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Weak party institutionalization and the dynamics of political dialogue

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Abstract

Just as brand labels provide information to the consumers as to what they can expect from a particular business informative party labels provide information to citizens about the policies a party will pursue if elected. However, even though the influence of party institutionalization for different aspects of the political process has been widely studied the effect it has on the dynamics of political dialogue has been largely ignored. How parties and politicians decide the issues to be raised, and whether or not to respond to opponents, is an essential part of the democratic process. It provides competing interpretation of issues that informs the electorate as to parties' positions. This paper addresses this gap in the literature by studying how in weakly institutionalized party systems the failure of parties to disclose consistent programmatic messages affects their ability to gain advantage over issues and dramatically changes how we understand political dialogue. By using novel techniques of content analyses I studied over 14,000 op-ed articles by 230 Venezuelan politicians from 1996 to 2007. The results indicate that in weakly institutionalized party systems, dialogue is prevalent, issue advantage is unlikely and issue salience is irrelevant.

Keywords— Political Dialogue, Issues, Party Institutionalization, Venezuela, Text analysis

Brand labels provide information to the consumers as to what they can expect from a particular business. Seeing the sign of a McDonald's, Starbucks, Pizza Hut, or Apple, for instance, provides valuable information as to the products and their quality. Just as businesses aim to maintain the value of their labels so do political parties. Informative party labels facilitate citizen's evaluations of parties, policies, and effectiveness. When these labels are absent, however, we -the citizens or consumers- don't know what to expect and the businesses/parties don't know what they should offer.

The selective discussion of issues by politicians has so far relied on the informative value of party labels. As a consequence political scientists have generated models and theories explaining and predicting the behavior of politicians. Given the importance of issue discussions in campaign dynamics this research has focused itself in understanding whether politicians of different political parties respond to each other. By doing so, it is argued, politicians dialogue.

Dialogue is considered an essential ingredient of the democratic process (Bessette 1994, 1996; Kelley 1960; Dryzek and Braithwaite 2000; Habermas 1996). Dialogue between political opponents relays information that enhances democratic accountability. Politicians that need to communicate consistent ideological messages to voters are at the center of the responsible party government model. More importantly, however, politicians desire to inform voters about the ideological location of their party on issues and policies (APSA 1950; Page 1978; Schattschneider 1960).

Research on political dialogue shows that politicians selectively choose the issues on which they talk based on how citizens evaluate the party's performance on these issues as well as on the level of importance or salience of the issue among the public (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Kaplan et al. 2006; Sigelman and Buell 2004; Simon 2002; Xenos and Foot 2005). These findings are based on the existence of informative party labels that develop in the context of highly institutionalized party systems, where party organizations

are solidified (Panebianco 1988) and parties become “well established and widely known” (Mainwaring and Torcal 2006,206). These associated reputations, that inform citizens about the likely stance of politicians on issues, make parties “reliable” and “responsible” (Downs 1957,105).

Although party institutionalization may facilitate voters’ ability to develop expectations about party performance, thereby allowing for the creation of issue associated reputations, its direct impact on political dialogue has not been studied. Therefore, a key factor influencing politicians’ decisions to dialogue (*talk-to-each-other*) or to not engage in dialogue (*talk-past-each-other*) has been omitted. This article seeks to fill this gap in the literature by examining the impact of the level of party institutionalization on political dialogue within the context of weakly institutionalized party systems where voters lack the resources to assess performance and parties lack the resources to establish a track record that will enable them to have issue advantage.

This article’s main argument is that in these weakly institutionalized environments the dynamics of political dialogue will be different from a highly institutionalized setting which in turn impacts the decision to engage in dialogue. Given the low value of party labels in weakly institutionalized party settings, advantage over issues will be harder to obtain. Furthermore, it is assumed that lack of information, and weak issue advantage, leads to political debate dominated by the relative salience of issues. As a consequence politicians should have greater incentives to talk-to-each-other (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Petrocik 1996). This, however, is not the case either for weakly institutionalized party settings. Because of the low association between parties and issues politicians face no punishment for ignoring salient issues. As such, in weakly institutionalized settings, dialogue will be prevalent across the board and will not be affected by parties’ advantage on issues or by the salience of an issue.

By examining the impact of party institutionalization on political dialogue in this

context, this study represents a significant departure from existing research. First, in terms of the effect weakly institutionalized parties have on political dialogue, I argue that a minimal level of party institutionalization is a necessary component for any model of strategic dialogue. Second, the study of political dialogue has traditionally been restricted to the campaign setting (Kaplan et al. 2006; Sides 2006; Sigelman and Buell 2004; Simon 2002; Smidt 2007). Such settings are restricted in time and in the pace of interactions.¹ This study moves beyond that context and includes over 11 years of continuous data to test the dynamics of political dialogue in campaign and non-campaign periods.

Normatively speaking, this study shows that excess of political dialogue does not necessarily improve the democratic process. In contrast, it limits the issues under discussion and promotes the shadowing of policy issues by process issues such as corruption and elections. Furthermore, the lack of effect of issue salience further highlights the disconnect between parties and citizens. Hence this study highlights the need for a minimum degree of party institutionalization for the existence of variations in the degrees of political dialogue and the range of issues covered.

This article will be organized as follows. The next section describes how the lack of high party institutionalization affects the dynamics of political dialogue due to the absence of a direct understanding of party labels by citizens. The third section details the case and data used for this study and the fourth section presents the methods of analysis and results. The fifth section concludes highlighting the need for further studies that analyze the effect of party institutionalization of political dialogue.

¹While political dialogue during campaign periods provides information that allows voters to learn about the candidates and their positions on the issues (Popkin 1991), research has found that what happens between elections is as or even more important than campaigns in changing the dispositions of citizenry (Berelson et al. 1954; Lazarsfeld et al. 1948). For example, in their study of the 1936 and 1940 U.S. Elections, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet(1948) found that “Erie County in 1940, changes in vote intention during the campaign were much fewer than changes in vote intention during the preceding three-and-a-half years” (102). As such, political dialogue needs to be understood not only in the campaign setting but also outside of it.

Political Dialogue and Party Institutionalization

Political Dialogue² requires one politician to raise an issue to which a second politician responds (Simon 2002). This exchange is important not only because it relays information to voters but also because it is done with the purposeful intention of providing a competing interpretation of issues and policies. Politicians that *talk-to-each-other*, therefore, are those that respond to a prior message and discuss the same issue or issues. Politicians that communicate after a message from a political opponent but do not do so on the same issue are presumed to *talk-past-each-other* and, therefore, not to engage in dialogue.

So far a common thread between the political dialogue theories is the unstated but shared assumption that the party environment consists of highly institutionalized parties. These systems are commonly found in the OECD countries that have been the main focus of studies in political dialogue (Abbe et al. 2003; Belanger and Meguid 2008; Green and Hobolt 2008; Kaplan et al. 2006; Parker 2007; Petrocik 1996; Petrocik et al. 2003; Schmidt 2008; Sellers 1998; Sides 2006; Sigelman and Buell 2004; Simon 2002; Smidt 2007; van der Brug 2004). The parties in these countries have acquired both brand value and stability, and thus are considered to be highly institutionalized (Huntington 1968; Randall and Svassand 2002).

Current research has made two opposing predictions about these highly institutionalized settings. The first is that politicians shirk from dialogue because they perceive no benefit from talking on issues that are *prima facie* “owned” by their opponents (Abbe et al. 2003; Petrocik 1996; Petrocik et al. 2003; Riker 1986; Sellers 1998; Simon 2002; Vavreck 2009). The second prediction is that they constantly dialogue with opponents in an attempt to appear responsive to citizens’ preferences (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Sides 2006; Sigelman and Buell 2004; Smidt 2007). These two strains of thought

²For the purposes of this article politicians of the same political party are not considered to engage in dialogue with each other. While intra party dialogue could be a source for theories of dialogue in party elections this falls outside the scope of this work.

guide most research in this field, with new research focused on weakening the strong assumptions underlying these models.³ These newer studies, however, still assume as a given that parties are highly institutionalized.

