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Research Paper

Appropriation of Civil Society: A Tool for Aspiring Autocrats

INTRODUCTION

Civil society Organizations (CSOs) are usually understood as a necessary variable to promote democracy and challenge authoritarian regimes. In Latin America, especially, civil society's conceptualization has been directly linked to the growing resistance against authoritarian leaders following the Second World War. In this essay, however, I will argue that in weakly institutionalized democracies, appropriation of civil society is a tool used by aspiring authoritarian leaders to obtain and maintain political power. In contrast to traditional literature, I found that the mere existence of a strong civil society does not promote democratic values. Instead, without autonomy from political parties and the state, it will support an authoritarian agenda. I will do this by first defining civil society, drawing an important distinction of its role between democratic systems and competitive authoritarian ones. I will also interpret this definition for the Latin American context, with a special emphasis on the Venezuelan context. Second, I will present academic literature on the current notion of CSOs. Third, I will present my case study, Venezuela, by contextualizing the role of CSOs before and after Hugo Chavez won the election. Lastly, I will be discussing my findings in a broader context and how my research complements current literature on the topic of civil society in weakly institutionalized democracies. The importance of this research lies in that it explains common political methods

that aspiring autocratic leaders take to appropriate CSOs, a topic which is usually overlooked when discussing this type of political system.

CONCEPTS

In political science, authors struggle when defining civil society. It is a fluid concept that has been used and interpreted in many ways. Foley and Edwards (1996, 39) draw an important distinction when conceptualizing civil society. They argue there are two different notions for the concept of civil society. ‘Civil Society I’ puts specific emphasis on the ability civil society groups have in political life. This notion is based on the Tocquevillian theory that “knowledge of how to combine (to form civic associations) is the mother of all other forms of knowledge; on its progress depends on that of all the others” (Tocqueville 1840). ‘Civil society II’ instead focuses more on civil society as an independent body that constantly resists through civic actions, such as mobilizations, against authoritarian regimes (Foley and Edwards 1996, 40). In both notions, Putnam’s conception of civil society does a good job in bringing the two concepts together when he states that CSOs participate in politics while having effective social collaboration (Putnam, Leonardi, and Nonetti 1993). Based on the information above, I define CSOs as independent associations that are constantly challenging and resisting the political regime.

In the Latin American context, the emergence of the concept of civil society was a consequence of several processes (Avritzer 2006, 39). Civil society “linked the emergence of the concept to the process of reconstitution of social ties by the Latin American poor and middle-class sectors in a situation in which social actors were under the pressure of an

authoritarian regime” (Avritzer 2006, 37). CSOs emerged to distinguish among the authoritarian state, the political opposition, and social groups claiming human rights. On the one hand, civil society groups in Latin America have become the force that unites grievances to bring political and systematic changes to several countries in the region, such as in Chile and Nicaragua (Avritzer 2000, Avritzer 2002, De la Maza 2002). These CSOs had relatively enough autonomy from the state and enough resources to achieve their goal of promoting democratic values. On the other hand, however, in more contemporary Latin America, academic writing has pointed out that a strong civil society does not always lead to the promotion of democratic values, instead, it has promoted undemocratic leaders (Brysk 2000). There are many variables that explain this, though in this essay I will focus on the way aspiring autocrats appropriate CSOs.

Appropriation of CSOs is a tool used by authoritarian leaders to remove CSOs autonomy and political influence. This concept denotes a relationship between state and civil society in which both actors are benefiting from the dynamic. “It is based on two government strategies: the creation of new government-dependent CSOs and the co-optation of the existing associations and foundations”(Yabanci 2019, 294). For the purpose of this essay, however, I will focus on the ways Chavismo has created pro-government civil society organizations using the rhetoric of a more ‘participatory democracy’ for the country. To explore the level of institutionalization for my case study, I use The V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index, which measures the strength of democratic institutions from weak to strong (0-1).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Democratic state-civil society relations have been examined thoroughly by various political scientists in order to understand the nuanced ways in which non-traditional political actors play a role in shaping the political environment. One of the key ideas found in the literature of state-society relations is autonomy. Academic writers generally agree that associational autonomy from the state and traditional parties must be present in a country for CSOs to have enough political influence and to pursue their goals (Tripp 2001, Sørvoll and Bengtsson 2019, Bernhard 1993). However, for the purpose of this article, it is necessary to explore CSOs under weakly institutionalized democratic regimes.

