

Government performance, political trust, and satisfaction with democracy in Venezuela, 2016–2017

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Abstract

Since 2015, Venezuela has been home to numerous protests, instigated mostly by people's discontent with the government and its public services. Despite the seriousness of these protests, limited studies have examined the Venezuelans' evaluation of their government and democracy, and only a few of these studies have used quantitative analysis. To fill this gap, this article offers a snapshot of the ongoing crisis using the Americas Barometer survey data collected between 2016 and 2017. We first identified Venezuelans' three main concerns during this time—shortage of food and necessities, economic crisis, and crime—and examined their relationships with the respondents' trust in government and satisfaction with democracy. We found that shortages of food and necessities and increasing crime were negatively associated with Venezuelans' trust in their government (although shortages were a more significant factor than crime). The long-standing problem of economic crisis was not a significant factor in people's trust in the government. Furthermore, these three factors were not directly linked to Venezuelans' satisfaction with democracy, but people who showed low levels of trust in government tended to have low satisfaction levels with Venezuelan democracy. Our results invite future studies to compare different times and contexts in Venezuela's ever-changing political landscape.

KEYWORDS

crime, democracy, economic crisis, political trust, shortage, Venezuela

INTRODUCTION

The last decade of Venezuelan history has been marked by government persecution, increased crime, shortage of goods, and economic crisis, all of which have contributed to the largest exodus in Latin American history (AEI Working Group on Transnational Organized Crime in the Americas, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2019; UNHCR, 2019). The United Socialist Party of Venezuela engaged in a series of repressive measures against the Venezuelan political opposition, using military and security personnel and misappropriating funds (Ellis, 2017; Human Rights

Watch, 2019). To stay in power, Nicholas Maduro's (and previously, Hugo Chávez's) Bolivarian regimes did not respect the Venezuelan constitutional process, crippling the functions of democratic channels while dealing with Venezuela's serious social and economic problems (Ellis, 2017). Moreover, the country's volatile political conditions stifled its law enforcement, rendering it incapable of responding adequately to the surge in crimes, which, in turn, fueled mass emigration (Freedom House, 2020). In 2018, the crime rates in Venezuela ranked among the highest in the world, with homicide rates at 81.4 per 100,000 (Freedom House, 2020).

Although the media and public discourse have identified these problems as the causes of migration, few studies have focused on Venezuelan citizens' perceptions of their government and democracy, especially using quantitative data. This study proposes to fill this gap with two questions, (1) what do Venezuelan citizens perceive as the most serious problems in Venezuela; and (2) what is the statistical relationship between these problems and people's trust in the national government and their satisfaction with democracy? To find the answers, we analyzed a nation-wide instrument conducted as part of the 2016–2017 *AméricasBarometer* survey by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP, 2023). Although this single-year survey data does not offer any “causal” inference, and the social and political situations in Venezuela continue to change, we expected the results of the study to offer an evidence-based snapshot of Venezuela between 2016 and 2017 that will motivate broader comparative studies in the future.

This article is organized into five sections. The first one discusses the literature that explains recent political and economic situations in Venezuela. The second section focuses on political science literature to discuss the public's political trust in and satisfaction with democracy. The third section describes the data, measurement of key variables, and methods. The fourth section reports on the regression results of political trust and satisfaction with democracy. Finally, the article concludes by discussing the implications that can be drawn from the analysis.