Institutionalized parties serve many purposes including helping their members win elections by sharing organizational resources. In exchange for these resources obtained from the party, politicians invest resources of their own and their reputations to maintain the brand value of their parties (Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005; Scarrow 2010). The meaningful labels that ultimately result from this trade establish party issue positions that help voters reduce their information costs and make informed choices (Conover and Feldman 1982; Converse 1975; Cox and McCubbins 2005; Downs 1957; Feldman and Conover 1983; Shively 1979).

However, these cues are obscured in weakly institutionalized systems where there are high levels of electoral volatility and weak party organizations (Jones 2007; Mainwaring 1999; Mainwaring and Torcal 2006).⁴ Political dynamics in weakly institutionalized party settings are different in other ways as well. When parties are not institutionalized, personalistic politics prevails over programmatic appeals and as a consequence voters have difficulty identifying between party labels (Jones 2007; Mainwaring 1998; Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Mainwaring and Torcal 2006; Mainwaring and Zoco 2007). When party labels have no meaning citizens have a hard time differentiating between competing options. The absence of meaningful party labels also impacts politicians because the nonexistence of these cues affects how politicians choose the issues on which they talk. These consequences clarify why it is important to understand how the level of

³Among this other research we find arguments for candidates trespassing on issues where ownership is weak (Arceneaux 2008); politicians obfuscating issues to lessen the impact of hurtful issues (Alvarez 1997; Sides 2006); elected officials uptaking opponents campaign issues (Sulkin 2005); and those candidates facing close races engaging in more dialogue (Kaplan et al. 2006).

⁴Weakly institutionalized parties have fragile roots in society, do not have a strong role in recruitment of new members, and lack the structures for internal organization and the resources for supporting party members in their elections (Jones 2007; Mainwaring 1999; Mainwaring and Torcal 2006; Panebianco 1988).

party institutionalization affects the dynamics of political dialogue.

Even though weakly institutionalized party settings influence voters and politicians the current approach to the study of political dialogue takes as a given the existence of institutionalized parties that citizens can identify. This assumption obscures the impact that varying levels of party institutionalization have on political dialogue and is of no use in countries where parties are not viable mechanisms for differentiation among politicians. If we consider that most countries lack an institutionalized party system (i.e. most developing countries), the need for understanding dialogue in relationship with the level of institutionalization of the parties becomes clear.

The lack of incentive to maintain (or increase) the value of the party label in weakly institutionalized parties creates a situation where: 1) the bag of beneficial issues on which to talk is empty leaving politicians with no cue as to what to talk about; 2) due to the high level of volatility and party switching, politicians have no incentive to create a long-term association between party and issues. As a consequence of these two dynamics parties will fail to gain advantage over issues which, in a cyclical way, reinforces politicians behavior.

In this environment where parties lack the aid of having advantaged issues it would be presumed that politicians would target those issues with which the citizenry is more concerned. This expectation, however, would require politicians to do long term planning and, due to the dynamic previously described, politicians will avoid this road.

As a consequence of these dynamics where politician's parties have no advantaged issues and politicians have no incentives to create these advantages, politicians have no choice but to respond to the day-to-day events. By responding to daily events politicians can appear responsive. Furthermore it allows a continued discussion with opponents creating differences, even if not programmatic. The consequence of these dynamics is that dialogue will prevail.

This article argues that in the presence of weak party institutionalization, issue

advantage is reduced and political dialogue increases. This increase in dialogue will be due to the lack of cues that party labels provide citizens and politicians. When citizens are unable to understand party labels, politicians cannot use this information as a decision mechanism for which issues to advertise. As a consequence of this low-cue environment politicians will base their issue choices on a short term strategy of appearing responsive to the most current events.

To estimate the effect of weak party institutionalization on the dynamics of political dialogue this article asks the following questions:

1. Do weakly institutionalized party settings exhibit high probabilities of political dialogue?
2. Is there evidence that weakly institutionalized parties are advantaged on issues?
3. Does issue salience affect dialogue in weakly institutionalized settings?

Case and Data

This article studies how weak party institutionalization affects the dynamics of political dialogue. To carry out this study Venezuela has been chosen as the case to analyze. Venezuela has seen many changes over the last 20 years. These include a new constitution, new political actors, a new party system, and an increased rate of participation by the people (Lopez-Maya 2006). Increased citizen perceptions during the 1980's and 1990's of corruption by politicians, together with the poor economic situation and the strong hold of parties in the system and societal institutions led politicians to initiate political reform (Buxton 2001; Coppedge 1994). This reform, however, led to the denationalization and later deinstitutionalization of the party system (Lopez-Maya 2006; Molina and Alvarez 2004; Sagarzazu 2009a; Tarver and Frederick 2005). The crisis of the system allowed for

the presidency to be won by Hugo Chavez, an ex-soldier who was charged and jailed for trying to overthrow the government.

From 1996 to 2007⁵ Venezuelans also witnessed the minimization of traditional parties and the emergence of new parties and a new party system (Lopez-Maya 2006; Molina and Alvarez 2004; Morgan 2007; Sagarzazu 2009a; Seawright 2003). This current party system, however, lacks the high levels of institutionalization of its predecessor (Lopez-Maya 2006; Molina and Alvarez 2004). This deinstitutionalization is not only seen in the ease with which politicians desert their parties to form new “movements” but in the little knowledge citizens have of where parties stand on different issues.

The different events that affected the party system also affected the dynamics of political dialogue. During the institutionalized era, issue attention depended on the parties’ strengths and constituencies and policy and issue discussions abounded and were important components of the political dialogue (Bolívar 1992, 2001; Myers 1973).⁶ However, with party deinstitutionalization, political discussions in Venezuela changed to a setting where few issues were raised by the different candidates (Bolívar 1992, 2001; Lozada 1999). In this setting of weakly institutionalized parties, politicians and parties have struggled to create identities that are well perceived and understood by the electorate. In addition, the fact that Venezuelan parties devolved from an institutionalized setting to a weakly institutionalized setting allows for the testing of the hypothesis mentioned above regarding political dialogue, issue advantage, and issue salience. As such, Venezuela represents a good opportunity for the study of political dialogue in a democracy with weakly institutionalized parties.

⁵While it would be ideal to extend this period to the late 80’s data availability limits the earliest point to 1996.

⁶In this article the terms dialogue, debate, and discourse are used interchangeably to define political dialogue, this is done with the understanding that all discourse is dialogic in nature (Bakhtin 2004).

A new source of data for the study of dialogue

This article introduces a new source of data to the study of political dialogue: newspaper Op-Ed articles, written by politicians. Op-Ed articles provide an important insight into political dialogue. First, it is a written statement of a politician's thought at a particular point in time. By using articles written by the politicians themselves this study avoids the mediation and inherent bias of newspaper reporting that exist in early approaches by Petrocik (1996) and Sigelman and Buell (2004). These studies were affected by the fact that coverage of campaigns is naturally biased to the particular slant of the news agency printing it (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006; Kahn and Kenney 2002). Second, the more recent studies that use campaign advertisements as data sources (Kaplan et al. 2006) are limited by the nature and dynamics of campaign ads. The dynamics of advertisements constrain politicians from addressing different issues, in turn restricting the set of possible messages to those that can be more successful in a short time frame. In contrast, newspaper Op-Eds allow politicians to, within a limited number of words, address as little or as many issues as they like effectively removing the limit imposed by campaign advertisements. Third, because the data used for this study spans over an 11 year period it avoids the constraint imposed in studies of political dialogue that are limited to campaign settings. As a result, this dataset will allow for the testing of political dialogue theories in non-campaign settings. Fourth, the centralized and national nature of the media in Venezuela (Diaz Rangel 2007) allows politicians to communicate throughout the country with a single article in a national newspaper or a single television interview. Furthermore, as in the United States, Op-Eds are also carried in subsequent days by other regional newspapers, effectively spreading the reach of the message. Finally, in writing an Op-Ed article, a strategic politician will take into consideration, among other things, relevant current events, particular preferences of topic, and implications for a long term strategy of issue discussion. Given these characteristics and benefits Op-Ed articles prove

superior to any other data source used in previous studies of political dialogue.

