Hugo Chávez is one of the more controversial figures in Latin American politics. He holds this title because of the adoration his supporters had for him, and the condemnation the opposition demonstrated from his time in power. However, if one thing can be certain about Chávez’s time spent as President of Venezuela, it is that his impact was significant in his fourteen years in power. Nevertheless, once the discourse turns to the democratic nature of his regime, there is a split in the analysis. Many scholars, such as Greg Grandin, believe that Venezuela under Chávez was the epitome of a democratic country, while those in opposition tend to believe that he was an authoritarian ruler, or one that did not embody “the most democratic country in the Western Hemisphere.”

In order to adequately address the topic at hand, we must first find a definition of democracy that can be operationalized. In his work entitled *How Patriotic is the Patriot Act?: freedom versus security in the age of terrorism*, Amitai Etzioni has a definition of democracy that can apply to more than just the topic of surveillance he discusses in his book. The definition is as follows:

Democracy … is … a polity in which there are regular, institutionalized changes in power, in line with the preferences of the people freely expressed. It entails a whole fabric of institutions: two or more political parties, some measure of checks and balances among the various branches of the government (although, of course, these may differ from the U.S. setup), courts that effectively protect individual rights, and a free press.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Etzioni also makes an important distinction that is often missed in the discussion of democracies. In his book, he compares democracy to a plant. He says that democracy is very difficult to take root, especially in places where it is not a “naturally” found root, but after it begins to take form and finally blossom, “it tends to withstand numerous challenges well and is rarely lost.”[[2]](#footnote-2) If one thing is certain in today’s Venezuela, democracy is certainly not prevalent. Therefore, if we proceed with Etzioni’s thought process, then either Venezuela was never a firmly rooted democracy, or it is an exceptional case in which democracy was firmly rooted but proceeded to be uprooted. I would argue that the former is true, and thus the claim made by Greg Grandin that Chávez left behind “the most democratic country in the Western Hemisphere” cannot be correct. This essay will accordingly further explain why Venezuela was never the democracy that Grandin thought existed.

Before we analyze why Venezuela was not a strong democracy as Grandin recognizes, it is first imperative to understand why there exists a notion that it was one. Greg Grandin, in his article “On the Legacy of Hugo Chávez”, pushes back on much of the criticism that is attributed to Chávez, primarily his image as an authoritarian leader. If one fact must be conceded to, it is that Chávez was adored by the Venezuelan public. As Grandin articulates, “Chávez has submitted himself and his agenda to fourteen national votes, winning thirteen of them by large margins, in polling deemed by Jimmy Carter to be ‘best in the world’ out of the ninety-two elections that he has monitored.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Additionally, after the idea that Venezuela is the most democratic western country was mentioned in the article, Grandin turned to the attitudes of Chávez’s supporters. He writes, “One study found that organized Chavistas held to ‘liberal conceptions of democracy and held pluralistic norms,’ believed in peaceful methods of conflict resolution and worked to ensure that their organizations functioned with high levels of ‘horizontal or non-hierarchical’ democracy.”[[4]](#footnote-4) As evidenced through these examples, Chávez and his supporters held fundamentally liberal and democratic ideals, but is that enough to say that Venezuela was the most democratic country in the Western Hemisphere?

When the freedom of the press is discussed, we can turn to Robert Samet’s work entitled *The Denouncers: Populism and the Press in Venezuela*. Samet writes, “Among Venezuelan journalists it is widely acknowledged that the private press played a key role in the return of populism. The antagonism that would later put Chávez and the press on opposite sides of the political divide has effectively concealed their historic entanglement.”[[5]](#footnote-5) An interesting clarification to make in regard to this quote is that the press is spoken of as a collective, therefore indicating that the majority of the press found itself at odds with Chávez and his regime. Another important clarification to make is that in order to have an opposition present in the press, there would require at least some tolerance from the government awarded to the press. Following this logic there then must exist freedoms guaranteed to the press, Indeed in the Venezuelan Constitution, freedom awarded to the press is guaranteed. Article 57 in the constitution states that “Everyone has the right to freely express his or her thoughts, ideas or opinions orally, in writing or by any other form of expression, and to use for such purpose any means of communication and diffusion, and no censorship shall be established.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Therefore, a free press does, and did exist in Venezuela, or that is what the Constitution will lead one to believe, despite the actual actions taken by Chávez while in power.