Generally, literature on CSOs' role in weakly institutionalized democracies is minimal or is mostly focused on the way CSOs challenge the incumbent. However, as Jessica Doyle (2016, 244) argues “the state is by far the more powerful actor and very effective at moderating and de-radicalizing civil society”, so CSOs can also serve as useful instruments for aspiring autocrats to assert political control. Croissant et al. build on this thesis when arguing that CSOs can help assert the aspiring autocrats' political control by: first, providing relevant information and acting as a feedback mechanism for the autocratic incumbents; second, CSOs may be able to organize their members as ‘vote-banks’ for the incumbent’s party (Croissant and Giersdorf 2011, 5). Drawing empirical evidence from Turkey’s CSOs, Bilge Yabanci (2019) argues that appropriated CSOs have helped the Justice and Development Party (AKP) by: first, forming a powerful semi-corporatist sphere within civil society through extensive organizational power; second, establishing grassroots links with societal groups through innovative methods; third, reproducing and expanding the reach of polarizing pro-AKP narratives; fourth, acting selectively

in rights promotion and work towards reversing gains; lastly, creating a system of multi-layered clientelism. Algeria, Mozambique, and Vietnam's CSOs have also been analyzed to understand the weakly institutionalized state-society relationship. In these cases, the non-democratic leaders appropriated and co-opted the CSOs to reduce their influence on people and its potential for challenging the authoritarian nature of the regime (Wischermann et al. 2018, 112). In weakly institutionalized democracies, aspiring autocrats use appropriation of CSOs to retain power and to reinforce political control. To understand the nature of the Venezuelan CSOs under the current Chavismo regime, it is important to analyze their role from a historical perspective since 1961.

CENTRAL ARGUMENT

Using Venezuela as a case study, I found that in weakly institutionalized democracies aspiring autocrats seek to appropriate civil society organizations to obtain and maintain political power. Figure 1 shows this causal mechanism. I argue that there is a cyclical relationship among the three factors. Appropriation of civil society by aspiring autocrats will lead to a much weaker institutionalization in the country. This happens because in these weakly institutionalized countries, where political parties struggle to create alliances and a common political base, newly appropriated civil society will not represent a challenge for the aspiring autocrat, so institutions are left alone against authoritarian leaders.