It is important to highlight that while readership of newspapers, and more so readership of Op-Ed columns, is limited to a small proportion of the population, Op-Eds nonetheless provide the best avenue for politicians to publicize their positions on issues. New approaches to the study of dialogue have looked at alternatives to the traditional sources of information, such as senator's press releases (Grimmer 2010), or transcripts of speeches and debates (Vavreck 2009). However, these suffer the same drawback as Op-Ed articles. As a result, and considering the extent to which social networks help to disseminate political information (Baker et al. 2006), the limited readership of Op-Eds does not diminish the appropriateness of this data source for the study of political dialogue. In fact, Op-Ed articles can be an important source of political information, particularly those written by politicians. These Op-Ed articles are important because, although they are one-sided arguments they are written to contrast the author's opinions against those of their opponents (Alvarado 1990). Beyond the importance of the Op-Ed as a part of a broader message war between politicians, Op-Ed's provide a venue for politicians to convey a message without media interference. An Op-Ed article will highlight the issue, or issues, that the politician considers most important to convey to the electorate.

Data

For the purpose of studying dialogue in a weakly institutionalized party system, I have collected over 11 years of Op-Ed articles from Venezuela's main newspapers: "El Universal", "El Nacional", and "Últimas Noticias" (ANDA-FEVAP 2004, 2005, 2006). This period starts in 1996, when President Caldera entered the second half of his mandate, to 2007, when President Chavez lost his first election. While the Op-Eds collected cover the entire time frame and all the important actors there is one key politician not included, President Chavez. Since taking office, President Chavez has understood the need for

a clear and effective communications strategy. For this purpose he has used different mechanisms, the most successful of which is his weekly television show, *Aló Presidente*. Having this concern in mind this program was included in the sample as well.⁷

The authors of these articles were classified as to whether or not they were considered politicians.⁸ Besides the politicians identified other authors included members of the appointed branches of government (i.e. Supreme Court, National Electoral Council, etc) and leaders of the most important business confederation and workers union.⁹ Table 1 shows the number and percentage of authors classified in the different political positions mentioned above and indicates that the most popular group of Op-Ed writers is Legislators, followed by Cabinet Ministers, and other public officials.¹⁰

A second categorization of the authors allowed us to determine whether, at the time the article was written, the author was part of the government or opposition. Given the fluidity of party labels, party membership, and the difficulty in identifying party membership in this environment it is believed that this distinction is sufficient to capture the main dimension of conflict. This assertion is based on research that has found that in weakly institutionalized systems the national executive serves as a focal point for decision-making (Rosenthal and Voeten, 2004; Hix and Noury, 2008; Jones et al. 2009, Zucco,

⁷While I acknowledge the difference in effect and scope of readership/viewership between Op-Ed articles and televised *Aló Presidente*, ignoring the only mean of communication of President Chavez that is constant through the period under analysis would eliminate the most important political actor and negatively influence the current study.

⁸In order to identify politicians from a sample of over 3,000 Op-Ed writers, I consulted a group of experts in Venezuelan politics which occupy tenure track positions in Social Science departments at top Venezuelan Universities. These experts classified 245 politicians based on three main criteria: 1) did the author run for, or hold, elected office; 2) did the author ever occupy a political appointee position in the cabinet or government agencies; or 3) was the author a leader of a political party.

⁹While the inclusion of interest group leaders might seem problematic in a study of political dialogue by politicians it is important to highlight two facts that make this choice appropriate. First, interest group leaders are closely tied to political party apparatus, in most cases they are part of a particular section of the party devoted to that particular interest group (Crisp 2000; Martz 1966). For instance, the labor section of AD (which lead the workers union CTV) always held a seat at the table of AD's National Steering Committee (Martz 1966). Second, political affiliation in terms of parties and the government-opposition divide is easily assessed for these leaders.

¹⁰A list of all the politicians identified will be made available online at <http://www.inaki-sagarzazu.com>. This list includes their partisan membership, affiliation with the government, positions held, and number of articles written.

2009; Aleman, et al. 2011).

Table 1: Percentage of authors classified in the different political positions

Political Position	Number of authors	Percentage
Governor	19	7.7%
Minister	69	28.1%
Legislator	80	32.5%
Mayor	20	8.1%
Other public officials	60	24.4%
Other branches	23	9.4%
Interest Group Leaders	14	5.7%

Analysis and Results

The dataset resulting from collecting all the Op-Eds written by the 245 identified politicians in these 11 years spanned from 1996 to 2007 includes 14000+ articles. With articles having a mean of 362 words. Because of the large size of the text corpus, these articles were processed through automated mechanisms of text analysis to obtain the different pieces of information necessary for this study.

Finding issue areas

Text analysis techniques, in particular those that are automated or semi-automated, allow us to obtain useful information from previously ignored large text datasets. In the particular case of this paper it becomes absolutely necessary to use these techniques and allows us to save time while obtaining valuable measures of issue discussion for each text. The process to estimate these measures of issue discussion is based on a cluster analysis of a word-count matrix which includes the number of times each word was mentioned in each article. ¹¹ This mechanism of analysis allows us to retrieve latent issue categories

¹¹As it has become standard in this realm of analysis words were stemmed and stop words, infrequent words as well as other meaningless words were eliminated. For a more detailed explanation of the data

from the way in which words cluster with each other (Sagarzazu, 2009b; Sagarzazu, 2011).

The process itself follows standard practices in the literature. First, texts from the corpus were preprocessed and word counts were generated for all words in each text. Second, the resulting words were stemmed and counts for the same stem were aggregated. Third, frequent stems were selected and count matrices were generated with all the data. Fourth, a hierarchical clustering algorithm was applied in the word count matrices. Fifth, words were classified into different clusters based on the results obtained. Afterwards the clusters were analyzed and classified into issue areas based on the words that grouped together in each cluster. To do so a cut point at 0.25 was used as a reference for data analysis and partitioning. To make decisions into final classifications the full structure of the clustered results was used.

Based on the content analysis carried out (for more details see Sagarzazu(2011)), 17 issues were identified. These issues encompass a broad range of subjects from the economy to education, elections, and justice (See Table 5 in Appendix I for the list of words classified into each issue). These 17 issues can be grouped into four broad categories: politics, economics, national defense, and social issues. Table 2 shows the issue categories and the issues each is grouping.

To provide an intuition about how the articles break out and with an aim at providing some descriptive statistics and insights into the different issue discussions articles were classified into one of the 17 issues. This classification has no repercussion for the empirical analysis that will be carried out later. In order to classify an article as pertaining to a particular issue, it was identified whether one issue category (i.e. elections, justice, or health care) dominated over the rest. Those cases (where an issue clearly dominated over the others), were immediately classified in that issue area. 93.5% of the articles were dominated by one issue and 1.5% was dominated by two issues, both of which were in the realm of politics (elections and political participation).

analysis process see appendix I.