GOVERNANCE CRISIS IN VENEZUELA

An important question in Venezuelan politics has been the classification of its political institutions, especially since the election of Hugo Chávez in 1998 (Mainwaring, 2012). The Venezuelan constitution, crafted in 1999, basically supported the principles of a liberal representative democracy. The leaders of the Bolivarian Revolution tried to expand the constitutional boundaries by adding some mechanisms of direct participation, such as recall referenda and civil initiatives in legislation, leading to a form of participatory democracy (Bull & Rosales, 2020). At the time of Chávez's 2006 reelection, the government's authoritarian ambitions became evident as it began frequently and seriously to challenge democratic rule; it punished opponents, persecuted and silenced media and activists, undermined the autonomy of key institutions, and indulged in numerous electoral irregularities (Bull & Rosales, 2020; Corrales, 2020; Hawkins, 2016; Levitsky & Loxton, 2013). During this time, consensus emerged among political scientists that Venezuela had evolved into a hybrid regime, with scholars classifying it as an “electoral autocracy” (Corrales, 2010) or “competitive authoritarianism” (Levitsky & Loxton, 2013; Mainwaring, 2012), describing a system with frequent elections but limited checks on power, where the political rulers have significantly swayed the playing field to their advantage (Levitsky & Way, 2002).

In the 2010s, Venezuela slid deeper into authoritarianism (Cameron, 2018; López Maya, 2016). In 2013, the election of Chavez's successor, Nicolás Maduro, was highly contested, with the beginning of his administration marked by mass protests (Cameron, 2018). Once he ascended to power, Maduro centralized his control over his political party, repressed and intimidated protestors, militarized the police, eliminated freedom of the press, and arrested political opponents (Gonzalez, 2019; Mijares & Rojas, 2018). In 2015, a key moment in

Venezuela's backsliding into autocracy took shape—the ruling party failed to win a supermajority in the National Assembly election. Maduro and his party refused to accept the election results. First, the Supreme Court challenged the outcomes of the election, and then Maduro called for a new, supra-constitutional National Constituent Assembly, which took on parliamentary functions (Cameron, 2018; Marsteintredet, 2020).

At that time, violence in Venezuela reached an all-time high. Lawlessness and mounting corruption safeguarded criminal enterprises (Escobari, 2019). Since the rule of law ensures due process and the protection of human rights, there is a clear connection between the criminal justice system and democracy (Karstedt & LaFree, 2006); Venezuela's inadequate law enforcement opened the door for vigilante groups such as the *colectivos*, who serve as a “parallel security structure” for the Bolivarian regime (Gonzalez, 2019, p. 42). These *colectivos*, armed and protected by the government, have as many as 100,000 members, some of whom have received training from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) (Gonzalez, 2019). Moreover, the lack of due process and the lawlessness fostered drug trafficking, offering fertile ground for the “Cartel de los Soles,” an organized trafficking group rumored to have political involvement (Galavís, 2020, p. 70). Most citizens do not have access to judges; they rarely see any progress in their complaints against abuse—a condition particularly true of those with a lower socioeconomic status (Galavís, 2020). Many have stopped filing official complaints, turning directly to gang members instead for temporary cease-fires (Galavís, 2020; Zubillaga et al., 2019). In this anomic state, disorder and violation of rights grew rampant, and abuse of power, impunity for rights violations, and inefficient public policy implementation undermined public order and the protection of citizen rights (Galavís, 2020).

Venezuela's recent economic trajectory has paralleled its crises of democracy and governance. The nation, with the largest known oil reserves in the world, has long been labeled a rentier economy (Hutt, 2016; Mommer, 1990). From 1940 to 1990, rent from the international exploitation of Venezuela's ground oil reserves became the country's main source of national capital accumulation. By 1990, oil was already its principal industry (as a productive activity) and an important source of rent (as a state-owned resource)—it was called ‘rentier capitalism’ (Mommer, 1990). Chavez's government leaned heavily on the rentier model, nationalizing oil, diminishing the country's productive capacity in the industry, and relying instead on royalties and tax burdens to generate national income (Bull & Rosales, 2020). Joint ventures and associations between the state-owned oil and gas company *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PDVSA)* and foreign investors became a crucial part of “the socialist model of rent distribution” (Rosales, 2018).

