

Andrea Fernández Valzania

¿Quiénes somos? Estudiantes! ¿Qué queremos? Libertad!

Who are we? Students! What do we want? Freedom!

Youth and political participation in Venezuela

A case study of the Venezuelan student movement



Master's thesis in Development Studies – Specializing in Geography

Trondheim, May 2014

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Dedicatoria

La presente tesis se la dedico a todos los jóvenes estudiantes venezolanos que con orgullo y tesón luchan por un mejor país y afrontan estoicamente las adversidades sociales y políticas en Venezuela. Este proyecto va dedicado a todos los valientes que creen en una democracia sólida, inclusiva y verdaderamente representativa, y que sin miedo enfilan la mirada a una visión de país que incluya ambas caras de Venezuela para ser nuevamente un solo país, con un mismo objetivo: ser ese país rico no solo en recursos naturales, sino en personas y héroes que no se cansan de hacer historia. Ese es el mejor recurso que tiene Venezuela, su gente!

Gracias Movimiento Estudiantil venezolano.

Abstract

Youth's political participation in Venezuela has become very important in the last fourteen years due to the unstable economic, social and political context of the country. Youth have come together as a student movement in order to make the government aware that they were also political subjects who demanded more social justice and better governance from politicians. Student movements in Venezuela have always been pressure groups that arise in the political scene during critical political moments in the history of Venezuela. Most recently, the student movement of 2007 has become another political actor as they appeared in the political sphere to stop radical policies and to demand for more freedom and democracy for Venezuelans. The aim of this political generation is to reconcile both sides of the country, those who are against the government and those who oppose it, and they claim to do this by proposing a non-violent struggle, using dialogue as a means for reconciliation and valorizing the role of human above any political ideology. This new political generation is the generation that intends to bridge both realities of the country in order to achieve social, material and spiritual progress in Venezuela.

The research is based on a month of qualitative fieldwork in Valencia, Venezuela between June and July 2013. In this period I was able to conduct in-depth interviews and two focus groups discussions that provided me with rich information about youth's political participation in Venezuela during the last years. All the information I gathered provided me with a deeper understanding of the way young people practice politics in Venezuela. Using a generational politics and life-course politics approach helped me understand better the relationship between age, social change and politics, and how both approaches are interrelated when it comes to understanding young people's political attitudes and behaviors. A humanistic view of politics emerges among youth; their claims have not so much to do with political ideologies, but instead with the defense and respect of human rights and values, such as solidarity, tolerance and dialogue.

Key words: youth, political participation, politics, student movement, Venezuela, political generation, humanistic.

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[venezuela.com/mapas/map/html/viales/carabobov.html](http://www.a-venezuela.com/mapas/map/html/viales/carabobov.html))

List of acronyms and non-English terms

AD	Acción Democrática
COPEI	Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente
FGD	Focus groups discussions
IESA	Instituto de Estudios Superiores en Administración
PJ	Primero Justicia
PSUV	Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela
RCTV	Radio Caracas Television
Acostados por la vida	Lie down for life
Defensa Nacional	National Defense
Dicho y Hecho	Said and Done
Estudiantes en la calle	Students in the street
Futuro Presente	Present Future
Ruta ciudadana comunitaria	Citizen's community route
Sonríe Valencia	Smile Valencia
Voto Joven	Youth's vote

1 Introduction

Research problem

The foundation of this research is to find out why youth in Venezuela are very much engaged in the current political process. In this, I will focus on the reasons that gave rise to the Venezuelan student movement, an event that has clearly marked the path for students to channel their concerns, impasses, and proposals to build a more solid democracy in the country. The importance of studying the Venezuelan student movement is that its youth constitutes a new political generation in Venezuela and it is worth understanding this phenomenon from a social and political perspective, since participating actively in society can lead to significant changes in the political structure of the country. Lastly, it is worth mentioning that Venezuela's largest cohort group in the population pyramid is mostly composed by people between the ages of fifteen and thirty years, according to the Venezuelan National Statistic Institute in 2011, meaning that the country has a very young population. This is important to consider when one thinks about the representativeness of youth in society, and how their engagement or non-engagement can have an impact on society.

The motivation behind my focus on youth, political participation, and politics is mainly due to the great interest in understanding the impact young people has on society, since they account for almost half of the world's population (Ansell, 2005). According to Ansell (2005), the proportion of people worldwide under the age of twenty-five years old has increased constantly over the last century, and is set to continue growing. This fact needs to be taken into account when it comes to policymaking in order to include youth in the decision making process, and create "youth-friendly" programs that will empower them to exert their agency. Also, in less developed countries the high number of youth population is a distinctive characteristic, so a way to achieve social, economical, and political change will lie in how governments include their young population in the developmental process (ibid).

Another argument for studying young people and their role as social agents is because it provides an opportunity to study the relevance of new social theories; if the social order has changed, and if social structures are no longer able to exert their power, it is then

expected to find evidence of these transformations in young people who are the intersection of the social reproduction process (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007). Therefore, youth's engagement or non-engagement in political processes can be seen as an indicator of societies' current situation and way of thinking. Regarding the case of Venezuela, political issues and attitudes have always been something related to the adult world, and their participation has been more significant compared to youth's involvement until now.

A humanistic view about politics is what this political generation advocates for. Humanism is about understanding men in all its dimensions: individual-society, material-spirituality and local-universal. Humanism is not a political ideology, instead is an existential concept that takes into account responsibility, tolerance, freedom and solidarity for building a nation. This concept, humanism, advocates for democracy with social content as a model of coexistence, and where every person can develop its abilities and the necessity of contributing to society's development (Tovar Arroyo, 2007). In the analytical chapter, humanism is understood by what youth engage in and what they have achieved.

In the literature about youth and politics, many scholars have drawn attentions to young people's lack of political knowledge, to political apathy, to a disinterest in political processes and their lack of participation (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007), arguing that a decline in participation can threaten the future of the representative democracy (O'Toole, 2003). However, the recent and present commitment from Venezuelan youth in the political arena shows a change in the way young people perceive and practice politics, whether it is in the most conventional way, such as participation in political parties, or in a more informal one, such as students associations (Harris et al., 2010; Skelton, 2010). One of the reasons behind youth's participation in the Venezuela's political process may be connected to the fact that when youth understand they may be facing a future with no opportunities or liberties, they opt to become active participants and leaders in social movements intended to produce social change (Youniss et al., 2002). Also, as Furlong (2009) states, *in some periods of time, political issues dominate national agendas to such an extent that young people are forced to consider their position (...) to take a stand* (2009:291).

Nowadays young people are becoming more visible and vocal in political mobilizations worldwide (Azmi et al., 2013), creating new participatory places such as the Internet, and being more present in other participatory practices such as voluntarism, music, student associations, etc. These new informal participatory spaces are having the same relevancy as the space occupied by mainstream politics (Harris et al., 2010), and it is the duty of scholars in the field of social sciences to look into these new participatory practices in order to understand youth's political motivations and ways of acting in society. The study of young people's lives provides an opportunity to study and understand processes of change; the way inequalities are reproduced between generations, and also to reflect the different ways structure and agency combine to shape people's lives (Furlong, 2009).

The politics of the new generation demystify the idea of youth being political apathetic actors, as it shows how older and traditional forms of collective identity are being replaced for a politicization of the personal, rather than a disinterest in politics per se (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007). This way of perceiving politics from young people's experiences can be explained as a generational shift, where participation nowadays is different, and political apathy is substituted with new ways of engagement in the political arena.

In order to study this social phenomenon the generational politics and the life-course politics are the most accurate and interesting approaches, since they lay the bases for understanding why the Venezuelan student movement can be considered a political generation, and how politics takes place during young people's life-course (R. Braungart & Braungart, 1986, 1993). The former highlights historical and cultural events as determinant for structuring the behaviors and attitudes of a generation, while the later explains political behaviors based on life-cycles interpretations (ibid). Combining these two approaches will result in a deeper and better understanding of why a generation of people perceived themselves as part of a group with common ideas and shared experiences, and the impacts that it has on young people's lives to be part of a specific political generation.