Table 2: Issues and Issue Areas

Issue Area	Politics subfield	Issue
Economy	-	Economy
National Security	-	War
	-	Border Security
	-	Safety
	-	Foreign Affairs
	-	Justice
Social	-	Education
	-	Poverty
	-	Health Care
	-	Labor
Politics	Performance	Corruption
		Participation
		Political Situation
	Institutions	Principles
		Institutions
Elections	Press	
	Elections	Elections

The articles where no single issue dominated were classified in terms of the collective domination of issue areas. As such, if the sum of the proportions of issue discussions in the social area issues is greater than the other areas, then the issue was classified as pertaining to the social area, similarly for the other areas. If there was still no dominance, articles were relegated to a residual category. Table 3 shows the division of the articles into the four issue areas and the residual category. As can be seen the residual category represents 5% of all articles, much larger than either the national defense or social area. Articles in this area are difficult to classify since they mix issues such as the economy and institutions, or education, safety and the economy. Since this classification is for descriptive purposes, the size of the residual category won't affect the results.

The 1996-2007 period is characterized by the increased attention that political issues such as elections and the political situation (protests, rallies), received in detriment of issues such as the economy which sees its share of attention (by both government and

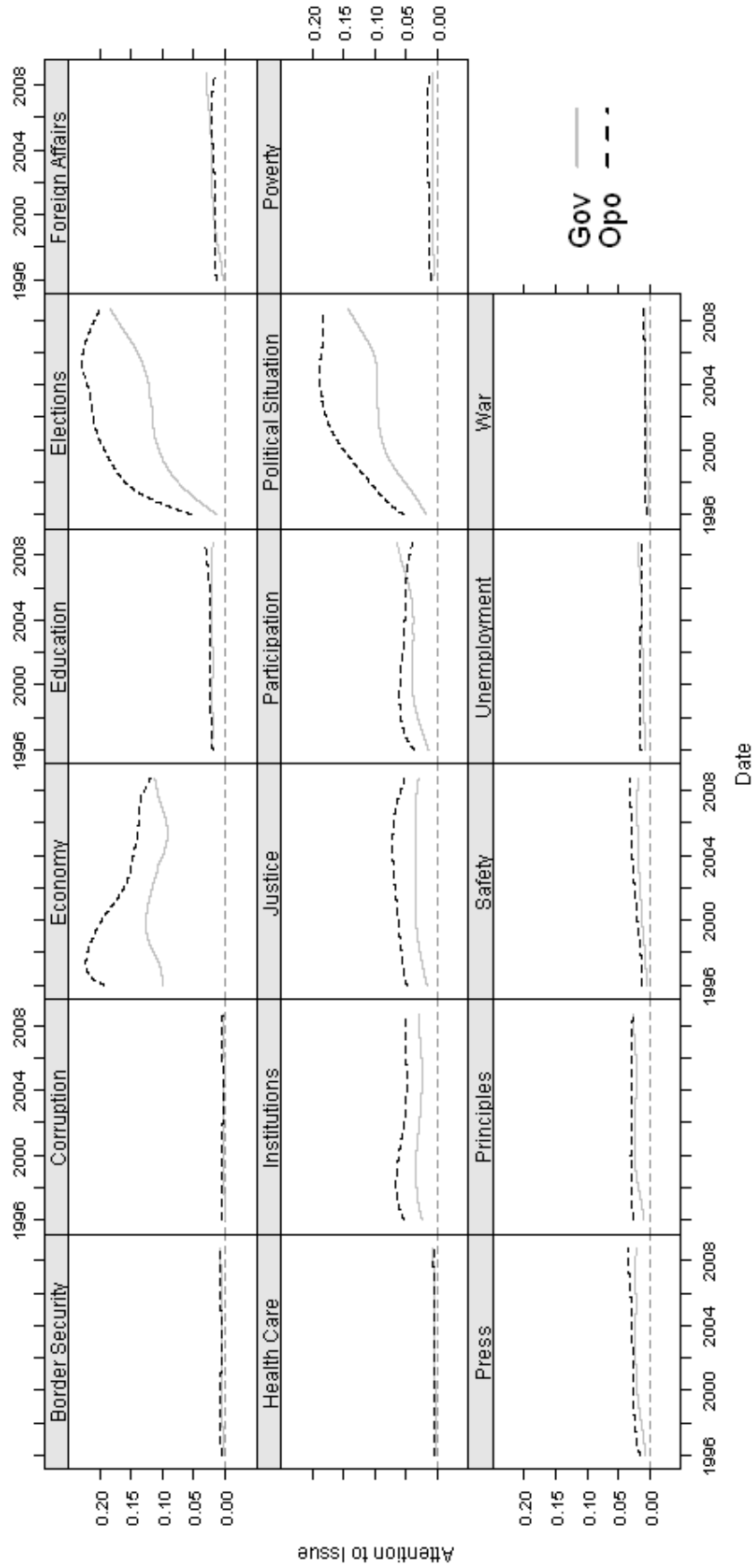
Table 3: Percentage of articles categorized per issue area

Issue Area	Politics subfield	Frequency	Percentage
Politics	Mixed	3,780	26%
	Performance	3,627	25%
	Elections	3,515	24%
	Institutions	615	4%
Economy	-	1,729	12 %
National defense	-	245	2%
Social	-	203	1%
Residual	-	723	5%
		14,437	

opposition politicians) diminish through time (see figure 1). This departure from more policy or results oriented issues such as the economy, health care, or national security is grounded in the lack of cues politicians receive from their party labels as to what issues they should raise. In this way, the long-term strategy of becoming identified with an issue or set of issues gives way to a short term strategy of commenting on the news of the day.

To analyze the questions that we posed earlier, the analysis will be divided in two levels of behavior. First, we'll look at the aggregate behavior of politicians to scout the macro patterns and see if they support the argument made. Second, we'll look at the individual level behavior to confirm the aggregate level findings.

Figure 1: Attention paid to the different issues by Government and Opposition politicians.