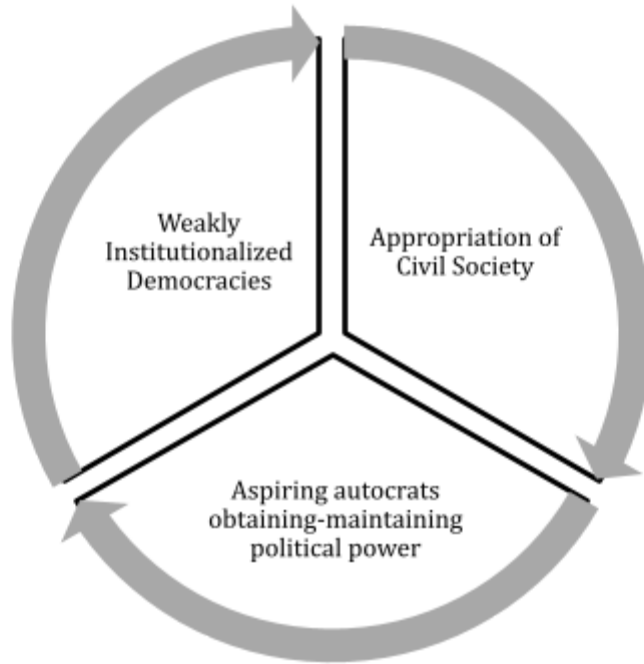


Figure 1. Causal Mechanism Aspiring Autocrats

In Venezuela, since the foundation of the democratic republic in 1961, the two most powerful political parties monopolized all kinds of civil society activities, making CSOs almost nonexistent in those first years of the newly democratized country (Levine 2006, 169). As the social discontent towards traditional political parties grew during the 70s, 80s, and 90s, however, CSOs became an important actor in the political arena. As a way to fight against corruption and tight political control from political parties, citizens participate in civil society to demand more accountability from traditional parties (Levine 2006, 170). These newly founded CSOs were not fighting against the state, but they were intrinsically motivated against the control of the political parties (Salamanca 2004, 98). Hugo Chavez, with his outsider and anti-political parties rhetoric, took advantage of the institutional political decay in the country to win the 1998

elections. Under Chávez’s government, CSOsx struggled to survive in a political environment where appropriation and retaliation are the nature of authoritarian practices.