Going back to Venezuela: motivations

Choosing the place where my research was going to take place was something that came natural as I was born and raised in Venezuela. When I was eighteen years old, my

family decided to move abroad due to the socio-political situation of the country. Consequently, living outside the country for almost ten years has kept me a little distant from the reality Venezuelans have to face every day. Deciding to go back to my home country and doing research about a topic that is so up to date in Venezuela nowadays was a natural motivation for me. I wanted to learn and understand more about the complexities young people and the Venezuelan society in general face. It called my attention to know how youth in Venezuela tries to find spaces to present its views of how development should be handled, as well as how they manifested resistance to the policies they do not accept.

Although it is true that I have not been in Venezuela for the last ten years, I do feel I am part of a generation who wants to make a difference in the country. It has been revealing for me to discover that my generation is a generation of transformation; it is a new political generation that has decided to get involved in politics, changing the status quo whereby politics is a topic, which concerns adults only. I believe that this desire of taking the lead in political and social change comes from a general disenchantment of young people towards their elders since they have failed them politically, and therefore, young people recognize that it is their duty to change the reality they live in for a better future, not only for them but also for future generations. So the relevance of doing research about youth in Venezuela has to do with the fact that they are now leading a process of social change that it is worth studying, since this can have great impact on future generations in the way they build democracy, the way they participate in society, and also because youth's participation may well result in a significant change in the current political organization and functioning of the country.

Research questions

The nature of the research questions will shape the most appropriate way of investigating them (Limb and Dwyer, 2001) and will also help set the path the researcher has to follow for reaching its main objectives. Furthermore, as Kitchin and Tate (2000) mention, finding a focus to the project gives the researcher a study purpose as well as it allows the formulation of specific questions. For this, it is important to first define the research topic (ibid), which in my case is **“Youth and their political participation in Venezuela”**. After having a clear research topic, the formulation of

research questions should help construct knowledge and a better understanding of the research topic.

Objectives

- Understand the importance of youth participation in politics for achieving social change, and how their engagement can have an impact in social stability.
- Find out what are the characteristics of the Venezuelan student movement and its importance in the socio political context in the Venezuela.

Research questions

- Why have youth become increasingly more concerned with political issues in Venezuela?
- How do Venezuelan students participate in politics?
- Why did the Venezuelan student movement emerge and what does it mean?

Structure of the thesis

In chapter **two** I will discuss about the study area and context in order to situate the reader and make it easier for him/her to understand the reasons that pushed students to the streets to protest. Firstly I will start by explaining the location and situation of the study area to later go into details about the current socio political situation. I will also explain some previous student movements that have taken place in Venezuelan history, which will make it easier to comprehend the presence of students in the political sphere during political crisis. Finally in this chapter I will talk about the current student movement taking the lead in political processes in Venezuela.

In chapter **three** I will explain the methodology used and techniques for acquiring data. I elaborate on the use of a case study approach in order to obtain in-depth knowledge about the student movement in the socio political context Venezuela is facing; furthermore in this chapter I will comment on some of the challenges I had to overcome when doing fieldwork, and the importance of being flexible to be able to adapt to new situations and maybe new ideas than can broaden the understanding of the research

topic. Finally, I will explain the process of analyzing data after fieldwork and the importance of this process in order to obtain meaningful information that will later on be used in the analysis chapter.

In chapter **four** I will talk about the theoretical framework that gives social meaning to the research topic. I will firstly conceptualize the main concepts (youth, political participation and politics) to later elaborate on two approaches that can be used in the study of age, political attitudes and social change. These two approaches are the generational politics, and the life-course politics approach. Lastly a third approach is proposed, which consist of merging the generational politics and the life course politics. I will elaborate also on the reasons why this third approach can provide a wider knowledge and understanding of the relationship between age and politics.

In chapter **five** I will elaborate more deeply on what is the student movement in Venezuela and the characteristics of this movement. I will look into the student movement as a product of a political generation that has changed they way of conceiving politics and shaped an image of Venezuelan youth as a new collective with its own identity and ideas which can achieve social change when they unite towards a common goal. Youth as a collective has become another political actor in Venezuela that cannot be ignored. The social and political context in Venezuela has also shaped the attitudes and behaviors towards politics of young people in the country, making them more aware of their role as social and political agents.

In chapter **six** I emphasize the individual level, explaining the way youth engage in politics, what kind of activities they take on, and what is their own perception about politics. Additionally, examples about how politics is considered as a means for achieving social change are also explained, whether it is through formal or informal politics. Finally, the university and the street are represented as the two spaces for resistance where youth has found a place for raising their voice and taking on actions that have influenced public opinion about how citizens should be more politically involved in society.

Chapter **seven** will be the concluding chapter. A brief interpretation about what the student movement achieved is explained, as well as how both generational politics and life-course politics are intertwined.



Figure 2: Map of Carabobo State, with its capital Valencia (source: <http://www.a-venezuela.com/mapas/map/html/viales/carabobov.html>)

2 Study area

The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela occupies most of the northern coast of South America on the Caribbean Sea, and covers an extension of 916,445 square km¹. It is divided in twenty-three states, and one capital district, which is Caracas, and it is among the most highly urbanized countries in Latin America. Although the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela has some of the largest oil deposits in the world, the majority of population has not seen the benefits of oil wealth in their social welfare. The country has a high poverty rate; unemployment is high and, according to official figures, around 60% of households are poor². Thus, the context in general is one where the most needed do not have access to basic services such as health and education, creating an environment of anxiety and hostility that has led to high levels of insecurity.

Research was based in the city of Valencia, which is the capital city of Carabobo State and is located in the central region of the country. Valencia is one of the most important and vibrant cities in the country in terms of population, with 829.856 habitants by 2011³, and also because it contains one of the biggest industrial hubs in the country. In regard to demographic data, Venezuela has a young population composition, where the majority of people are concentrated between the ages of thirteen and thirty five years old, according to the Venezuelan National Statistic Institute in 2011⁴.

Venezuela's population ascends to 27.227.930⁵, and it is expected to keep growing in the next years. It is a big country with a growing population that is now facing a lot of social, political and economical instability, and the fact that its population is young, is relevant as it gives meaning to young people's participation into politics. Moreover, young populations characterize the demographic composition in many developing countries, so it is important to be able to respond to young people's needs, and include them in the developmental process of their country, since they will be the future leaders of their society.

¹ <http://www.consulvenbarcelona.com/venezuela/perfil/geografia-de-venezuela>

² <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-19649648>

³ <http://www.redatam.ine.gob.ve/Censo2011/index.html>

⁴ <http://www.redatam.ine.gob.ve/Censo2011/index.html>

⁵ <http://www.redatam.ine.gob.ve/Censo2011/index.html>

Location, location, location

The city of Valencia, as mentioned before, is very important for its dynamism. It also hosts one of the most important public universities of the region, Carabobo University, from where the Venezuelan student movement carries on many activities. Logistically, for me it was easier to do my research in this context since it was the city where I used to live, and contacting people was a less difficult process; also, many of my interviewees were students or former students from Carabobo University.

Moving around the city is not an easy task; first of all traffic jams seem to happen all day at all times, so to get to any place it was necessary to plan it well ahead. Secondly, public transportation in the country is very poor and inefficient; buses do not follow a schedule, road conditions are very bad, and taking taxis is something risky; therefore, it is necessary to know people who can take you around.. The chaos in the city makes it difficult to access many places, for example, many students that do not have private cars and have great difficulties to go to school or their universities, since the transportation system is obsolete and almost non-existent. This is only some of the deficiencies that many people have to deal with every day.

The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela is a country of contrasts; there are big differences between well to do people and those who have nothing. These differences can be sensed in the geography of the city. The northern part of Valencia is where people who are better accommodated economically are established, while the southern part of the city is mostly populated by low income people; unfortunately, the majority of population in the city and in the country are from very low social strata, leading to many social problems in the country. My research was conducted in the northern side of the city, thus I had access to a very specific population group: university students that may have a way of thinking very different from people living in poorer areas. This is not to say that poor people do not go to universities, they do, in fact Carabobo University is a place where different ideologies and social classes combine, however, it is true that middle class people do have higher chances to access and finish a superior education.