In the 2000s, increasing global oil prices ushered in cheap imports and a consumption boom in Venezuela. The high prices allowed the government to keep price and currency under control and to borrow extensively in the bond market and from allies (Bull & Rosales, 2020). Meanwhile, national oil production and productive capacity plummeted, and the country accrued debt (Bull & Rosales, 2020). This model of development left Venezuela vulnerable to what resource-curse theorists call the Dutch disease, where the rapid economic growth fueled by oil exports leads to inflows of foreign capital, which, in turn, diverts labor and capital away from other sectors (Cheatham & Labrador, 2021). A large body of research also suggests that reliance on rents, as opposed to taxation of domestic productive activities, can fuel corruption, nepotism, and authoritarian practices (Peters, 2019; Ross, 2015).

Chávez and his party used the economic boom to fund important social programs, the so-called “Bolivarian missions,” which promoted social welfare and access to food, education, and housing, among other goals (López Maya, 2016). Meanwhile, the management of Venezuela's economic and political institutions by a few political leaders with little accountability unleashed widespread corruption. Between 2007 and 2017, the misappropriation of public funds for the personal enrichment of political elites was estimated at US\$300 billion—a “systematic looting

of the state” (Ellis, 2017) perpetuated by the conversion of the state-owned PDVSA to a transnational investment company (Denis & Romero, 2020).

Against this backdrop, in 2013, a recession began to develop, with the country struggling with internal fuel subsidies and a distorted currency market (Bull & Rosales, 2020). Then, in 2014, global oil prices crumbled—from more than US\$100 per barrel in 2014, to less than US\$30 in 2016—and Venezuela's economy went into free fall (Cheatham & Labrador, 2021). The United States then escalated sanctions on the Maduro government, landing another blow to its rentier economy (Bull & Rosales, 2020). From 2013 to 2019, Venezuela's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) contracted by 62% (Cheatham & Labrador, 2021), and the nation succumbed to a 1 million percent inflation rate and a 96% poverty rate (Angelo, 2020).

From 2014 to 2020, the augmenting political and economic crisis left Venezuela suffering severe shortages of necessities such as food and medicines, which had dire consequences for the Venezuelans. Between January and May 2016, maternal mortality reached 130.7 deaths per 100,000 births (Human Rights Watch, 2016), and according to the Ministry of Health's reports, between 2012 and 2015, neonatal deaths rose a hundredfold (Escobari, 2019). Previously eradicated diseases, such as cholera and malaria, reemerged, and several hospitalized patients died due to a lack of basic medical supplies (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Food shortages hurt especially the lower-income Venezuelans who rely on price-controlled goods; they were no longer able to find basic food items in government stores (Human Rights Watch, 2016). The government's policy of sanctioning humanitarian aid organizations, human rights defenders, and nongovernmental groups that received external funding exacerbated the crisis (Human Rights Watch, 2019). By 2019, one-third of the country's residents were food insecure (World Food Program, 2020).

The shortages began to subside in 2020, but many people are still suffering. After Maduro's government decided to liberalize prices and import controls, Venezuelan entrepreneurs were allowed to buy goods directly from abroad and sell them in Venezuelan stores without paying import tariffs (Morales, 2022). The government also largely gave up its restrictions on the US dollar, leading to an influx of this currency into the country, a phenomenon known as the dollarization of the economy (Oliveros, 2021). These shifts in policy have had a stabilizing effect on economic contraction and inflation (Newman, 2022). Although Venezuelans can now find stores stocked with food, medicine, and other essential products, they are still unable to afford them on a minimum-wage salary (Morales, 2022). Moreover, dramatic cuts in government spending have depleted public services and deepened inequality (Oliveros, 2021).