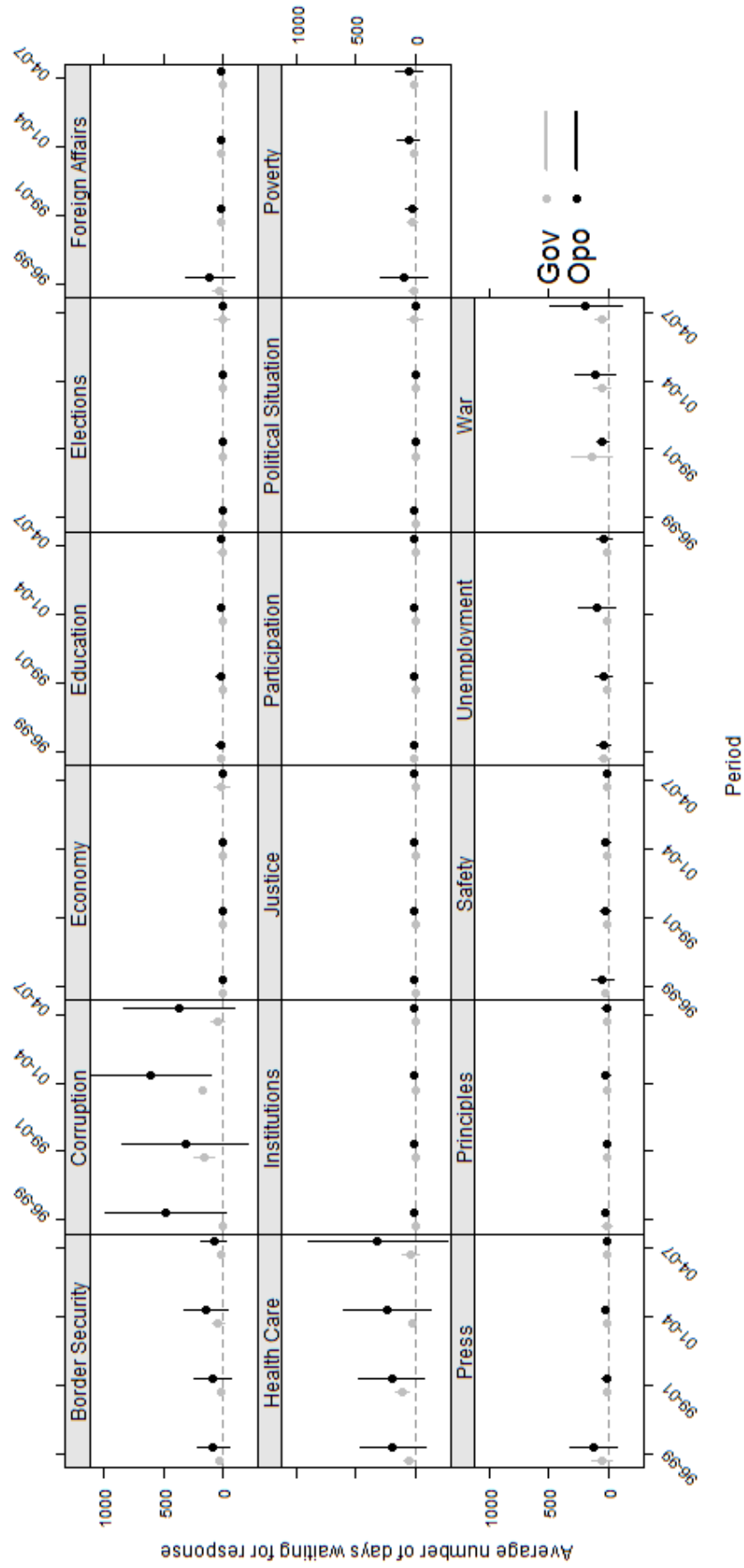


Aggregate Level Dialogue

The first question we set out to analyze is whether or not dialogue is prevalent across the different issues. That is, whether politicians from different affiliations respond to each other on the same issues. To test this hypothesis a measure was generated for the number of days spanned since an issue was raised by opposing politicians. Figure 2 shows the mean number of days it takes for a response between government and opposition politicians (and vice-versa), for each issue, and the 95% confidence interval around the mean. The period under study 1996-2007 was divided into four smaller periods (1996-1998, 1999-2001, 2001-2004, 2004-2007) for ease of analysis and to acknowledge the possibility of different dynamics in each sub-period.¹² There are three important findings that this graph provides: 1) the large value of the mean for the issues of corruption and health care which can reach a value greater than a year (365 days); 2) the fact that the 95% confidence interval suggests that the mean, even though large, is not consistently different from zero; and 3) that a majority of issues have a very quick response after being raised. Overall the results shown indicate that across the board dialogue is prevalent. The only issue where we see a difference in behavior, and different than zero means, is in corruption. In this issue we see that, for the most part, while the opposition speaks the government remains mute. This behavior is not surprising because if the opposition is talking about corruption, it is directly referring to the government's fault and government politicians will try to deviate attention from this issue, or highlight the opposition's past.

¹²This 11 year period, which goes from 1996 to 2007, covers four major periods in Venezuela's recent history. As such, it can be broken down into four eras that have different political dynamics, one under the Caldera presidency and three during the Chavez administration. Three major events were used as cut points: 1) President's Chavez inauguration on February 2nd, 1999; 2) December 10th 2001, day in which after the approval of 49 laws via presidential decree the umbrella association of business chambers (FEDECAMARAS) called for a national strike; and 3) the day of the recall referendum against president Chavez, August 15th of 2004.

Figure 2: Mean number of days between Government and Opposition attention to an issue.

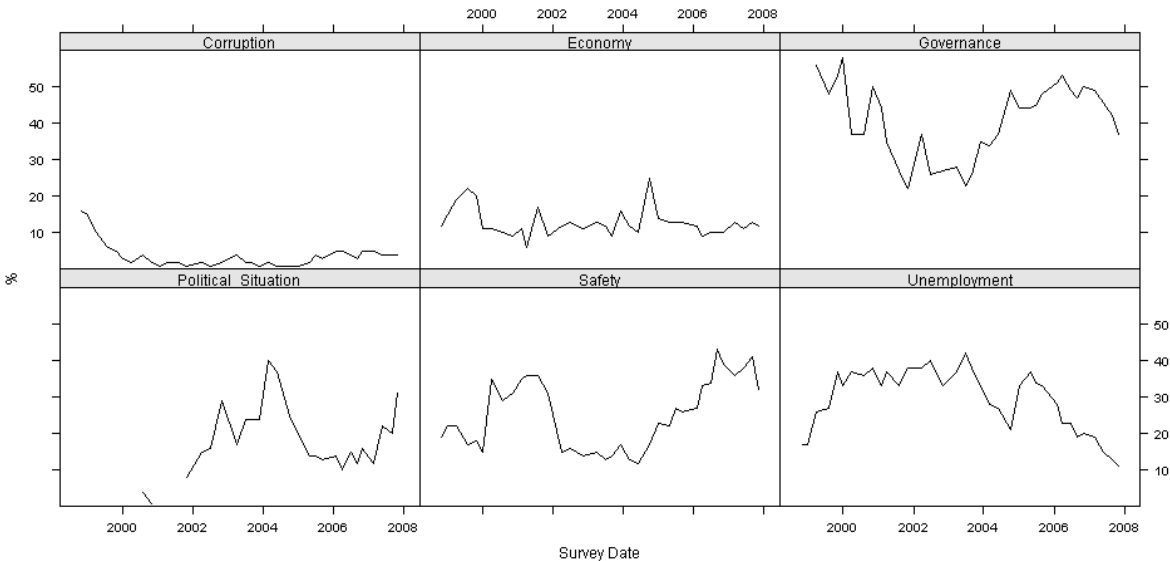


Just as figures 1 and 2 show the similar patterns in the issues raised by Government and Opposition politicians they also highlight the absence of advantage on the issues by the parties. If a party were advantaged on an issue then we would expect a diverging pattern of attention not a converging pattern (i.e. while the advantaged party speaks more the disadvantaged one speaks less). The only issue where advantage seems to exist is, as mentioned above, in corruption. The small percentage of articles that touch on this subject, however, raises questions as to whether or not it is in fact advantage what drives exists in this case. We hope to provide a better answer to this question by looking at the individual behavior analysis.

If as it's been described above political dialogue is permanent and issue advantage is nonexistent then we would expect politicians to 'ride the wave' of public preferences. As such we would expect the issues raised, and dialogued on, to be the same issues that the public considers most important. To do this evaluation we'll look at survey data from Consultores 21 - "Encuesta Nacional Perfil 21". The Perfil 21 national survey is a quarterly survey which includes a political component. This survey is carried out in metropolitan areas with a population equal or greater than 20,000 people. Respondents first answers to the open ended question "Which is the most important problem that Venezuela has in this moment?" are plotted in figure 3.

Figure 3 shows how citizens concerns vary during the period under study. The issues of governance, political situation, unemployment, and safety seem to be the most important of all the six issues mentioned, for the whole period. However, if we compare these series with the aggregated attention in figure 1 (where elections and the political situation constantly get more attention) then we see that there seems to be a disconnect between what citizens see as their most important problem and what politicians are talking about. This disconnect highlights the absence of a long term strategy of appearing responsive to citizens concerns. If party labels were meaningful politicians could invest this capital in

Figure 3: First answer to the open ended question: “Which is the most important problem that Venezuela has in this moment?”