Socio-political context

To understand why the Venezuelan student movement appeared as a new political actor in the country it is first important to understand the social, economical and political conditions that preceded the student movement. A common way to describe the turbulent path the country has gone through goes as follows:

Venezuela is one of the world's wealthiest emerging markets, a country blessed with all kinds of riches-most notably, huge petroleum reserves. This national patrimony could have enriched the population and produced an advanced economy and society, but instead a small elite managed to grab most of the country's wealth. This concentration of political and economic power resulted in a country with abominable poverty and outrageous inequality. (Naím 2001:19)

This brief description gives insight on how governments in Venezuela over the last four decades have managed a country with enormous wealth but failed to deliver progress to the country. Hence, it is no surprise that Hugo Chávez's ascendancy to power in 1999 was more a response to a long-term degradation and decomposition of the political power once held by AD and COPEI, the two main political parties in Venezuela (Naím, 2001). The country had faced, and still faces high levels of corruption, and all the money that the oil industry produced was never reverted into social policies that would improve the life of so many impoverished people. According to Naím (2001), in the last two decades, poverty has been the country's defining issue. Until 1980, Venezuela was the world's fastest growing economy; however, today sixty-eight percent of Venezuelans live below the poverty line (ibid). So Mr. Chávez, instead of being the expected hope for Venezuelans, failed to deliver on its promises of a better life for the majority of people in the country, and instead, he adopted radical policies and measures that not only created political instability, but also created a highly polarized society (ibid).

Nowadays, the country faces the highest levels of insecurity. During Chavez's mandate Venezuela became one of the most hostile and violent countries in the world (Naím, 2013b); scarcity of basic need products is an everyday issue; corruption keeps proving as a symptom of the country's problems (Naím, 2001); there are scarce job opportunities and the government far from trying to resolve these issues, is more likely to retain power at any cost, even at the expense of civil liberties from those who oppose

the government's ideas. Now with president Nicolas Maduro in the frontline, people are showing their rejection and dissatisfaction to a system that is oppressive and has shown no sign whatsoever of using its power to alleviate poverty, reduce inequality, or put Venezuela's economy on a sustainable path (Naím, 2001). Once again, the public administration has failed to respond to its citizens' needs and problems, and has shown incompetence in a country where public-sector efficiency has been low (ibid).

Why conduct research in Venezuela?

Although the country is now dealing with one of the worst economic crisis, there are no democratic guarantees and insecurity seems to rise every day. The civil society is tired of this situation and has decided to speak up, especially students. They are now the new political actors, as their participation into politics and into every-day issues proves they can join together and be an important opposing force against bad governance or against inefficient politicians. The student movement emerged as a response to the critical situation the country is now facing, and students have been present in the streets for fourteen years now showing their inconformity with the government.

The social and political relevance of learning more about the Venezuelan socio political crisis today is that the country is going through a historical moment right now, where the levels of participation of civil society are growing each day, as they show their nonconformity with the government and claim for different and better ways of doing politics in order to build a more inclusive and just society. I believe that Venezuela is in the midst of a deep political transition, searching for new alternatives in order to strengthen democracy and to achieve good governance, by promoting civil participation, more social justice, stronger institutions and most importantly, trying to reach for a space where dialogue between different ideas and ideologies can be built.

Student movements in Venezuela

Student movements in Latin America where from the very beginning an expression of the middle classes of societies trying to claim spaces of participation in socio political issues (López Sánchez, 2006). In this context, the student movement entails a political orientation that questions the status quo and demands for a progressive vision about how universities should be used as spaces for criticizing social inequalities, and political oppression (ibid). This has not been different in the case of Venezuela. Along the

history of the country, the presence of students during difficult political times have always been a subject of interest, since their participation have always showed up as an act of rebellion against the practices of the government, and opposing any idea that went against the practice of civil liberties and democracy. Active participation from Venezuelan students has been key in different moments in the history of the country (Cavet & De Bastos, 2012).

Two important issues have characterized the political history of the Venezuelan student movement, the first one related to the struggle against militarism, and the second related to the construction and defense of a civil law system and democratic freedom (Bermúdez et al., 2011). The presence of Venezuelan students in political struggles against militarism in the country goes back to the early twentieth century. When in 1908 the country lived the longest dictatorship in the country with former president Juan Vicente Gómez, the only sector that maintained a firm opposition against Gómez's regime was the student sector (ibid).

Different events along the twentieth century have marked the presence of the student movement and its leading role in the construction of a democratic system. In this sense the year 1928 is as a key year, identified in the political history of the country as the "28-generation", since students that conformed this generation had a major role in the struggles against dictatorships in the country in the first half of the twentieth century, and in the construction and strengthening of a democratic system. After this, many other events involving the student movement had been in the forefront of the political history of Venezuela. Most recently, the year 2007 has also been part of the student movement history since students once again reappeared after a long period of absence in the political scene to claim spaces for national reconciliation and to propose new ways of doing politics.

When talking about the student movement in Venezuela, there are two essential elements that define it: its agile and fresh dynamic that allows it to be less formal and rigid compared to political parties, and its permanent renovation and incorporation of students, leading to new generations with different ways of acting and thinking (Cavet & De Bastos, 2012). Students' protests have appeared in the social and political sphere in key moments in Venezuela due to either problems that have a negative impact on

students, or because of social discontent towards implemented policies, and absence of good leaders that cause a general nuisance among citizens (ibid).

From the 1928 generation to the student movement of 2007

Different events along the twentieth century have marked the presence of the student movement and its leading role in the construction of a democratic system. In this sense the year 1928 is as a key year, identified in the political history of the country as the “28-generation”, since students that conformed this generation had a major role in the struggles against dictatorships in the country in the first half of the twentieth century, and in the construction and strengthening of a democratic system. After this, many other events involving the student movement had been in the forefront of the political history of Venezuela. Most recently, the year 2007 has also been part of the student movement history since students once again reappeared after a long period of absence in the political scene to claim spaces for national reconciliation and to propose new ways of doing politics.

The 28-generation

The importance of the 28-generation in Venezuela’s contemporary history lies in three important aspects: the first one, a leader like Gomez who was used to solving political conflicts in the battlefield, suddenly had to face a group of students that acting together as a collective, set out a struggle in a unknown field for Gomez and in general for all the leaders of the nineteenth century, which was the street; from that moment political struggles of the twentieth century are carried out in the cities by strikes, boycotts and protests⁶. Secondly, the collective character of the 1928 student movement, expressed in the word “generation,” was part of another important element of rupture with the political history of the nineteenth century, that has to do with the depersonalization of power. This is why although there were a lot of important student leaders in the 28 generation, no one had a special mention, the unity of the group prevailed above individualities, which is important to understand political organizations of the twentieth century in Venezuela⁷. Finally, students from the 28-generation introduced new ideologies such as socialism, and democracy, that made it impossible for old leaders

⁶ http://www.venezuelatuya.com/historia/generacion_28.htm

⁷ http://www.venezuelatuya.com/historia/generacion_28.htm

likes Gomez to adapt to. Many historians consider this student movement a crucial point in the historical evolution of the country, as well as a reference in the study of all the universities struggles that followed (Cavet & De Bastos, 2012).

The general character of all the student movements that followed had in common the necessity to establish and maintain a democratic regime in Venezuela, the improvement of life conditions for the majority of society, and elimination or reduction of social inequality, but especially the student movement was conformed as a single movement against military dictatorships (Bermúdez et al., 2011). In this way, the student movement became one of the principal forces that propelled the overthrow of the last dictator in Venezuela in the twentieth century, general Marcos Pérez Jiménez, leading to the beginning of the democratic era in 1958 (ibid). Representative democracy consolidated in Venezuela in 1958, from this year new political aspiration were born (López Sánchez, 2006). It was also during this period that “El Pacto de Punto Fijo⁸” was reached, which meant the agreement between the elites of the main political organizations that had influence in the country by then. This pact was based on the recognition of the existence of diverse political, social and economic interests; from this pact the main political parties were born (Castillo, 2013)

The process of creating critical political thinking among young people was possible, among other things, because public universities became from their very beginnings spaces of resistance and ideological confrontation against dictatorial governments; they also turn out to be a space were it was possible to have critical thinking against all governments in Venezuela established since 1958 until 1980 approximately (Bermúdez et al., 2011).