VENEZUELA’S CIVIL SOCIETY UNDER CHAVISMO

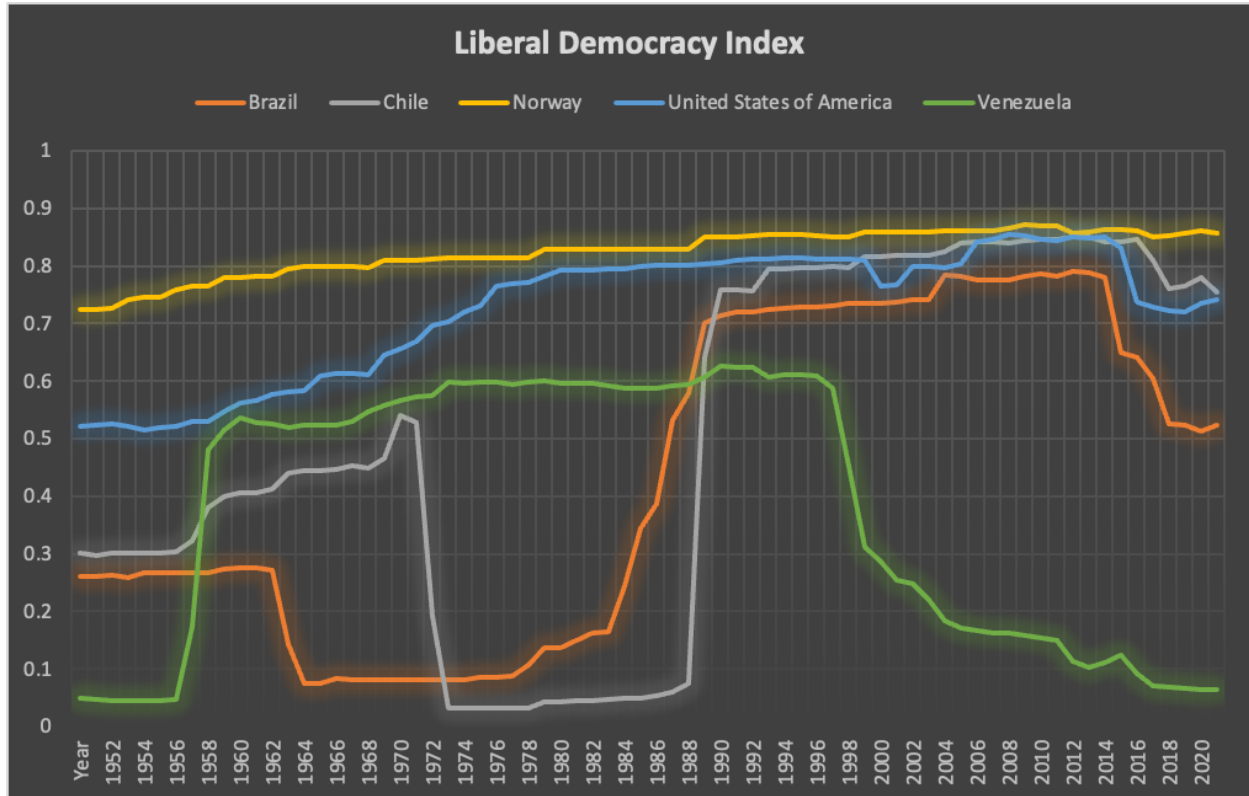


Figure 2. V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index, Venezuela compared with other countries, 1961-1998¹

The V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index, shown in Figure 2, is an important measurement of the institutionalization of Venezuela since 1961, especially when compared with other countries. First, it is noticeable that the Venezuelan index by 1998 was the lowest among the countries shown in the graph. Since 1961, Venezuela has been constantly called the strongest democracy of the region, though this graph shows how this might have been a constructed idea

¹ [V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index. Venezuela. 1961-2020](#)

that did not represent the actual institutionalization of the country. Second, compared with countries that historically have had a strong institutionalization, USA and Norway, the Venezuelan index is considerably low. Last, but most importantly, Chile and Brazil were chosen because they represented countries that had military dictatorships, and then transitioned to democratic republics. So, when compared with Venezuela, I could notice that Brazil and Chile's indexes surpassed Venezuela's. I argue that this happened because the political elite in Venezuela has been historically more interested in conserving political and economic privileges than enhancing the institutionalization of the country. There were many issues of inequality and poverty in the country that affected most of the population. The V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index shows how Venezuela was a weakly institutionalized country when Chavez took power, which made it easy for him to appropriate civil society organizations.

Hugo Chávez's political project was based on a radical change of the country's political system that he called 'participatory democracy'. He criticized traditional parties and elites, calling the previous forty years of Venezuelan politics 'corruptocracy' (Tyszka and Marcano 2007, 127). This constant ambush against past political actors nourished his anti-elite rhetoric, which became appealing for a majority of Venezuelans. Chávez used this popular support to summon a National Constituent Assembly, in which the social and political actors, established after 1961, were subjected to an offensive to weaken them and to appropriate them (Salamanca 2004, 101). Civil society participation was harmed by this new 'participatory democratic constitution' because it created a regulative process in which it narrowed the definition of who should be considered part of civil society (Salamanca 2004, 102). This was the first attempt of

Chavismo to remove CSOs autonomy. This also led Hugo Chávez's supporters to create their own CSOs that will support the future authoritarian agenda of Chavismo. I will be exploring CSOs autonomy and role in the Venezuelan weakly institutionalized democracy by showing three among the most influential CSOs in the country.

One of the most prominent civil society groups during the first years of Chavismo were The Bolivarian Circles. They were created in 2001 by Hugo Chávez, and by 2002 the group had over 2.2 million members. The goal was the “defense of the revolutionary process to form a society with social justice, with economic justice, with a guarantee for real political participation for all” (Burke 2003). The leaders of these circles have argued for its autonomy from the state and from the regime's political power. However, opposition members have called them ‘circles of terrorists’, arguing that they are a source of violence created by the government (Forero 2002). There is little academic literature written about their autonomy and their role in Venezuelan society. Yet, Hansen and Hawkins through a study done in 2004 have concluded that even though participants had high levels of democratic values, their lack of autonomy from the state and the government party undermined their goals (Hansen and Hawkins 2006, 104). Furthermore, there have been accusations of the government's sponsorship of arms and money to these circles, with a purpose of receiving support in campaigns and mass mobilizations (Vinogradoff 2002). With a high level of popular support, Chavismo, since its institutionalization in 1999, has created CSOs that support their political agenda, undermining civil society's autonomy. Bolivarian circles are an example of the appropriation of CSOs because, after its creation, many grassroots neighborhoods-based CSOs were removed from the social space. Hugo Chávez, as an aspiring

autocrat, appropriated CSOs to assert his political control from the masses and gain high levels of popular support.