Source: Consultores 21 - “Encuesta Nacional Perfil 21”. Sample size 1500 interviews. Error margin is $\pm 2.6\%$

a long-term association with a salient issue with the capability of carrying them through the election.

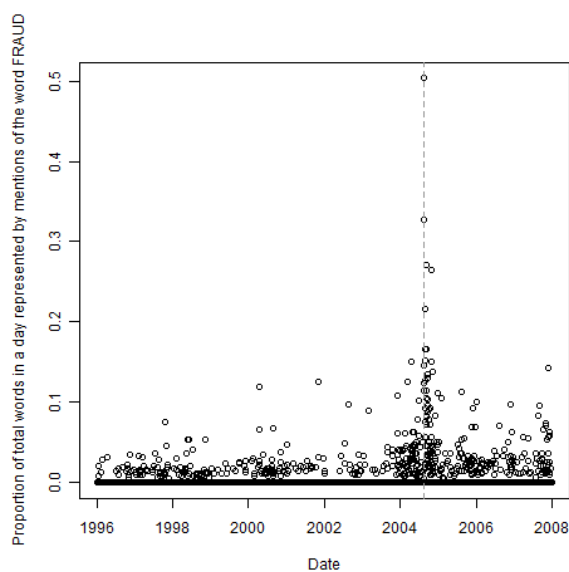
Having shown that politicians in a weakly institutionalized party system lack of advantages on issues and are indifferent to issue salience we are left dumbfounded as to what accounts for the high levels of political dialogue found. As it was mentioned before, it is the argument of this paper that in these environments politicians try to be responsive, in a short-term strategy way, to the most current events. Instead of ignoring small, short term, situations and scandals they give them attention in an attempt to: 1) seem responsive to the day-to-day nitty-gritty and 2) try to win the war of words with opponents on every short-term issue.

An example of this behavior is the relative importance of the word *fraud* in Op-Ed articles. Fraud has always been claimed to happen in Venezuelan elections, however, it never reached the effect that it did after the Recall Referendum against President Chavez.

While on the 15th of August of 2004 President Chavez won the recall referendum the majority of opposition forces did not accept this result. As a consequence, the public statements of politicians, and in particular Op-Eds, focused around the alleged fraud committed against the opposition's victory. For a while this became the only available topic of conversation in opposition statements.

Figure 4 shows the proportion that the word "fraud" (and other words with the same stem) represents of the total number of words in each day. As it can be seen after August 15th 2004 this word can represent up to half of total words in a day. This short-term strategy, however, proved wrong. Unfortunately for the opposition their message had an effect in the electoral dynamics of this period. The belief that fraud was committed extended to opposition supporters who abstained from participating in subsequent elections, which were won by government candidates. It took the opposition two years to recompose the message and three to win an election.

Figure 4: Proportion of articles the word FRAUD represents



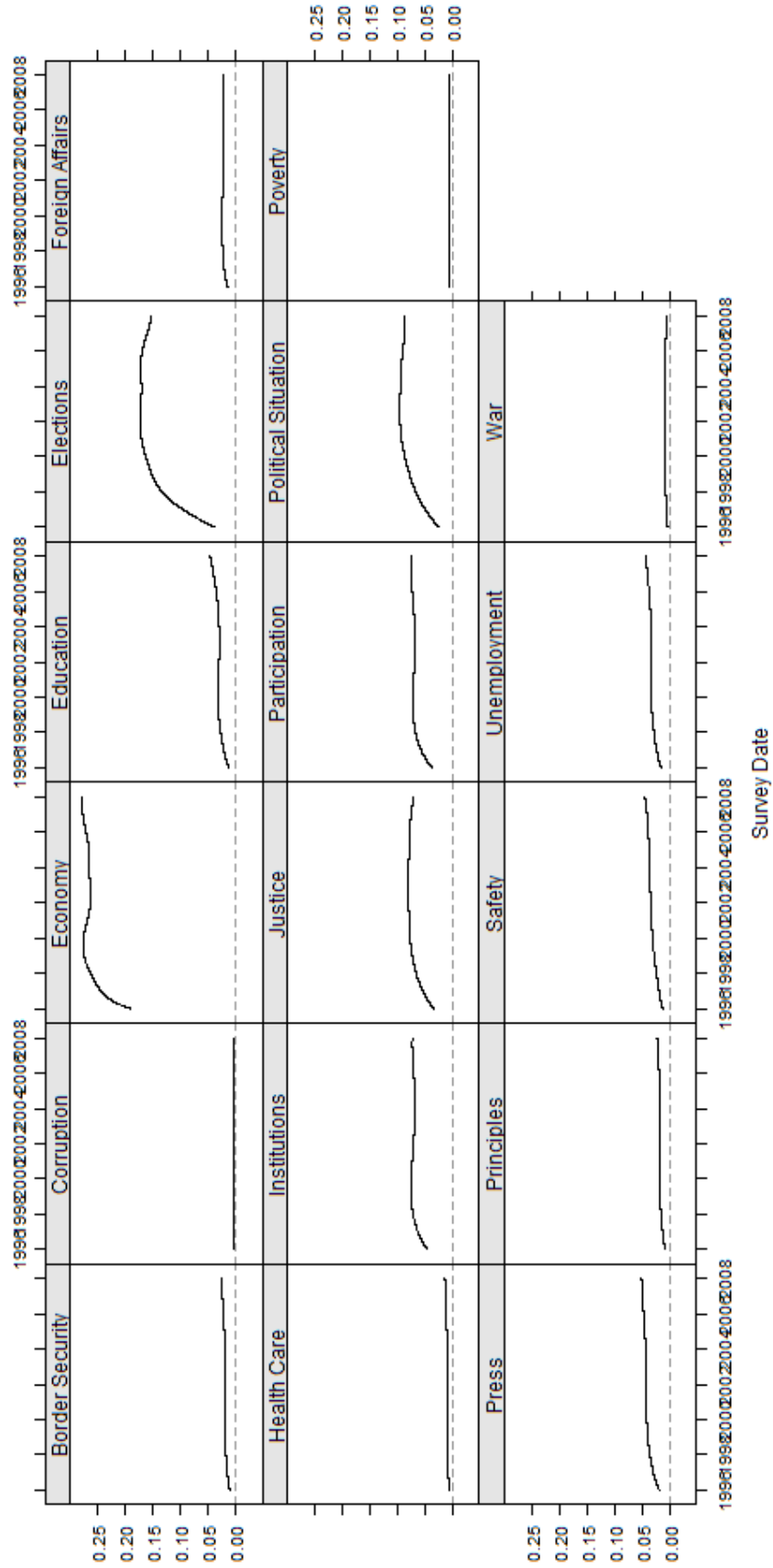
Note: The vertical line represents August 15th 2004, the day of the recall referendum against President Chavez

To test this claim I have collected all the news articles published (excluding Op-Ed

articles), each day, in the newspaper “El Universal”.¹³ Attempts were made to include a sample of articles from the three newspapers, but only “El Universal” had all texts for the specified period available online. While the inclusion of only one newspaper might seem problematic it is worth noting that of the three newspapers it has received the least amount of criticism for bias towards either the Opposition or Government. These articles were evaluated in a similar way to the analysis of the Op-Ed articles and the attention given to the 17 issues identified is represented in figure 5. As it can be seen by comparing figures 1 and 5 there seems to be a relationship between the patterns in level of attention of the different issues (the economy being an outlier). As attention in the news increases so does the attention in Op-Eds. In this case, however, there also seems to be an exception in the issue of the economy. As attention in newspaper articles remains very high, attention by politicians diminishes considerable to a moderate attention level.