The tradition of struggle from university students created a whole culture of student protests; In Venezuela, to be a university student became a synonym of subversive, rebellious, anti-system, etc., (López Sánchez, 2006). Furthermore, the diversity of social interests was never impediment for the student movement to have a social commitment with the revolutionary struggle, as Feuer in López (2006:76) says: *student movements have traditionally been considered as keepers of a superior ethical consciousness from*

⁸ The Punto Fijo Pact

the society they live in, and they act as historical forces that find themselves in conflict with the social system.

The university renovation movement in 1969

One of the reasons that gave rise to this movement was that students wanted to extend their direct democracy beyond the student movement, and they intended to change the university into an institution with full democracy, where its authorities would govern under the commitments acquired in assembly with all the university community (López Sánchez, 2006). In this way, “direct democracy without intermediaries” became the slogan among youth in the universities. This obviously collided with the political system of the parties, established in 1958, based on the delegation of power that the people practiced through votes (ibid). The university renovation as an exercise of democratic participation set a historical precedent in a society that started to notice how political parties were ignoring the will of the people, and instead were more interested in retaining power (ibid).

Student protests in the 80's

The student struggle at the end of the 80's had an important impact in Venezuelan society, because a social movement opposed to the traditional structures of political participation emerged, confronting political parties and institutions that implemented in the country a group of transforming measures that only served to feed the military insurgence of 1992 (López Sánchez, 2006). Political parties started to have a lot of discredit due to a number of corruption cases among its leaders, especially from the two most important parties in the country, AD and COPEI. Students and society in general were tired of this situation that also led to the country into a state of social and economic degradation (ibid). It was from the universities that for the first time students started to question and strongly criticized the two-party system, as they proved to be more a patronage system and full of vices (ibid).

Student's response to the oppression of the State introduced a culture of “street struggle”. At the end of the sixties the street protests became important in the context of the university renovation, but it was in the eighties when the street struggle had more impacts that started to affect the stability of the political system (López Sánchez, 2006).

From active participants to political apathy

From this moment on (1980), active participation from students starts to decrease, and the people started to focus more on solving their immediate needs (Bermúdez et al., 2011). All sectors in society started to have a negative image of political parties and the way politics was carried out by then, showing their disapproval in a distancing from politics that turned out into apathy (ibid). By mid eighties and beginning of nineties it was a fact that young people had a negative opinion about democratic institutions in Venezuela, until the point that most of the young people did not participate during elections; the incapacity of the government and all the political system to solve social problems combined with the economic crisis the country was facing generated bigger levels of social inequality, producing frustration and despair among young people (ibid).

The questioning of political parties was expressed in two opposing ways: in a passive way through general discontent, and in an active way through abstention and non-participation; Venezuela was facing a process of loss of representativeness from political parties, and this turned into an anti-party and anti-politic attitude among people (Castillo, 2013), questioning political actors' roles in society which implied a reconfiguration in the relationship between citizens and politics (ibid). This anti-politic refers to mobilizations that act in a different ways from institutional politics; thereby, the anti-politic started to act as a new way of doing politics that in a way expected to set aside political parties and question the dominant discourses related on how to do politics (ibid).

Over the decades, students have denounced the vices of the political system born after “El Pacto de Punto Fijo”; the same vices that made the pact failed. The patronage system; corruption; the excessive partisanship; the failure to solve education's needs; the processes of privatizing education and public services in general; putting institutions at the service of political and personal projects and forgetting its fundamental social functions; and the oppression against any form of protesting, were some of the issues that ignited students' mobilizations (López Sánchez, 2006), and many of these problems have not been resolved.

In this context of social discontent and political disenchantment with democratic institutions by Venezuelans is that the messianic figure of Hugo Chávez appears, a

leader that by the time had a different speech from the old political parties, and was for the first time showing political will to fight against poverty and all the social issues in the country (ibid). His political project was successful for winning the elections in 1998 because after four decades of corruption, Chávez was directing his discourse to the marginalized sectors in Venezuela, which happen to be a big proportion of the Venezuelan population. After a long time, people started to have hope and believed in Chavez's social agenda. He represented a new face in politics, which made him very popular among the poorest sectors of society. However, after fourteen years Chavez's proved to be another militant, and did not bring positive changes to the country. On the contrary he created many new and grave problems: confrontation, militarization, attacks against private property, physical and legal insecurity, elimination of the independence of powers, etc. His more and more authoritarian and radical politics started to jeopardize people's future because his measures were more restrictive and did not leave much space for people to act freely according to their ideology. Chavez's speech started to create polarization and confrontation between people, creating an atmosphere of tension and political disputes.

The student movement of 2007

By 2007 the Venezuelan society witnessed the appearance of a group of students that rejected the traditional way of doing politics and started to participate in the political sphere. Students from public and private universities, and experimental colleges started to take the lead in a number of political mobilizations against the measure taken by the government of closing a private television channel, RCTV, a channel that has always opposed to the government. These young students who decided to stand up in 2007 are still very active and engaged in political manifestations against the government, and their fight is for defending civil rights, and democratic values such as the inalienable value of freedom (Bermúdez et al., 2011).

The student's protests after the closure of RCTV in May 2007 were related to the fact that students wanted civil rights to be recognized. There was a lack of political representation and there were no signs of a strong opposition by then, whereby student's emergence in the political scene generated a great impact, and an immediate recognition by different sectors of society (Cavet & De Bastos, 2012). The student movement of 2007 advocated for a reconciliation speech, where both, government and opposition,

could reconcile their differences and work together instead of confronting each other, generating more polarization; the 2007 movement was a sign of hope in a society that was full of conflicts (ibid).

To talk about young Venezuelan students requires making clear the kind of youth one is referring to. In this sense, those who identified themselves with the university students are those who participate politically in other ways and in other spaces that are not the traditional ones, and that does not share the same discursive practices. However, there are also those who remain passive and indifferent to what happens politically in the country (Bermúdez et al., 2011).

However, the student movement of 2007 did not burst in the political scene just as a result of the closure of a TV channel. Previous events were creating a general discomfort in society that pilled up until it stormed into the appearance of young students in the streets after May 2007. These events had mostly to do with the insecurity the country was facing, in fact, the insecurity issue has been one of the most worrying topics in Venezuela over the last ten years (Cavet & De Bastos, 2012). The murder of three brothers and their chauffeur in 2006 after being kidnaped created manifestations from students to show their repudiation to this kind of violence; the universities were the main spaces of rejection from where violence was being denounced (ibid). Youth felt very closely what happened, creating a tense atmosphere of protests. From there, students felt they had to do something to call people's attention and to create consciousness about how this kind of violence should not be accepted, basically because most of the victims of such violence were young people (ibid).

The measures from the government in May 2007 to close RCTV were the excuse that finally put all the university community out in the streets. After that, thousands of students filled the streets to protest and demand for changes in society; with time, the student movement took shape and created solid leaderships that were able to face the government, as well as it sent a clear message to society that they were a new political actor (Cavet & De Bastos, 2012).

Summing up

Specialists consider that the student movement has never been completely absent from the political scene in the political history of Venezuela. Instead, it has been an evolving

movement that erupts in the public scene during political and social crises, and that part of its absence has to do more with the lack of identification with the public sector rather than political disinterest (Cavet & De Bastos, 2012).

The different students movement that have taken place in the history of Venezuela has shown that it is a plural movement, with ideological differences, and that they are diverse even in their social composition. However, in its diversity lies its strength as it is able to represent the diversity of opinions and ideas that society has; it has shown to be a movement where there is space for dialogue and agreement, where the common goal is not to impose anyone's ideology, but to be present in the political scene and to stand up for civil rights defending democratic values.

3 Methodology and the research process

On this chapter I will focus on explaining the diverse methods I used during my fieldwork and how those methods were useful in the process of collecting data for further analysis. Thus, this chapter will be based on my personal experience in the field, and will expose the challenges I had to overcome as well as how those challenges had an impact on myself and on the general process of inquiry.

In this particular case, fieldwork was conducted in the city of Valencia in Venezuela, during one month between June and July of 2013. In this time I conducted interviews, focus group discussions (FGD), analyzed secondary data, and although observation was not a method I considered at the beginning, it inevitable played out a significant role as I realized that much of the time I was being a passive observant, as well as an attentive listener. The importance of this chapter is that it values the significance of using different qualitative methods during fieldwork for understanding and analyzing the ways in which the knowledge acquired has been produced.

