two requirements are satisfied, participatory institutions have the potential to empower historically marginalized communities, rejuvenate local democracy, and strengthen representative institutions by infusing them with civic vitality. Whether these conditions are met depends on how political parties structure their relationships to participatory institutions.

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There are three basic models through which political parties interact with participatory institutions. We contend that the model that predominates in a party's strategic thinking will strongly affect the quality of grassroots participation and political representation that follows. The first is the highly strategic "vanguardist" model. This model employs participatory institutions as direct instruments of the party in order to mobilize supporters and grow the party's electoral base. Participatory institutions are strictly instrumental: they exist to defend the party during key moments or to consolidate the party's political hegemony. This often results in clientelistic top-down relations that exclude non-party supporters. This model can generate high levels of participation, but only among supporters of the ruling party.¹⁸

The second is the utopian "dual power" model. The intention is to replace traditional institutions of representative democracy, such as mayors and governors, with a bottom-up system of direct democracy. This would consist of a territory-based system of local-level participatory institutions in which, at least in theory, any individual could participate in key decisions that affect the community. The ultimate goal is that all political decisions be taken directly by organized communities. When a policy associated with this model prevails, tensions can arise within the party between those primarily concerned with ensuring the party's political hegemony and those hoping to build alternative institutions.¹⁹ Most of the time, the vanguardist

institutions that focus primarily on deepening democracy, they will be less motivated to devote resources to these institutions. Thus, there will be limited levels of community participation compared to participatory institutions where the vanguardist or dual power models predominate.²⁰

In practice, actors draw on these models to varying extents. Thus, empirical analysis must also consider the effects of various combinations of the models. When the deepening democracy model predominates and either the dual power or vanguardist models are present, the outcome is likely to be temporary high levels of participation (since the presence of the vanguardist model gives hard-nosed pragmatists in the party an incentive to devote resources to the participatory institutions) combined with politically inclusive participation that minimizes exclusionary practices (since significant forces in the party are committed to a vision of participatory democracy that requires full political inclusion). The problem with this combination is that it is unstable and prone to drift toward the predominance of the vanguardist model and the marginalization of the deepening democracy model.

However, the deepening democracy model can coexist with the vanguardist or dual power model with neither predominating. This too produces a temporary period of high participation and broad political inclusion—though less than when the deepening democracy model predominates. Still, this is an unstable combination that tends toward the predominance of the vanguardist model. When the vanguardist or dual power model predominates and the deepening democracy model is

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incentives to ensure political inclusivity in participatory spaces. The dual power model may persist, primarily due to its role not only in maintaining the support of ideologically committed party militants, but even more importantly because it provides political justification for undermining the authority of elected officials opposed to the party.

For instance, if the party seeks to minimize the authority of opposition mayors (as well as less compliant mayors from its own ranks), the dual power model allows it to claim that doing so is part of a broader plan to democratize society, even if it is truly part of an effort to further centralize power in the hands of the ruling party. Despite the valuable legitimization role that the dual power model may continue to play under conditions of authoritarian backsliding, it still tends to be eclipsed by the vanguardist model, which is capable of delivering more immediate and substantive political benefits.

Venezuela from 2015 to the present is a case in point for a ruling party's tendency to transform multidimensional participatory processes into a one-dimensional process after the transformation of electoral competition conditions. After losing handily in the December 2015 legislative elections, Maduro began to entrench its authoritarian tendencies at the institutional level. This formalization of the regime's authoritarianism included power grabs designed to help the party to tighten its grip on power. Legislative elections had given the opposition the means to restructure state institutions that govern elections and key parts of the judiciary—scenarios Maduro was not willing to accommodate. With self-preservation in mind, in 2017 Maduro neutralized the legislature by creating a supra-constitutional Constituent Assembly, which amounted to a trump card he could play to block any opposition move.

In this context, where building a majoritarian electoral coalition has become more or less irrelevant, the value of the CCs to the PSUV has increasingly centered on maintaining the support of a relatively small but deeply committed core capable of providing the regime a base level of legitimacy by turning out at mass rallies and voting in low-turnout elections (such as the 2017 National Constituent Assembly elections and the 2018 Presidential election). Thus, there is little to no incentive for the party to maintain politically inclusive participatory spaces. The dual power model has persisted in rhetoric, but is increasingly a political tool used in the service of the vanguardist model to maintain the support of party militants committed to the dual power model, and to provide an ideological justification for future efforts to centralize political power.

Figure 1: The evolution of the party's relationship with the CCs

Tables 1 and 2 summarize our theoretical framework, and Table 2 includes a description of the relative strength of each model of party-participatory relations throughout the evolution of Venezuelan CCs. In the Councils' first years, when the PSUV enjoyed high levels of popular support and had copious resources at its disposal, all three models played an important role in the party's relationship with the CCs. However, after the economic crisis of 2008 and the opposition's strong performance in the 2010 legislative elections, the deepening democracy model was subordinated to the other two models, as exhibited in the more conservative, state-centric law regulating the CCs passed in 2009.²¹ Finally, the Maduro government effectively ended competitive elections in Venezuela in wake of the opposition's 2015 victory in National Assembly elections. Under these conditions, the deepening democracy model has all but disappeared, and the dual power model has taken on an increasingly instrumental role in service of the vanguardist model. The CCs have become almost direct organs of the party.