POLITICAL TRUST AND SATISFACTION WITH DEMOCRACY

Political scientists have long studied political trust, which refers to citizens' trust in major government institutions and officials (Lee & Yi, 2018; Liu & Stolle, 2017; Newton & Norris, 2000). It indicates “diffuse political support in the public” or “the public's normative commitments” to values linked to governing activities and the effective functioning of political institutions (Mishler & Rose, 2005, p. 1051). Citizens' trust is critical to the survival of regimes, especially democratic regimes, which rely heavily on popular support, although political trust also exists in non-democracies. Moreover, political trust is important to enhance government legitimacy and effectiveness (Mishler & Rose, 2005). All forms of government require a minimum level of political trust for legitimacy and functioning. Low-level political trust is linked to citizens' negative evaluation of government performance, such as governments' responses to widespread corruption, high crime rates, high inflation or unemployment, defeat in war, or natural disasters (Lee, 2020; Liu & Stolle, 2017; Mishler & Rose, 2001; Newton, 2001).

In a nondemocratic or semidemocratic system, where regime transformation has no clear direction, people's evaluation of their current regime's performance is closely related to their political trust and support for democratic values (Mishler & Rose, 2005). For example, in Russia, people's political trust encourages political involvement and contributes to public support for democratic ideals (Mishler & Rose, 2005). In China, citizens' evaluations of the regime's ability to solve social and economic problems and provide public goods are directly linked to their trust in political institutions (Lee, 2021; Yang & Zhao, 2015). Whether such a high level of political trust leads to the Chinese public's support for democratic values lacks sufficient evidence. The extremely high level of political trust in China may have also contributed to the Chinese people's satisfaction with their current authoritarian system, but this point requires further research.

Building on these studies and the discussion in the previous two sections, this study aims to contribute to the literature by identifying the relationships between Venezuelans' evaluation of government performance, trust in the national government, and their level of satisfaction with democracy. We undertook three important steps, (1) identify the most serious problems Venezuelans perceived the government should have solved; (2) test the statistical relationship between citizens' evaluations of such problems and their trust in the national government; and (3) assess whether their evaluations of the government are related to their satisfaction with the democratic system. This study hypothesizes that,

- H1:** *Venezuelans' perceptions of the serious problems in their country are negatively related to their trust in the government and satisfaction with democracy.*
- H0:** *Venezuelans' perceptions of the serious problems in their country are unrelated to their trust in government and satisfaction with democracy.*

DATA SOURCE, VARIABLES, AND METHOD

We used a survey data set published by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP, 2023) and sponsored by Vanderbilt University. The LAPOP conducted the *AméricasBarometer* 2016–2017 survey on democracy and government in 34 countries of the Americas, but this study focused only on respondents in Venezuela. The overall sample size for Venezuela was 1558, and the data was collected from October 3, 2016, to January 28, 2017, with the samples comprising one voting-age adult per household interviewed face to face in Spanish. The sample was stratified into eight geographical regions—Capital, Zuliana, Center-Occidental, Oriental, Los Llanos, Central, Guyana, and Andes—which were further substratified by municipality size and urban and rural areas within the municipalities. Of the total sample size, 1424 and 134 individuals were in urban and rural areas, respectively (LAPOP, 2023). To avoid multiple callbacks for missed units, the LAPOP used frequency matching to generate a sample with a similar distribution of demographic characteristics, namely age, and gender, to that of the national census or electoral registration lists. Finally, the LAPOP used handheld devices to improve the efficiency of data collection by eliminating errors, facilitating the ability to switch languages as needed, and auditing and tracking (LAPOP, 2023).

This research aims to determine whether citizens' evaluations of government performance are statistically associated with the overall trust in political institutions in Venezuela, and how political trust is related to their satisfaction with democracy in the country. It is important to note that this single-year survey analysis is not enough to show a longer-term causal relationship; the terms “dependent” and “independent” variables were only used to distinguish the variable types and not to infer any causal relationship between the variables. The first dependent variable is the overall level of trust in the government. A survey question asked, “To what extent do you respect the political institutions of Venezuela?” and the answers were measured on a scale from “1 = not at all” to “7 = highly.” Venezuelans' satisfaction with their democracy was also used as a dependent variable. Another survey question asked, “Are you

very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied with the overall democracy functions in Venezuela?" The respondents were asked to choose from "1 = very dissatisfied," "2 = dissatisfied," "3 = satisfied," and "4 = very satisfied." These variables determined whether the respondents respected the overall sentiment of democracy in their country.