Using a case study approach

A case study research begins with the desire to acquire in-depth knowledge or understanding, of a single or multiple cases, set in the real world context; therefore examining the context and other conditions related to the case or cases being studied, are fundamental to understand the case (Yin, 2011). Furthermore, a case study is a very useful method of inquiry for addressing the exploratory research questions, as well as to explain real life events in relation to a determined context (ibid).

This approach also *favors the collection of data in natural settings* (Yin 2011:5), so the use of interviews, groups discussions and observation are important as they collect and provide first-hand data that can be very useful for the researcher in understanding the social phenomenon in question. Therefore, using this approach is relevant for my study as it can explain the reasons why the Venezuelan student movement emerged; its characteristics; and finally it can provide a justification for why such student movement is important in the social and political scene in Venezuela.

The main case: the Venezuelan student movement of 2007

The most important step is to define the “case” that is going to be studied (Yin, 2011). For my purpose, the Venezuelan student movement of 2007 constitutes the main unit of analysis. This movement has been in the political scene more vividly since 2007, and its presence responds to an inconformity with the way politicians are governing the country. This student movement’s struggle is more related to finding new ways of doing politics and opening new spaces for young people to participate in politics in order to improve the situation of the country. The student movement advocates for dialogue and reconciliation between opposite ideas, they do it by making use of their right of protesting pacifically and intervening in the decision making process, and by getting involved in the every-day issues that affect Venezuelan society.

The reason why I choose this case was because it represents a historical moment in Venezuelan history; university students are in the leading edge of a political transition in the country and to study this case in its context adds enormous value to understanding social processes in which youth are involved as leading actors. Finally, by studying this case, I believe I can help to contribute to the knowledge production of such event, since the Venezuelan student movement of 2007 is quite recent in Venezuelan history, and therefore this knowledge can help to explain socio political processes in the country, as well as young people’s motivations for taking part in Venezuela’s political history.

Qualitative methodology

Qualitative inquiry cultivates the most useful of all human capacities: The capacity to learn (From Halcolm’s Laws of Inquiry in Patton 2002:1)

An important stage in defining the research process is to choose the best methodological approach according to the research problem. In my case, qualitative methodology was the approach that best met my research needs, because it allowed me to study in depth and detail my research topic (Patton, 2002). Consequently, it was an easy decision to choose this approach as I was going to look at the experiences of young people’s engagement in Venezuelan politics during the last ten years, as well as to understand their reality in order to contextualize it within the actual situation of the country. The importance of this approach according to Boeije (2010) is that it emphasizes the role of how individuals attach meaning to the construction of their social reality.

Another important aspect to keep in mind is that it is not about the quantity of the sample to collect information, but more about the quality of the information, and the qualities of the studied event or issue (Cloke et al., 2004; Limb & Dwyer, 2001). I became aware of this quality matter when I was already in the middle stage of my fieldwork, as I realized how valuable and rich in details was the information my participants had given me.

In order to get into the detailed and enriching information, I carried out interviews and FGD since these primary sources allowed me to understand people's everyday lives in their context (Crang & Cook, 2007), as well as the chance to look closely to young people's experiences and perceptions regarding their role as social agents. It also led me to a wider and deeper understanding of the social and political situation of the country, and the motivations that have pushed, and are pushing, a new generation of youth into action challenging the status quo in the political sphere and creating what I would call in my opinion, a new generation of change.

Before going to the field: Who? Why? What? How?

Preparation before going to the field is very important. It gave me the chance to organize and structure my work in order to have access to participants who provided me with information about my topic; it also helped me acquire an idea of what to expect, and the chance to be reflexive and realistic about the outcomes I might get. Additionally, by identifying possible limitations of my study I was better prepared for accepting how much I was able to achieve (Clifford *et al.*, 2010). Of course, this does not mean that things will always go as expected, and in my case, being flexible was key for me to adapt to last minute changes and difficulties, as I will explain later.

During the preparation phase I had to thoroughly think about:

WHO are the people I want to interview?

WHY are those informants relevant?

WHAT kind of information can the chosen informants provide?

HOW can I get access to them?

These questions helped me guide my research plan beforehand since it gave me a structure to follow and was easy not deviate from my purpose; nevertheless, keeping

this idea in mind helped me a lot during fieldwork, since I got in touch with most of my participants through snowballing. As I was acquiring information from my participants, I became more aware of the quality and significance of my data, helping me in answering these questions with much more critical thinking.

Since the beginning of my work, I heard in mind one person that I thought could be my key informant: Jose Antonio Bucete. We used to be classmates in High School in Venezuela, and I knew he was an active member in a political party. Indeed he was very helpful in providing me with useful information about my topic, as well as giving me his own opinion about how feasible he thought my project could be given the political context in Venezuela. This person is an active member of the political party “Primero Justicia⁹, PJ” and was also running for city councilor. This political party was conceived with the hope to help develop a better and more just country, and contains the specific program “Young Justice”, a program that involves activists between the ages of 18 and 28 years old with the mission to promote the participation on young Venezuelans in the social and political life.¹⁰

With the help of Jose Antonio I had the chance to contact other people, and these other people helped me get in touch with more participants. Thus, snowballing or networking method proved to be the most useful technique for finding my participants (Boeije 2010; Clifford *et al.*, 2010), although it provided me with a specific type of participants as I will explain later on this chapter. In Venezuela nowadays most of young people talk about politics, it is not a taboo topic and it is very much out there, so in this sense contacting people was not supposed to be a difficult task. However, I was interested in knowing the experiences of young people who were also engaged into politics. Through snowballing I was able to get in touch with people who were visible or who were known among youth because of their active role in politics or social change.

I also knew that in order for my research to be unbiased, I had to access people with different political ideologies. Since Jose Antonio was part of the government’s opposition party, I tried to contact people from the government’s party, “Partido

⁹ Justice First

¹⁰ http://www.primerojusticia.org.ve/cms/index.php?option=com_contact&view=category&id=167&Itemid=506

Socialista Unido de Venezuela¹¹, PSUV”. This party, as well as “Primero Justicia”, has a youth program called “Youth of Venezuelan’s United Socialist Party”, which aims to include youth as active members in the political realm, through participation in group committees¹². My attempts of contacting the responsible of the region from the Venezuelan’s United Party where I was going to conduct my fieldwork failed as I never got an answer from him, nor from any other groups of young activists from the socialist party which I tried to contact using the social networks, and Internet resources. Yet, I was able to contact some of them once in the field as some of my participants provided me information about people with different political ideology that I could include in my participants list.

Before going to the field, I also got in touch with a person in Venezuela who was working for an organization called “Partners of the Americas”, which is an organization that *connect people and organizations across borders to serve and to change lives through lasting partnerships*¹³. Through this person, I was able to reach some young people that had participated in the organization as exchange students in the United States for a short time period. I thought it was interesting to know the perspective of these young people who had participated doing voluntary work, and also to know the real purpose of their exchange. The relevancy of this group was that I considered it important to get in touch with youth that had no particular political affiliation, but still participated in society somehow. All of these contacts were given to me before going to the field, so I had the time to get in touch with them through e-mails explaining who I was and the reason I wanted to interview them.

One thing that surprised me in a very positive way was that these young people without knowing me, were eager to participate in my study. They felt very important with the fact that somebody wanted to know their opinions and own experiences as people who actively participate in their community in one way or another. I got answers such as: *it’s a pleasure to help you with your thesis* (Milexis Ochoa); *I appreciate that you are interested in doing this kind of project, because you’re not only thinking about your country, but also in a way you can let people know something very positive, that is how*

¹¹ Venezuelan’s United Socialist Party

¹² <http://juventud.psuv.org.ve/equipo-nacional-de-la-jpsuv/>

¹³ http://www.partners.net/partners/How_We_Work.asp

young people are preparing for a change (Participant A); I appreciate people who engage in this kind of projects, so don't hesitate to ask me anything you need (Participant B).