Second, the Venezuelan labor movement has been another important pillar of civil society in the country's history. Before Chavismo, the labor movement was seen as corrupt, so Chávez entered the political area to dismantle these structures that were serving the interest of traditional parties. In 2003, the Chávez administration encouraged a group of unionists to create a parallel union institution that will serve as a rival to the Confederation of Workers of Venezuela (CTV). This newly 'Bolivarian' institution composed over six hundred unions that supported the government's agenda and had clientelistic relations with the regime (Shapiro 2009, 22). Literature on labor has argued that, in Venezuelan politics, there is no room for autonomous labor movements due to the government's constant attempt to diminish their autonomy and co-opt them (Shapiro 2009 and Ellner 2005). More evidence on the lack of labor movement's autonomy can be found in a Human Rights Watch report that shows how the Chávez's regime has violated basic principles of freedom of association by promoting state interferences in labor elections, refusing to bargain collectively with established unions, and engaging in favoritism toward pro-government unions (Human Rights Watch 2008). Furthermore, other authors have argued that "the regime's primary foible was not its radical leftism but its pursuit of populist control at the expense of the leftist goals of diminishing the domination of marginalized groups and expanding their autonomous participation in civil society" (Posner 2016, 27). The Venezuelan regime has used a 'participatory democratic' rhetoric while also appropriating CSOs autonomy, and the labor union has been drastically affected throughout its mandate.

Third, by 2006, aiming at increasing his 'participatory democracy' project for the country, Hugo Chávez created the Communal Councils (CCs). Its goal was to improve people's quality of life by actively participating in community politics and providing basic and social community services. The CCs are widespread and funded by the state. At a local level, government agencies are responsible for financing and supporting the development of the councils. Literature on the CCs role in 'participatory democracy' in Venezuela has argued that many marginalized groups, who did not have a voice in the past political system, participated in community politics through the CCs (Zaremborg 2016, 86). Furthermore, communities that were often not involved in the political arena have accessed state resources to develop plans for the improvement of their communities. However, other authors have pointed out that in practice the CCs were a state-dependent organization used by the regime for social control, such as in elections or mobilizations (García-Guadilla 2008, Maya 2008, Wilde 2016). Also, CCs are constantly competing for the state resources which makes them reluctant to collaborate on common goals that will affect society overall. The clientelistic state-society relation worked as a way to assert political control. Appropriation of CSOs has impeded CSOs' ability to have autonomy, so challenges to the regime, which is usually associated with the role of CSOs, diminished.

In her paper, *A rude awakening: the underside of Venezuela's Civil Society in the time of Hugo Chávez*, García-Guadilla and Mallen (2013) argue that ethical principles usually attributed to civil society have been undermined due to the politicization of the organizations.

Appropriation of CSOs has been a major problem in the Venezuelan political arena, leaving society further polarized and not being able to unite against common grievances.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Civil society is usually an underrepresented research topic in Venezuelan literature, which is translated to an underestimation of the role it plays in Venezuelan politics. Scholars have mostly focused on opposition coordination (Jiménez 2021) and strategies against the incumbent (Gamboa 2017). Yet, it is within civil society where Chavismo has mobilized voters and tightened political control. Despite the co-optation strategies used by Chavismo, emerging CSOs could have the ability to challenge the authoritarian regime outside of the traditional political sphere. Here lies the importance of this article for Venezuela. In competitive authoritarian regimes, where the incumbent is constantly competing against the opposition, the promotion of democracy has to come bottom-up from the society itself. Not just by demanding political and civil rights to the incumbent, but also by making the opposition political elite accountable. Emerging CSOs must understand the importance of autonomy from political parties, avoiding clientelistic relations, to efficiently demand changes in the country. Also, emerging CSOs must have democratic practices within their organizational structures to promote democracy. Similarly, this paper becomes important to understand Latin America as a region, where institutions might be weak and emerging political leaders have authoritarian traits in their rhetoric.