¹³The sports, horoscope, classified ads, culture, and variety sections were eliminated.

Figure 5: Attention paid to the different issues in news articles.



Individual Level Analysis

The aggregate level analysis provided in the previous section shows that politician's behavior in weakly institutionalized party settings seems to follow a different behavior than it has been shown to do in highly institutionalized party settings. To further test this claim, however, we believe that an individual analysis of the different article needs to be carried out. To do this analysis an attention measure for each issue has been created for every article. This measure (y_i) with a value of 1 if an article devotes more than 10% of its space to the an issue and 0 otherwise, will allow us to test what influences an article devoting attention to a particular issue.

$$y_i = \begin{cases} 0 & \text{if article} < 10\% \text{ of issue } i \\ 1 & \text{if article} \geq 10\% \text{ of issue } i \end{cases} \quad (1)$$

Having defined our dependent variable we need to define the variables we believe are relevant to the case at hand. First, whether or not the opposing group (out group) raised the issue. Second, whether or not the same group (in group) raised the issue. And third, whether or not the issue was covered in the news. These three measures will all be dichotomous variables following the convention established for our dependent variable (i.e. more than 10% of attention devoted to the issue). If the *out group* variable has a significant and positive effect on our dependent variable it will confirm the existence of dialogue, as it would imply that politicians are more likely to raise an issue if it was raised by the other group. Similarly, if the *news* variable has a significant and positive effect on our dependent variable it will confirm the influence of daily news on the topics being raised. To account for possible different effects between government and opposition politicians a dichotomous variable *government* (with a value of 0 if the author is from the opposition and 1 if the author is from the government) was interacted with our three dialogue variables.

Three sets of control variables will be used in the model. These are: 1) whether the article was written during the Caldera or Chavez presidency; 2) which news source was the article written on; and 3) which type of politician is the author (mayor, legislator, etc). There is no expectation as to the behavior of these variables.

To estimate the probability of speaking on a topic a multilevel regression with varying intercept and varying slopes was used. There are three levels the article level, the issue level and the politician level

Following the findings of the aggregated analysis presented before the individual level results (shown in table 4) confirm that in a weakly institutionalized party system dialogue exists and it is mainly driven by the most current events. This conclusion can be reached by looking at the significant and positive signs of the *out group* and *news* variables. As these results suggest there is no statistically significant difference between government and opposition politicians in terms of how they respond to their opponents (out group) and how they react to the news. In both of these cases we can see how when the opposing group speaks on an issue the probability that the issue is spoken on increase by 0.1 . When the news report an issue, however, these probabilities of speaking on the issue reach 1. These results highlight not only the continuous existence of dialogue but the fact that this dialogue is not based on advantaged or salient issues but on the issues which are reported in the news. As such it corroborates the assumptions made earlier that political dialogue in weakly institutionalized settings will be prevalent. That this prevalence in dialogue was due to the low value of the party labels which hinders parties gaining advantage on issues. The absence of meaning in party labels also affects the degree to which politicians can ‘ride the wave’ of issues salient in the electorate. The final effect of all of these dynamics is that politicians, in an effort to appear responsive, engage on the most current issues discussed in the news, effectively allowing the news to take the commanding role in everyday political interactions.

Table 4: Multi-Level Logistic model estimates

	Model 1^a	Model 2^b	Model 3^b
In Group	0.311 *** (0.056)	2.190*** (0.344)	1.977*** (0.275)
Out Group	0.113 * (0.064)	0.672*** (0.221)	0.750*** (0.209)
News	0.607 *** (0.109)	10.431*** (1.429)	10.143*** (1.595)
Government	0.146 *** (0.033)	0.148*** (0.035)	0.118*** (0.028)
In Group × Government	-0.205 *** (0.042)	-1.169*** (0.177)	-
Out Group × Government	-0.001 (0.039)	0.007 (0.169)	-
News × Government	-0.008 (0.039)	0.442** (0.211)	-
LogLik	-75731	-75472	-75490
AIC	151610	151091	151121
N	245038	245038	245038
N _i	246	246	246
N _p	17	17	17

Note: Standard errors in parenthesis. Significance levels at 0.01 *** 0.05 ** 0.1 *

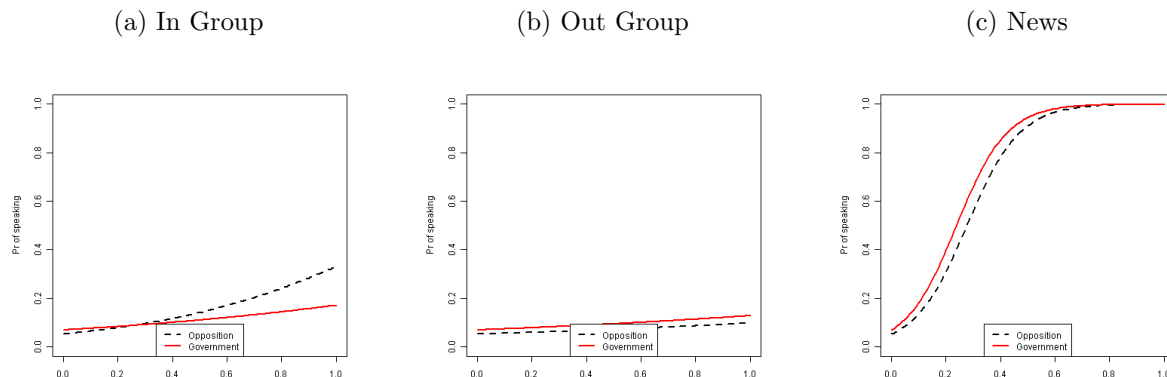
Full model results can be found on Appendix II Table 6.

^a The independent variables for dialogue (in group, out group, & news) are dichotomous {0,1}.

^b The independent variables for dialogue (in group, out group, & news) are continuous measures.

The results from the multi-level models (shown in table 4 and in figure 6) confirm the claim, made in this paper, that the dynamics of political dialogue in weakly institutionalized party settings differ from previously theorized models developed for institutionalized party systems.

Figure 6: Probability of speaking on an issue. Results from Multi-Level regression (Table 4, model 2)



Note: Results by issue are presented in Figure 7 in Appendix 2.

Conclusions

Does weak party institutionalization affect the dynamics of political dialogue as we know them? Research on dialogue argues that parties have no incentive to trespass on issues where their opponents are advantaged (Petrocik 1996) unless they do so to appear responsive to the electorate (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1996). Parties, it is assumed, have niches of advantaged issues created through prior experiences, performance, posturing and positioning through platforms. However, this assumption only holds in institutionalized party systems, where party labels provide informative cues to voters and provide electoral benefits to party members (Cox 1997; Downs 1957). In weakly institutionalized party systems, instead, party labels provide limited information about the party preferences, which carry little electoral value (Jones 2007; Mainwaring and Torcal 2006). Consequently, parties fail to disclose consistent programmatic messages leading to failure in gaining electoral benefits on what could become advantaged issues.

Failure to attach value to labels and gain advantage over issues dramatically changes how we understand political dialogue. This article argues that in the presence of weak party institutionalization, advantage over issues will be reduced and political dialogue

will increase. This increase in dialogue is not, however, due to increased attention to salient issues. It is instead due to a short-sightedness of politicians who engage in a daily word fight over every current event happening. As a consequence of this strategy the ability of citizens to differentiate parties programatically remains low.

To test whether weak party institutionalization changes the dynamics of dialogue, this article used novel techniques of content analysis to study over 14,000 op-ed articles by 230 Venezuelan politicians from 1996 to 2007. These articles were not only analyzed at the aggregate but also at the individual level. As shown, political dialogue is on average prevalent, there is no evidence on issue advantage, and there are no indications that this increased dialogue is due to a responsiveness to salience.