The selected independent variables are the three most serious problems in Venezuela. From 40 suggested answers, the respondents were asked to select the issue they perceived to be the most serious problem in Venezuela, and three problems stood out (see Table 1)—shortages of food and other necessities (38.2%), economic crisis (37.6%), and crime and violence (7.9%). Additionally, as Table 1 shows, less than 50 respondents selected politicians, bad government, inflation, high prices, corruption, health services, and unemployment. The issues selected by fewer than 10 respondents are not listed in the table. For the three most serious problems, individuals who selected the problem as the most serious one facing the country were coded 1, otherwise, 0.

For the control variables, urbanization was measured on a scale from 1 to 5:—"1 = rural," "2 = small city," "3 = medium city," "4 = large city," and "5 = national capital" (metropolitan area). The respondents' gender was assigned a unit of 1 for males and 2 for females, and age was measured as it was. Their household income was determined as—(1) "not enough for you, and you are stretched;" (2) enough only for you, so that you do not have major problems;" and (3) "enough for you, and you can save from it." To deal with racial differences, the survey distinguished nine racial categories, but to simplify the analysis, we recoded them as Morena, White, Mestizo, and others (reference group). Finally, victimization experience was measured as 1, and as 0, otherwise. Table 2 summarizes all the variables.

For regression analysis, the ordinary least squares method was used for all models. To detect any multicollinearity problems, the models were tested for the variance inflation factors, all of which were below 3.0, an acceptable value in most social science studies.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

First, a regression model was created for trust in government as the dependent variable (see Table 3). The coefficients are unstandardized and represent the amount of change in a dependent variable per unit change in an independent variable. The numbers in parentheses are the standard errors clustered by urbanization. As the results show, the shortages variable was

TABLE 1 The most serious problems in Venezuela.

Problems	Frequency	Percentage
Shortages, lack of food and necessities	596	38.2
Economy, problems with, crisis of	586	37.6
Crime and violence	123	7.9
Politicians	36	2.3
Bad government	29	1.8
Inflation and high prices	29	1.8
Corruption	19	1.2
Health service, lack of	10	0.6
Unemployment	10	0.6

(The rest of the suggested problems are not listed)

Source: Authors' elaboration, based on LAPOP (2023).

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics.

	<i>N</i>	Mean	Standard deviation	Maximum	Minimum
Satisfaction with democracy	1491	2.063	0.854	1	4
Trust in government	1512	4.353	2.158	1	7
Shortages	1542	0.385	0.487	0	1
Economic crisis	1542	0.380	0.486	0	1
Crime and violence	1542	0.079	0.271	0	1
Urbanization	1558	3.171	1.144	1	5
Gender	1558	1.503	0.500	1	2
Age	1558	40.33	15.635	18	90
Education	1540	11.16	4.006	0	18
Economic status	1541	1.801	0.787	1	4
Race	1558				
Morena	700			0	1
White	463			0	1
Mestizo	241			0	1
Others	154			0	1
Experience of victimization	1554	0.404	0.491	0	1

Source: Authors' elaboration, based on LAPOP (2023).

found to be negatively associated with trust in the government and is statistically significant ($b = -.322, p < .05$). The coefficient for the economic crisis was also negative, although not statistically significant. The crime and violence variable was negative as well, but the relationship is weak ($b = -.470, p < .10$). These results only partially support the hypothesis that Venezuelans' evaluation of government performance is negatively related to their trust in government.