Latin America has seen an increase in the number of would-be autocrats in the past 20 years, such as Evo Morales in Bolivia, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and more recently Nayib Bukele

in El Salvador. Some of them have been successful in weakening democratic institutions, while some others have failed in the process. A similarity among all the cases, nonetheless, lies in the role civil society played when confronted with authoritarian practices. Recent research on the topic of democratic backsliding has found that “autocrats must carefully construct broad coalitions across political elites, the security forces, and civil society to make competitive authoritarianism work” (Velasco Guachalla et al. 2021, 74). So, for CSOs to efficiently challenge these would-be autocrats, there must be an understanding of the political tools that have been used to co-opt them in other similar cases. Hence, my argument in this paper becomes important because I show the ways in which Chavismo co-opt civil society organizations to mobilize them in their favor. Weak institutionalization in Latin America leaves society on its own when confronting political leaders with authoritarian practices; hence organized civil society could be the key to preserving the political system.

Further research in the topic of civil society organizations in the context of weakly institutionalized countries must go beyond appropriation as the only method to obtain and maintain power. Aspiring autocrats are on the rise in Latin America, but also other regions, hence their methods to remove civil society’s autonomy will enhance in the foreseeable future. Turkey is an example of autocrats using other methods such as co-optation of CSOs to maintain power. Furthermore, there are other variables that are not present in this research, such as repression and media manipulation. These are variables that could enhance the understanding of the political tools aspiring autocrats have used to control civil society organizations.

CONCLUSION

The study of civil society organizations in weakly democratized countries has been understood in two opposing views: first, civil society organizations challenging the political elite outside the traditional means and promoting democratic values; second, civil society organizations supporting an authoritarian agenda, helping the autocrats to obtain and maintain power. In this essay, I found that the mere existence of civil society does not lead to a democratization process. Instead, I present a more nuanced understanding of civil society organizations in weakly institutionalized democracies, focusing on the way aspiring authoritarian leaders could appropriate a strong civil society to obtain and maintain power. I defined and contextualized the concept of civil society both as a general construct in politics and its meaning in Latin America. Then, I defined appropriation as a tool used by authoritarian leaders to remove CSOs autonomy and political influence. I also used the V-Dem index to measure Venezuela's level of institutionalization. In my literature review, I found that scholars generally agree on the importance of associational autonomy from the state and traditional parties for CSOs to have enough political influence and to pursue their goals. Then, I outlined the ways in which aspiring autocrats in the context of weakly democratization use civil society to obtain political power, highlighting the cases of Turkey, Algeria, Mozambique, and Vietnam.

My case study, Venezuela, shows how the appropriation of civil society by aspiring autocrats will lead to a much weaker institutionalization in the country, which implies that the autocratic leader will have more stability to control all the political institutions. Without the

power of an autonomous civil society, repressed political parties do not have the ability to challenge the regime, and so autocrats stay in power for longer. Chavismo in Venezuela successfully appropriated three among the most important civil society organizations. This significant influence on CSOs completely changed the state-society relations. Before Chávez, clientelist state-society relations existed, though they were not the norm. Instead, Chávez created these clientelist organizations as a political tool for control and power stability. Politicized civil society has undermined the value of autonomy civil society organizations must have to promote democratic practices.

The implications of my study are mostly focused on the foreseeable future of Venezuela and the region. Venezuela's political future is still uncertain, yet recently there has been a push for democracy, such as the pro-democracy protest in 2019 and the 2020 negotiations. Civil society could play an important role during the democratic transition and afterward by making the political elite accountable. For the region, my implications are focused on the ways in which aspiring autocrats have gained lots of popular support and even won elections, such as in El Salvador. Civil society in Latin America must understand the risks of being appropriated, and therefore must act in defense of their autonomy and democracy for the region.

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