I contacted ten people through a collaborator of Partners of the Americas; seven responded my email, but at the end I was only able to interview three of them. I suggested Skype meetings with the people that were not able to meet me in person, and although some of them looked quite interested, at the end I was left without answers of when to Skype each other. Here is when I started to realize that it was not an easy task to access all my participants, and although I was somehow persistent, I still did not get as many participants as I hoped for. I also tried to gain more awareness about the general situation of Venezuelan, political, economical, and social, before going there.

During my time in the field, teachers from public universities were at strike because their salaries have not been raised in many years, and many students were manifesting defending the teachers' right for a decent income. This issue was a problem for me because some of the spaces I considered for interviewing my participants were universities, and not having access to them (because they were closed) reduced my possibilities for accessing students. However, I was lucky enough to organize a group discussion with some students who happened to be attending school because of an arrangement with teachers who were not participating in the strike. I have to say that this was a very unique opportunity for me, because the students I interviewed were from Carabobo University, one of the most important public universities in the region, which reunites students from all social categories, with different ideologies, and different backgrounds. Besides, my participants were first year students of Political Science, and they were eager to participate in the group discussion.

In total I was able to interview thirteen people (Appendix 1), and conducted two group discussions (Appendix 2), one group with four members, and the other group with seven members. Among my participants, there were people from all ideologies, and all of them were university students, except for two young men who were finishing high school. I have to say that regarding gender, most of my participants were males. I did not consider it important to understand if there were gender differences for participating in politics, as my goal was to understand the role of youth as one group and the way they behave and react to life changing events in society. To go into details about gender

would have required more time in the field, and would have changed my research objective. However, I did consider that the impact on gender would be interesting to study in case I wanted to deepen my study in the future.

Collecting data using qualitative techniques

As I mentioned earlier, in order to gain in-depth knowledge and a better understanding of why young people in Venezuela have been involved in politics in the last ten years, I mainly used interviews, focus group discussions, and assessed secondary data. However while on the field, I realized I was also being an observant (a passive observant since I was not expecting to collect any kind of significant data through observation) and most of all a solicitous listener, even during moments where I was not doing fieldwork.

Also worth mentioning is that since my native language is Spanish, and I was born and raised in Venezuela, there was no language barrier that impeded me to understand local expressions and ways of communicating. This benefited my research greatly because in the way young people talk and from the tone they use, there is a lot of information that can be interpreted. According to Crang and Cook (2007:49) *language use varies by geographical and interactional context*. The context in this case was related to the everyday lives of young people and their political engagement. The challenge for me was to get used to a vocabulary or expressions that related very much to the political world, such as “street activities”, “street movement”, “the fight of all”, “fellow, get active!” among others.

All my participants allowed me to record the interviews, which made it easier for me to focus entirely on the conversation. I found it really hard to take notes during the interviews because I noticed that the few times I did, I lost concentration, and I did not want to give the impression to my participants that I was lost, so I just wrote down very specific words or sentences that I wanted to keep in mind for asking questions later.

Interviews

When interviewing people, we do it *to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe* (Patton, 2002:340); it is an opportunity for the researcher to engage in a better understanding about social life through the participant’s emotions, feelings, thoughts, and perceptions (Boeije, 2010), and going beyond the obvious to reveal the detailed knowledge a person has. As Crang and Cook (2007) mention, interviews are

the primary source through which ethnographic researchers understand and deal with the context and matters of people's everyday lives.

I conducted in-depth interviews that were in most cases semi-structured, which provided great knowledge about youth's activism and students' movements. It also became a very useful technique because it allowed me to discover new ideas about my subject. This helped redefine my objectives and of course, there is also the fact that new points of views can enrich the analysis of the underlying argument, which is the reasons and motivations that make young people in Venezuela become active members in their society, specifically, their presence in the political environment.

The topics and questions I wanted to cover were prepared beforehand; I worked on an interview guide that helped me keep track of the themes I wanted to cover. However, this guide was adjusted as new information from my participants arose, and as I progressively learned the value of considering new approaches about my topic.

During my first interviews, I was nervous and not confident about my skills since it was my first time interviewing. At the beginning I found it difficult to establish a natural flow between the questions I wanted to ask and my participants, but as I got the chance to interview more and more people I got to improve my abilities when interacting with them. Also, the interview guide (Appendix 3) made me feel a little uncomfortable during my first interviews; I saw it more as something I was depending on, instead of a support for not forgetting the issues I was interested in. After I got used to my role as a researcher and improved my skills for interviewing, I felt more self-confident and optimistic. Moreover, the more people I interviewed the more knowledge I had in order to engage in more critical thinking and questioning, and the more self-confident I felt when meeting with my participants.

Being prepared for an interview was as important as it was to be polite and open with my participants. My questions reflected that I was prepared and curious. Before starting the interview I always introduced myself and expressed my gratitude for being able to count on my participant's time. I always made clear from the start the purpose of the interview, and why I was conducting this research. I explained my situation of being a Venezuelan but not living in the country for the last ten years, and therefore missing out many important events that shaped the way youth participate in politics nowadays. I

also did not mind saying that there was a lot I did not know about when and how the transition of youth from passive to active members had occurred. By showing that I was interested in understanding this social phenomenon and making them realize they were the experts of the topic, my participants were eager to explain and share their personal experiences and knowledge.

Most of my participants were very talkative, and after the first few interviews, the process went usually like an informal conversation. The convenience of semi-structured interview is that they allow the dynamic to be more flexible, and although I was guiding the process I was also able to engage in very interesting discussions by allowing my participant to talk about something I did not contemplate at the beginning. Being flexible and open was key in order to create a natural flow between researcher and participant.

I was also very impressed with the way my participants expressed themselves; their vocabulary use and the way they were so articulated in their speaking showed me these young people were highly educated in the topic and knew very well what they were talking about, and most importantly, that they were used to talking about the topic. In fact, some of the people I interviewed were used to appear in the media and talk to a large number of people. They were very eloquent and their knowledge was based on their own experiences combined with a keen personal interest about the political situation of their country.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

According to Patton (2002:385) , *a focus group interview is an interview with a small group of people on a specific topic*, its relevance lays on the fact that each participant can hear each other's opinions and responses and make additional comments beyond their own responses (ibid). The goal of a FGD is not to reach a general consensus, but to share ideas about a specific topic and achieve *high-quality data in a social context where people consider their own views in the context of the views of others* (Patton 2002:386).

The reason I wanted to conduct groups discussions was because this technique helped me understand the way people work out their opinions and ideas about youth and political participation in a social context (Crang & Cook, 2007). For this experience to

be successful it was important that I kept the conversation flowing and made sure I involved every member of the group into the discussion (Kitchin & Tate, 2000). Also the selection of people was very important, and I made sure when I conducted this activity to have people with similar experiences to share (ibid.)

Young people act in society as a whole and their actions can have a big impact when they unite. In this sense, in how youth perceive themselves as a group with the power to change things, their actions will have a certain range. Community participation, students' movements, and activism are some of the areas where youth is very present, and they act collectively for achieving better outcomes. Being able to conduct focus groups discussions allowed me to see how young people with the same or different ideology interact and share their opinions.

I conducted two focus groups discussions; one with four people from an organization called "Súmate", a non-profit civil organization founded in 2002, proposed to build a more just democracy, and that provides technical capacity to facilitate citizens' participation processes¹⁴. The young people, between nineteen and twenty eight years, in the group were all volunteers in this organization, and the process took place in one of the rooms of Súmate's head office. All of them were students that engaged in community participation during their free time by leading workshops about active citizenship. Also, these people were very much involved during elections processes as members of polling stations, or as polling stations witnesses.

The other group consisted of first year students of Political Science at Carabobo University. There were seven participants, and the focus group took place in a classroom from the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, I was very lucky to conduct this group discussion because most professors were at strike, and public universities were closed because of this. I was very fortunate to contact the right person at the right time. Participants in this group were quite young, between eighteen and twenty-four years old, but the level of the debate was very high. This group was very interesting to talk to because within the group there was all kind of ideologies. I was amazed at how civilized the discussion was. It is not

¹⁴ <http://www.sumate.org/nosotros.html>

easy to engage in political debates when there are opposing ideas, but in this case, I was very impressed by the tolerance and respect showed by this group.