This article has found that, in weakly institutionalized party systems, political dialogue behaves differently than it has been found to do in highly institutionalized systems. In particular, this study showed how, in the case of Venezuela, the weak institutionalization of the party system has increased the amount of political dialogue due to the absence of advantage over issues by political opponents. The theoretical claims of this article, that weak party institutionalization increases political dialogue, was found to be true. However, further testing is called for to corroborate these findings. In particular, settings with varying levels of party institutionalization need to be considered for proving the theoretical claim made here.

Normatively the findings presented in this paper posit some controversy for the need for political dialogue and for highly institutionalized parties. While political dialogue is normatively positive for democracy, so are institutionalized political parties. Higher institutionalization of parties, however, diminishes dialogue vis-à-vis weakly institutionalized parties. As such the findings here raise the question of how to balance the positive aspects of political dialogue with those of highly institutionalized parties.

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1 Appendix I

Table 5: Words classified in each Issue category

Issue	Words
border	colombia, borders, invasion, territory, neighbors, zone
conflict	combat, conflict, face off, danger
corruption	corruption, corrupted
economy	agricultural, savings, bank, benefits, bolivars, quality, change, capital, central, figures, commerce, comercial, competition, competitiveness, consumption, contribution, control, growth, credit, crisis, unemployment, debt, money, dollars, economics, economy, efficiency, employment, companies, fund, businessmen, equilibrium, stability, state owned, excess, exports, financial, financing, finances, fiscal, tax, industry, industrial, inflation, stability, state owned, excess, exports, income, interests, investment, macroeconomics, market, millions, currency, monetary, business, pay, pdvsa, oil, pressure, budget, private, produces, production, product, property, protection, income, service
education	educational, education, school, study, family, formation, youth, teacher, works, university, student
elections	assembly, bell, candidate, chavez, chavista, cne, council, constitution, constitutional, constituent, consult, deputies, leaders, elections, voters, electoral, choose, signatures, fraud, rulers, hugo, leaders, politics, popular, populars, leadership, mandate, majority, official, opposition, opponents, parliament, parliamentarians, party, partisan, presidential, president, referendum, referendum, resignation,

Table 5: (continued)

Issue	Words
health	republic, recall, sovereign, trap, vote hospitals, doctors, health
institutions	administrative, administration, article, congress, courts, decree, executive, guarantees, judicial, legal, legislature, law, norms, organizations, public, reform
ir	america, europe, european, latin, latinamericans, northamerican, region, united, union
justice	lawyer, abuse, citizens, citizenship, defender, crime, right, exercise, bureaucrats, general, illegal, judicial, judges, trial, justice, justify, to judge, magistrates, order, penal, demands, responsibility, sanctions, sentence, supreme, tribunal, to violate, violation
participation	accord, alternative, autonomy, debate, decision, discussion, independent, institutions, institutional, organizations, pact, participate, process, proposal, proyect, regionals, rules, representatives, transparency
political situation	armed, authoritarian, battle, bolivarian, castro, caudillo, civil, commander, confrontation, cuba, cuban, defender, defense, democracy, democratic, dialogue, dictator, dictatorship, disidence, army, enemy, fight, expresion, fidel, force, coup, coup plotter, war, legitimacy, liberty, liberties, leader, fight, command, protests, march, military, militaries, miraflores, peaceful, peace, powers, people, regime, respect, command, protests, march, revolution, revolutionary, triumph, violence, violent, will
poverty	class, impoverishment, hunger, misery, neoliberalism, poor, poverty, rich, wealth

Table 5: (continued)

Issue	Words
press	communication, daily, report, information, media, news, journalist, pressure, television
principles	colective, common, ethics, honesty, equality, individual, moral, principles, society, solidarity
safety	weapons, assault, assassins, murder, slums, jail, punishment, criminal, delinquency, shoot, impunity,
	unsafe, interior, scared, death, police, policing, kidnapping, silence, terrorism
work	institute, research, labor, professionals, work

2 Appendix II

Table 6: Full results of Multi-Level model

	Model 1 ^a	Model 2 ^b	Model 3 ^b
In Group	0.311 *** (0.056)	2.190*** (0.344)	1.977*** (0.275)
Out Group	0.113 * (0.064)	0.672*** (0.221)	0.750*** (0.209)
News	0.607 *** (0.109)	10.431*** (1.429)	10.143*** (1.595)
Government	0.146 *** (0.033)	0.148*** (0.035)	0.118*** (0.028)
In Group × Government	-0.205 *** (0.042)	-1.169*** (0.177)	-
Out Group × Government	-0.001 (0.039)	0.007 (0.169)	-
News × Government	-0.008 (0.039)	0.442** (0.211)	-
Cabinet Minister	-0.009 (0.032)	-0.001 (0.031)	-0.007 (0.031)
Legislator	0.033 (0.030)	0.038 (0.031)	0.037 (0.030)
Governor	0.050 (0.038)	0.075* (0.042)	0.068 (0.042)
Mayor	0.112 ** (0.040)	0.105** (0.044)	0.095** (0.045)
Other public officials	-0.015 (0.044)	0.002 (0.042)	-0.006 (0.039)
Other branches	-0.037 (0.109)	-0.041 (0.111)	-0.048 (0.105)
Interest group leaders	-0.234 *** (0.069)	-0.223*** (0.071)	-0.257*** (0.065)
Chavez pres.	0.019 (0.022)	-0.004 (0.022)	-0.007 (0.022)
El Nacional	0.030 (0.148)	0.070 (0.132)	0.063 (0.089)
El Universal	0.056 (0.147)	0.071 (0.131)	0.068 (0.087)
Ult. Noticias	0.002 (0.152)	0.036 (0.136)	0.041 (0.094)
Constant	-2.446 *** (0.435)	-2.889*** (0.412)	-2.813*** (0.410)

Table 6: (continued)

	Model 1 ^a	Model 2 ^b	Model 3 ^b
<i>Issue Level</i>			
Constant	2.8 (1.688)	2.585 (1.608)	2.726 (1.651)
In Group	2.7 (0.167)	1.253 (1.119)	0.927 (0.963)
Out Group	3.8 (0.197)	0.449 (0.670)	0.451 (0.672)
News	0.13 (0.360)	27.254 (5.221)	34.032 (5.834)
<i>Author Level</i>			
Constant	1.6e-02 (0.126)	0.008 (0.093)	0.009 (0.095)
Government	1.4e-02 (0.119)	0.015 (0.126)	0.011 (0.103)
Cabinet Minister	8.3e-05 (0.009)	0.012 (0.112)	0.010 (0.102)
Legislator	1.6e-03 (0.041)	0.017 (0.131)	0.024 (0.154)
Governor	1.1e-02 (0.107)	0.003 (0.054)	0.004 (0.062)
Mayor	5.2e-03 (0.072)	0.006 (0.080)	0.004 (0.063)
Other public officials	2.3e-02 (0.152)	0.030 (0.174)	0.021 (0.145)
Other branches	1.2e-01 (0.348)	0.135 (0.367)	0.097 (0.312)
Interest group leaders	3.9e-03 (0.062)	0.009 (0.095)	0.059 (0.243)
LogLik	-75731	-75472	-75490
AIC	151610	151091	151121
BIC	152380	151861	151860
N	245038	245038	245038
N _i	17	17	17
N _p	246	246	246

^aThe independent variables for dialogue (in group, out group, & news) are dichotomous {0,1}.

^bThe independent variables for dialogue (in group, out group, & news) are continuous measures.

Figure 7: Probability of speaking on each issue. Results from Multi-Level regression (Table 4)