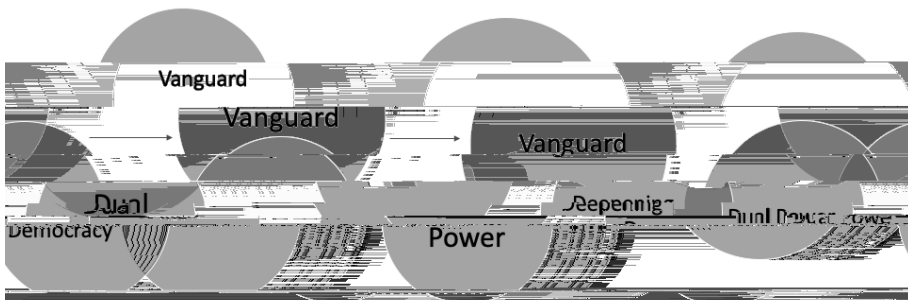
Table 1: The evolution of the party's relationship with the CCs

	High Legitimacy	Low Legitimacy
Democratic Competition	Flexibility to allow a range of competing visions of participatory institutions coexist	Vanguardist model predominate
Little/No Democratic Competition	N/A	Vanguardist model predominates

Fig. 2: Evolutionary paths of Dual Power, Vanguardism, Deepening Democracy, and their combinations

Models	Outcome	Period Dominant in Venezuela's CCs
Only Dual power and/or Vanguardism	Generates tension within ruling party while also strengthening ruling party's base and increasing exclusion of other sectors of society	After 2015
Only Deepening Democracy	Isolated experiences of improved grassroots representation	Never
Deepening Democracy dominant and Dual power/Vanguardism secondary	Coexistence until political necessity forces the party to abandon participatory institution	Never
Dual power and/or Vanguardism dominant and Deepening Democracy secondary	Coexistence until economic/political necessity forces the virtual disappearance of the latter by the former	2009-2015
Deepening Democracy and Dual power/Vanguardism roughly equal in importance	Coexistence until economic/political necessity forces the party to abandon participatory institution or shift to Dual Power/Vanguardism dominance	2006-2009 (with new CC law)

Fig. 6: Evolutionary paths of Dual Power, Vanguardism, and Deepening Democracy



CONCLUSION

Venezuela's Communal Councils show that participatory institutions can endure well beyond the expiration date scholars might assign them based on fluctuating political and economic conditions. Despite the economic contraction that dried up their oil-soaked budgets and the political polarization that threatens to make them ungovernable, CCs are still at work in thousands of communities across the country. Unfortunately, their endurance is fueled largely by their instrumental role in holding together the PSUV's core support base, particularly among the urban poor. In their initial years, despite many problems, the Councils provided an opportunity structure for previously marginalized grassroots activists. This balance between top-down and bottom-up was highly fragile. As the party's elec-

Scott Mainwaring (ed.), *Democracy in Latin America: A Handbook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 291-325.

- 8 The AmericasBarometer by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP). Available at <www.LapopSurveys.org>.
- 9 Cira Pascual Marquina, "What's Been Learned Won't Be Easily Forgotten: A Conversation with Antonio Gonzalez Plessmann," *Venezuelan Analysis*, January 17, 2019, <<https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/14235>> (accessed May 9, 2019); and Ricardo Vaz, "Production and Conflict in El Maizal Commune," *Venezuelan Analysis*, September 7, 2018, <<https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/14038>> (accessed May 9, 2019).
- 10 Ricardo Vaz, "Interview with Angel Prado (Part I): 'The Commune Holds the Solution to the Crisis,'" *Venezuelan Analysis*, August 16, 2018, <<https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/14005>> (accessed May 9, 2019).
- 11 Interview with former Presidential of Venezuela's Presidential Commission of Popular Power, December 5, 2018.
- 12 Estimates of turnout in the 2018 Venezuelan presidential election, for example, ranged from around 30 percent to 46 percent. If we take the average, 38 percent, and assume that Maduro's core base constituted 20 percent of the electorate and that turnout among the core base was high (our survey suggests this figure was over 90 percent), this would suggest that Maduro's core supporters constituted at least 70 percent of his vote share in the 2018 elections. In other words, he very nearly could have won the election without voters from outside his core supporters. Turnout estimates for the 2017 Constituent Assembly elections were even lower, making the impact of Maduro's core supporters even greater in those elections.
- 13 Interview with former Presidential of Venezuela's Presidential Commission of Popular Power, December 5, 2018.
- 14

parties and participatory institutions in the academic literature. Key examples include B. Wampler, *Participatory Politics: How Citizens Shape Policy* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2007); G. Baiocchi, *Participatory Politics: How Citizens Shape Policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Leonardo Avritzer, *Participatory Politics: How Citizens Shape Policy*