Conducting group discussions with these two groups was one of the most enriching experiences in my fieldwork. My challenge was to be able to moderate the discussion and include everyone in the process, as well as to negotiate with power relations in order to make everyone express their thoughts. The two groups were the last interviews I did before finishing fieldwork; by that point I was feeling very confident about my abilities and skills. I did not use the interview guideline at this point, since I knew already the subjects I wanted to cover, such as motivations that led young people to participate, and how this sudden need of participating in politics grew during the last ten years.

Informal conversations

A lot of significant information can also be produced when you least expect it, or when you haven't planned for it. In my case, when I was talking with friends over coffee political subjects always arose, like how insecurity should be one of the main targets in the political agenda; how young people do not find jobs after they finish their studies; the political polarization, and the economic crisis the country is facing. Of course, I did not record these conversations because it would have changed the natural dynamic of the dialog, but I did write down some important ideas that I did not want to forget. The good thing about this spontaneous source of information is that allows the participant to feel comfortable and relaxed, since the setting is not planned or organized in advance (Kitchin & Tate, 2000).

Most of the time when people asked me why I was in Venezuela and I had the chance to explain, they immediately started talking about the political issue in the country, and from the conversations I could grasp and interpret how young people were more active in political matters; for example, they talked about problems they had in their community and how they were organizing working groups to solve such problems (problems with water and electric supplies; collecting school material for children, etc.). In the way they got involved in every-day problems they show their level of commitment to society, and how they take responsibility for things that will benefit the collective. It was very interesting to notice that politics is something very immersed in the day-to-day lives of these people. I just had to be aware and attentive to what was

being said, and follow the conversation in order to answer some of my questions and doubts.

Observation: overt or covert observant?

Kitchin and Tate emphasize that observation depends on the *observer's ability to interpret what is happening and why* (2000:219). At first I did not consider observation as a source for gathering data, because I thought this technique required much more than just paying attention to what is happening in a social setting. However, I became increasingly aware that most of the time I was receiving meaningful information simply by paying attention to what I was observing and listening to.

During the interviews I noticed that my participants felt comfortable; their body language was a good indicator of this. Usually they were very calm during the interview, but sometimes when they started talking about their own experiences I felt they got more excited and passionate about the topic.

I also noticed that during informal conversations, it was sometimes difficult to keep a calm and relaxed dialogue among people with different political ideologies. Young people have very strong political ideas and opinions, and they are used to confronting opposing ideas, fueling the big polarization they are living nowadays. Being able to witness this was quite an interesting experience because I could more or less perceive how young people deal and convey with the political issues in a social context. Thus, I realized that I was being an observer to a very important degree, and that the information I was receiving was meaningful to construct more knowledge about my research topic. In this sense, Angrosino and Rosenberg (2013) in Denzin and Lincoln (2013:152) state that (...) *we now function in a context of collaborative research in which the researcher no longer operates at a distance from those being observed*; observation therefore cannot be detached from the research process.

When it comes to question what kind of observation I was doing, I realized that I was being a covert observant. Following this argument, Patton (1990) explains that by doing covert observation it is more likely to capture what is really happening, because the subjects being observed tend to act more naturally. Of course, with this comes great discussion related to ethical considerations, since researcher should inform their participants they are being observed. Furthermore, Patton (2002) also advocates for

searching opportunities to collect what he calls unobtrusive measures, which are those made without people knowing that they are being observed and without affecting what is observed. This applies more to what I did, although I was not fully conscious about it when I was engaging in this process. Although my intention was not to use observation as a main technique for acquiring my data as I mentioned before, I realized that observation is an inevitable process. The difference of whether observation is overt or covert will relay on the researcher's objectives and the kind of knowledge he or she is seeking.

Secondary data

Assessment of secondary data is also important because it constitutes an important source of information that can help understand the topic that is being studied. In my case, during the times that I was not conducting interviews, I was broadening my understanding of youth and political participation by reading articles and books, and by watching pictures, news, documents, YouTube clips, etc.

One of my participants was very kind to give me a book about students' movement in Venezuela in the last years. I also got in touch with an academic of the IESA¹⁵ who by the time I was doing fieldwork, was finishing his study: "Comparative analysis on the motivations of young people's active participation in governance in Venezuela, during the period 2002-2012" (Castillo, 2013). This person was also very helpful as he sent me the complete report after it was finished.

Where do I stand?

As a researcher it is important to always be aware of ones position, to analyze and constantly reflect on the research process, and to modify it when necessary (Dowling, 2000). It is not only an ethical consideration, but being reflexive is necessary to be critical towards ones work and its role during the whole inquiry process.

In my experience I realized that in order for my study to be unbiased I had to contact people with any kind of ideology, and so I did. I was aware that I had to be a neutral

¹⁵ The IESA (Institute of advanced management studies in Venezuela) is a business school that trains leaders to become responsible professionals or businessmen capable of contributing to the success of public or private organizations.

listener in every case, because in the end, my goal was not to have a political debate about people's political convictions. My objective was to understand the reasons that pushed young people to be active social agents.

Being neutral, or trying to not get emotionally involved with my participants' experiences was one of the most challenging things I had to overcome. I had to leave aside my personal experience of moving out of the country and the reasons in order not to let my emotions affect my role as a researcher. The good outcome of this is that emotions can make the research more engaging, and can provoke interesting reflections (Lund, 2012) . In my case, it made me be more reflexive about the fact that it does not matter so much the political preferences of a person, what counts is the motivation that leads that person to care enough about what is happening in his or her society, so he or she would engage in some kind of civil participation.

Related to my participant's involvement in the research, I always explained beforehand what they were getting involved into, and the nature of my project. I also made clear that their participation was completely voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the interview or FGD at any time. I also got their consent to record all the sessions and for using some of their names, hence names that are given are based on informed consent in the thesis. However, on the case of two of my participants that were underage, I preferred to identify them as Participant A and Participant B and not reveal their real names. All these ethical considerations were constantly in my mind, and I always made sure that I was doing the right thing in terms of handling my interviews and the participants.

Insider or outsider?

The fact that I chose to do my study back in my home country was something my participants appreciated. They saw me in a way as someone they could relate to. Also, I was seen as somebody who could be able to export the information I was gathering so people abroad would hear their voices. This was something I realized that was very important for them; they wanted "the world" to know what is happening in their country. In fact, many of my informants were curious to know if I wanted to continue the study of my topic after I finish my master degree, or if it was possible to extend the study later on.

Regarding this, I saw myself in a conflicting situation, on the one hand because although my informants provided me with very useful information about youth and participation into politics in the country, they also politicized the interview much of the time; it was very difficult not to get into the political discussion and therefore, into the ideological aspects behind each one's opinion. So when my informants mentioned that this information should be “out there”, they were not talking about how youth has been actively involved into politics for the last ten years, but they were more concerned about exporting, through me, the situation in Venezuela, or their perception of it, which was indeed a much-politicized and somewhat biased opinion. On the other hand, when I was asked if I wanted to continue with this project afterwards, I did not know what to answer, since it was not in my mind to develop further into the topic after finishing my master's degree. This made me think that I could actually deepen the study. In this sense, I think my participants saw me in a position of power, since I was supposed to be able to decide whether I wanted to “spread” this very interesting information or not; but being reflexive about it made me realize that my objective was about understanding youth political engagement, not to become an activist myself.

I never felt rejected or questioned for living in another country, and this made me feel very comfortable. My participants shared with me a lot of personal experiences, and the fact that they trusted me, was something that I valued. In fact, most of the times my participants did not even consider my living abroad into account. As soon as they heard me talking they knew that I was “one of them”.

I realized that the process of gathering information opened a whole new range of possibilities and questions that I was able to contemplate and consider by interacting with my participants, by being flexible to changes, and by keeping an open mind for new ideas.

Some lessons learned

In most of the cases, punctuality, or better yet, unpunctuality was something that I had to deal with most of the times. Of all my interviews, only three took place on the agreed time; the rest of the times, my participants always made me wait. This made me feel powerless at the beginning because there was nothing I could do about it. I just made sure that I was on time and try to understand that not being on time is something part of Venezuelan culture. This was something I had forgotten after ten years of living abroad.

The “not-being on time” issue was problematic when I had more than one interview during the day. Whether my participants were late or not, I always did my best to be punctual as a sign of respect and professionalism. Being flexible and having a good attitude in this case was the correct reaction as I later learned; looking at it proactively, if my participant was running late I had more time to schedule for other interviews, or prepare better for the interview to come.