Another reason why scholars argue that the Chávez regime was one that encapsulated democratic values and furthered democracy rather than hindered it, is because of the policies Chávez implemented in the efforts to reduce inequality. These scholars would argue that under Chávez rule, it seemed as though Venezuela had found a viable alternative to the neoliberal ideology present in Latin America. With the exponential growth of Venezuelan GDP due to their export of oil, Chávez was able to take control of the economy and use those resources to fund his policies. The most notable of these policies is the redistribution of both wealth and land.[[7]](#footnote-7) Another ideal that Chávez turned into policy was the democratization of economic activity, which he accomplished through both the creation of cooperatives and workplace self-management.[[8]](#footnote-8) Additionally, in his time as president both inflation and unemployment dropped. Grandin brings another element into the policies and program that Chávez laid out as president, the United States of America. Grandin writes that he set out “on an ambitious program of domestic and international transformation: massive social spending at home and ‘poly-polar equilibrium’ abroad, a riff on what Bolívar once called ‘universal equilibrium,’ an effort to break up the US’s historic monopoly of power in Latin America and force Washington to compete for influence.”[[9]](#footnote-9) This bold initiative taken by Chávez allowed him to garner overwhelming support, as he provided a spark to a country that had continued with the status quo for decades.

Now that the arguments that are adopted by pro-Chávez scholars have been outlined, this essay will turn to pointing out why the aforementioned arguments do not explain that Venezuela was the most democratic country in the Western Hemisphere. As previously mentioned, Chávez was well-liked by Venezuelans as evidenced through his fourteen national votes, of which he won thirteen. This point must be conceded, as he consistently garnered national support and approval from Venezuelans. However, his popularity provided him the opportunity to institute radical change with minimal repercussions. Essentially, the argument is that Chávez was a populist leader that ran into similar problems that many populist leaders run into. This problem is outlined in Matthew Rhodes-Purdy’s work, *Participatory Populism: Theory and Evidence from Bolivarian Venezuela*. He writes that “populists cannot afford to diminish their own authority… If they concede too much power, they risk fracturing the cohesion of their movements and thus threaten their political survival; if they concede too little, the masses will lose faith in their promises and the regime will lose its legitimacy.”[[10]](#footnote-10) As previously mentioned, Chávez was no exception. This is exemplified through concession that Grandin makes. He writes that under Chávez’s rule the manifestation of “governing without accountability, marginalizing the opposition, appointing partisan supporters to the judiciary, dominating labor unions, professional organizations and civil society, corruption and using oil revenue to dispense patronage”[[11]](#footnote-11) persisted. The conditions for democracy do not solely consist of free and fair elections, but it also deals with the proper operation and functioning of a government, where abuses of power do not exist. Thus, these examples are some of the many that demonstrate why Chávez did not leave behind a democracy that would leave other westernized countries envious.

When analyzing the argument taken by scholars on the issue of the free press, a response is warranted. They claim that a free press does exist, in which it very clearly does not. As Javier Corrales and Michael Penfold write in *Venezuela: Crowding Out the Opposition*, by 2005 “Chávez has achieved complete control of all check-and-balance institutions, including the unicameral National Assembly, which … contains not a single opposition legislator.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Is it a coincidence that at the same time, freedoms afforded to the press were greatly curtailed? This increase in power allowed Chávez to take control of the media. When he won the election in 1998, 12% of the channels were controlled by the national government, that number shot up to 54% by 2014.[[13]](#footnote-13) In addition, Human Rights Watch stated that, “the leadership of President Chávez and now President Maduro, the accumulation of power in the executive branch and the erosion of human rights guarantees have enabled the government to intimidate, censor, and prosecute its critics.”[[14]](#footnote-14) As is common for most ideals in Venezuela, the democratic ideal does exist that would allow for free press, but the realpolitik is a different story.

We must also respond to the idea that the policies Chávez implemented makes his government one that was democratic. It is important to note that none of the success of these policies and the state of the economy during his presidency would not have been possible if not for the sole export of oil. This leads us to question the sustainability of such reforms. As Dick Parker writes in his work *Chávez and the Search for an Alternative to Neoliberalism*, “Karl (1999) has convincingly demonstrated that oil rent has perverted the very basis of the social and political texture of the nation. What is clear, however, is that an eventual failure will lead to a forceful return to neoliberal formulas.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Can we then claim that this alternative Chávez has found through oil wealth is not only sustainable, but one that can support democracy in the future? The thesis presented at the beginning of this analysis would argue no. Having such a volatile foundation for policies can make such implementation seem brilliant and infallible, but once the oil prices drop, funding the programs will be near impossible. Of course, this has happened in Venezuela and now there is a human rights crisis that has the rest of the Western Hemisphere worried. This is a common problem for rentier states, and Venezuela is once again no exception.

Before this analysis is concluded, one clarification must be made. That clarification being: I am not placing any blame on Hugo Chávez for ruining democracy in Venezuela. Instead I am making the case that if we follow Etzioni’s theory, democracy was never firmly rooted in Venezuela. Under Chávez, democracy was in the process of being uprooted as it was nearing the end of its “life” so to speak, and now, under Maduro, the plant has been firmly taken out of the ground. The weak institutions of democracy in Venezuela have led to the exacerbation and exploitation of the problems that faced Venezuelan democracy. Many scholars were fooled by the decades of “strong” democracy. As Grandin points out, “Samuel Huntington praised Venezuela as an example of ‘successful democratization,’ while another political scientist … said it represented the ‘only trail to a democratic future for developing societies … a textbook case of step-by-step progress.” Upon further review, they were incorrect.

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