Among the demographic variables, urbanization showed a strong negative relationship with trust in government ($b = -.211, p < .001$), meaning urban residents tended to have lower levels of trust in government. Gender was also a significant factor, with female respondents displaying higher trust in government than males ($b = .182, p < .01$). Moreover, the older respondents showed a slightly lower level of political trust than younger respondents ($b = -.004, p < .05$), which is statistically significant. Political trust tended to be low with higher levels of education, with statistical significance ($b = -.071, p < .01$). Household income was found to be positively related to trust in government ($b = .149, p < .10$). Among the race variables, white respondents tended to have lower trust in government, although the relationship was weak ($b = .324, p < .10$). Among the racial groups, only the white category showed a weak negative coefficient, and the Morena and Mestizo categories did not show a statistically significant relationship with trust in government. Finally, the respondents with victimization experiences tended to have significantly lower levels of trust in their government ($b = -.224, p < .01$).

As the next step, another regression model was created to show how political trust and social problems are statistically associated with people's satisfaction with democracy in

TABLE 3 Regression performed on trust in government regarding three-most-serious problems in Venezuela.

	Trust in government
Shortages	-0.322** (0.135)
Economic crisis	-0.093 (0.211)
Crime and violence	-0.470* (0.281)
Urbanization	-0.211*** (0.023)
Gender	0.182*** (0.068)
Age	-0.004** (0.002)
Education	-0.071*** (0.023)
Household income	0.149* (0.078)
Race (reference group: others)	
Morena	0.147 (0.184)
White	-0.324* (0.185)
Mestizo	-0.121 (0.220)
Victimization	-0.224*** (0.073)
Constant	5.784*** (0.407)
Observations	1463
R^2	0.051
Adjusted R^2	0.043
Residual standard error	2.107 ($df=1450$)
F -statistic	6.538*** ($df=12:1450$)

Note: * $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

Source: Authors' elaboration, based on LAPOP (2023).

Venezuela (see Table 4). Trust in government was found to have a significant positive relationship with satisfaction in democracy ($b = .088$, $p < .01$), indicating that the Venezuelans who trust the government tend to have more hope for democracy in Venezuela and vice versa. Yet, the three-most-serious problems people perceived to be affecting Venezuela did not show a significant relationship with their satisfaction with democracy. This result, together with the results reported in Table 3, means that people may not directly associate social and economic problems with democracy in Venezuela; still, these problems may reduce their trust in government, resulting in decreased satisfaction with democracy.

Of the demographic variables, gender, age, education, household income, and victimization showed a meaningful relationship. Older respondents reported higher levels of satisfaction with democracy ($b = .005$, $p < .01$), as did high-income respondents ($b = .123$, $p < .01$), whereas lower levels of satisfaction were found among female respondents ($b = -.092$, $p < .10$), highly educated respondents ($b = .019$, $p < .01$), and those with victimization experiences ($b = -.113$, $p < .001$).

In both tables, the F -statistic values confirm the quality of both models, whereas the low R^2 values indicate that the variables in this model cannot adequately explain all the variations in political trust and satisfaction with democracy. This result, a limitation of this study, demands further investigation.

TABLE 4 Regression performed on satisfaction with democracy regarding trust in government and three-most-serious problems in Venezuela.

	Satisfaction with democracy
Trust in government	0.088*** (0.007)
Shortages	-0.057 (0.045)
Economic crisis	-0.041 (0.053)
Crime and violence	-0.087 (0.066)
Urbanization	-0.011 (0.009)
Gender	-0.092* (0.053)
Age	0.005*** (0.001)
Education	-0.019*** (0.002)
Household Income	0.123*** (0.035)
Race (reference group: others)	
Morena	-0.057 (0.131)
White	-0.105 (0.158)
Mestizo	-0.061 (0.134)
Victimization	-0.113*** (0.046)
Constant	1.785*** (0.098)
Observations	1,416
R^2	0.104
Adjusted R^2	0.096
Residual standard error	0.808 ($df = 1402$)
F -statistic	12.552*** ($df = 13: 1402$)

Note: * $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

Source: Authors' elaboration, based on LAPOP (2023).

DISCUSSION

This study set out to answer two questions—what do Venezuelan citizens perceive as the most serious problems in their country; and what is the statistical relationship between these problems and citizens' trust in the national government and satisfaction with democracy? By analyzing the national survey, we found that, between 2016 and 2017, Venezuelans were mainly concerned with shortages of necessities, economic crisis, and crimes. Meanwhile, the three problems the Venezuelans perceived to be most serious showed a different relationship with their trust in the government. The acute social problems—concerns over shortages of food and other necessities—were found to have a stronger negative relationship with people's trust in government than the longer-term economic crisis and crime and violence, which only a relatively small number of people chose in the survey.

This result invites further studies because, as previously discussed, the shortages began to subside in 2020, after Maduro's government decided to liberalize prices and import controls,

allowing Venezuelan entrepreneurs to buy goods directly from abroad and sell them in Venezuelan stores without paying import tariffs (Morales, 2022). If these shifts in policy have had a stabilizing effect on economic contraction and inflation, the results in 2020 would be different. It would be interesting to examine how people's perceptions of trust and satisfaction change if the government were able to resolve the immediate concerns of shortages and crime. Although this study only offers a snapshot in a rapidly changing Venezuela, its results indicate that citizens' perception of their government's performance has a bearing on their trust in government institutions. We certainly cannot attribute all social and economic problems to government institutions, but the provision of public goods and services—including the assurance of basic necessities and the maintenance of law and order—are central functions of the national government and, therefore, a reasonable measure of government performance. Conversely, concerns over the economic crisis had a considerably smaller and statistically insignificant correlation with people's trust in the government, which may be due to the protracted nature of the crisis that could have led to dissociation in the people's evaluation of the government's performance.

The hypothesis of this study was only partially accepted—the three-most-serious problems did not show a significant association with people's satisfaction with democracy, indicating that Venezuelans do not directly associate their government's performance with democracy in general; yet the government's performance was indirectly related to democracy through trust in the government, which is strongly associated with satisfaction with democracy in Venezuela. Although this study was not designed to test the mediation effect of trust in government, people's poor evaluation of their government's performance may be related to their low support for democracy through their low trust in government. Future studies can further investigate this relationship. The positive relationship between trust in the government and satisfaction with democracy is consistent with a previous study on Russia, where people's political trust encouraged political involvement and contributed to public support for democratic ideals (Mishler & Rose, 2005).

The results of the demographic variables were informative. The fact that younger Venezuelans showed a lower level of satisfaction with democracy is concerning. The older generation may have experienced a well-functioning democracy in the past, but the recent political situation may have lost the younger generation's hope for democracy in the country. Further, highly educated people consistently showed low levels of trust in their government and satisfaction with democracy in the country. The current political and economic situations in Venezuela do not meet their expectations, a result that contrasts with that of household income—high-income respondents consistently showed higher trust in their government and higher levels of satisfaction with democracy in Venezuela, indicating that the affluent members of society tend to believe in the current system. Finally, in addition to social problems, people's victimization experiences lower significantly their trust in government and satisfaction with democracy, a finding that supports the negative effect of crime and violence on people's trust in government.

CONCLUSION


This research was designed to identify Venezuelans' perceived concerns about their society and to demonstrate how these concerns are statistically associated with their trust in government and their satisfaction with democracy. A recent and emergent problem—shortages—was found to be more closely related to people's trust in government than a long-standing problem—economic crises—irrespective of their seriousness. Furthermore, although the serious problems did not directly affect people's democratic values, their reduced trust in government could lower their satisfaction with democracy. As already mentioned, a single-year data set is

insufficient to establish a causal mechanism, so this study does not claim any causal inference or attempt to explain Venezuelan politics, which is constantly changing. Still, a snapshot of the 2016–2017 crisis can potentially contribute to our knowledge of how Venezuelans associate their problems with political institutions and allow us to compare it with the problems faced by people in other countries. Future studies can extend this research using a recent data set—especially after the shortage situation became relieved—or a multiple-year data set to show the longer-term causal effects. Moreover, conducting more comparative studies with other countries mired in political and economic crises can further the understanding of this relationship.

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