Another lesson learnt was not to program more than two interviews per day. Most of my interviews lasted at least fifty minutes, and after that I noticed I was mentally exhausted because I had to be very focused during the process. It was also important to have some time between interviews to grasp some of the important ideas and to write down notes. It is important also to acknowledge that the longer the interview, the longer it will take to transcribe. Sometimes I had very talkative participants that did not realize the time, and for me it was difficult to interrupt the session because I was also very interested in what was being said.

Limitations and challenges

I want to emphasize the role of the researcher’s safety. Venezuela has been facing for a long time great social instability and upheaval and this has inevitably lead to a lot of insecurity in the country, especially in urban areas. This insecurity issue limited my access not only to places, but also to people. I am aware that I did not interview people from every social class, especially from the lower class, and as a consequence my findings may not be very representative of the whole youth population, since I only contacted university students. The reason why I did not access people from poorer neighborhoods had to do with the fact that I did not feel safe accessing those spaces, and I also did not have the right contacts for doing so safely. I even felt very vulnerable moving around my “comfort zone”.

Access to public transportation was also dangerous, so I had to have a person of trust to drive me to the different places I needed to go. I had to be careful with the way I dressed in order to not draw people’s attention, and I could not be in the streets after six o’clock because it was very dangerous. All these facts conditioned very much the way I moved around on the field. I was feeling very anxious and worried during the first week about my own safety, and was very aware of what Dowling (2000) mention about putting the researcher at risk. A personal reflection about all this is that it is important to

be aware of the risk that one can be exposed to, but also, doing fieldwork with fear will definitely have an impact on one's findings. It is therefore important to consider whether it is really worth for the researcher to evaluate well beforehand the safety of the research setting, and how far does one want to get considering the security limitations in the field.

It is also worth mentioning the importance of the setting and location. All my interviews took place in public spaces, to be more precise, in coffee shops that were accessible for me since I did not have all the freedom to move where I wanted. Public spaces tend to be loud and noisy, background noises never ceased. Traffic was hectic during all times of the day, and the noise of the cars was very unpleasant. For me, it was hard to feel calm and relaxed when I conducted my interviews, and I believe this also conditioned my receptiveness, especially during the first interviews. Even after a month I must admit that it was hard to adapt to such a chaotic setting. For me, the public domain was synonym of unsafe space, and working in this kind of setting is very challenging because it made me think until what point I was willing to expose my own security in order to access participants or to conduct interviews. It also made me think about the risk factor, since in a setting like the Venezuelan one, people are always at the risk of being assaulted, robbed, or kidnapped. So the context where I conducted my research determined my vulnerability and my capacity to do things and access people and places.

Lastly, in regard to my chosen sample I questioned myself until what point my participants were randomly chosen, or if instead they were more driven by my respondents through snowball sampling (Heckathorn, 1997). Since most of my participants were university students and more or less had a same profile, I realized that when contacting people through my gate-keeper, he was referring me to people with the same characteristics as him: students from a certain social class, that had higher education, from a certain political tendency. Thus, this made me think that snowball sampling or other chain-referral sampling had some disadvantages: chain-referral tend to be biased toward the subject who agree to participate, and referrals occurs through network links, so people with larger personal networks will be oversampled risking to not reach some isolated network of people (Heckathorn, 1997). Furthermore, this kind of sampling can deliver a unique type of knowledge, since the researcher renounce to a certain amount of control over the sampling phase to the informants (Noy, 2008). It is

smart to be cautious regarding sampling next time I decide to conduct research, since this kind of sampling made me realized that is more or less limited if I do not contact people from different networks, narrowing the scope of my research.

Analysis of data

According to Crang and Cook, *throughout the research process, writing and analysis are inseparable* (2007:133). Analysis of data does not start after fieldwork, it is a process that actually begins the moment one starts reflecting on the WHO, WHY, WHAT and HOW about the research topic. These questions are the foundations that are going to determine the path the researcher follows for acquiring its research objectives.

After fieldwork, the researcher's challenge lies in how he or she is going to make sense of all the data collected in order to transform data into findings (Patton, 2002). Many authors describe the analysis of data as a creative and yet systematic way of organizing the researcher's findings (Crang & Cook, 2007; Kitchin & Tate, 2000). By systematic, it is meant that raw data has to go through a process of description, followed by classification, to later see where the interconnection is (Kitchin & Tate, 2000); all this with the objective to interpret and be able to explain the data generated (ibid.) Furthermore, the process of analysis should always aim to answer the research questions.

Putting all this information into practice is indeed very challenging. After conducting fieldwork the next step was to transcribe all the interviews, a very much time consuming process, but that helped me to refresh important notions and ideas. During the transcription process, it was necessary to code and find meaningful connections in the data for further interpretation (Boeije, 2010). Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) propose six steps¹⁶ for transforming the information of the transcriptions into a theoretical narrative. A theoretical narrative *describes the process that the research participants reported in terms of your theoretical constructs (...) It employs people's own language to make their story vivid and real* (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003:73). I

¹⁶ The six steps that Auerbach and Silverstein (2003:43) propose are: 1) Explicitly state research problem and theoretical framework; 2) Select the relevant text for further analysis; 3) Record repeating ideas by grouping together related passages of relevant text; 4) Organize themes by grouping repeating ideas into coherent categories; 5) Develop theoretical constructs by grouping themes into more abstracts concepts consistent with your theoretical framework; 6) Create a theoretical narrative by retelling the participant's story in terms of the theoretical constructs.

more or less used these steps as a guide in order to handle all the information I had. It was very useful as it helped me to organize and code my data in order to create the main themes from where I based my analysis. This process, although is long and can result exhausting, is very useful as it helps to break down all the information into pieces easy to handle and structure for the subsequent analysis. Lastly, all the fragments and quotations used in my analysis, and throughout my thesis, were translated from Spanish to English. Translations have been made keeping the same idea and response from my participants.

Summing up

In this chapter I have explained the use of qualitative methodology as a useful approach for obtaining in-depth data about youth's participation in politics. I exposed the importance of using a case study approach in order to focus on a single case, the Venezuelan student movement, and gain deeper knowledge about a social phenomenon in relation to its context. Furthermore, I justified the use of several qualitative techniques for acquiring data, as well as the limitations and challenges presented in order to obtain it. Having a clear idea of what kind of knowledge one is pursuing makes it easier to decide what kind of informants to contact, and what kind of information to obtain; thus, the preparation phase before doing fieldwork proved to be as useful and valuable as fieldwork itself, since it helps to have a clear idea of what to do once in the field.

An important aspect to take into account is to know whether the situation of the country where one will conduct research is safe or not, since this can have a positive, or negative impact for the researcher when trying to access people and places. In my case, I realized that the social and political instability in the country presented a hostile context for me, and this made me feel vulnerable as I was not completely independent when I had to access people. However, I also learned the value of conducting qualitative research in such hostile context, as it helped me to understand a little bit more the reasons why young people decide to engage in politics in order to transform realities. Finally, analyzing all the data after fieldwork is a time consuming process, but is the only way to establish connections and codified the data in order to establish the main topics for the analysis chapter.

4 Theory

Theory constitutes the roots for understanding the what, how and why of any social phenomenon; it helps the researcher to stay grounded and to follow a methodical path to arrive at the objectives of his/her research. This chapter aims to explain the theoretical approach chosen for studying youth and political participation in Venezuela. I will justify the use of two approaches that give social meaning to my research problem, which is essentially about understanding the reasons that gave rise to the Venezuelan student movement during the last ten years. These are the generational politics approach, and the life-course politics approach. Each of them explains the importance in understanding the relationship between age and politics (R. Braungart & Braungart, 1986, 1993; Fernández, unpublished¹⁷). I will give account of my analytical framework and propose the use of combining the life-course and generational politics to understand youth involvement in Venezuelan politics. But firstly I want to start with explaining the reasons why I find important to delve on this topic, to later get into details about how to systematize and use my main concepts in order to make them operational in this process.

Youth, Participation and Politics... Why are they important?

Youth's engagement into politics has always been a very interesting topic to study as a social phenomenon. Since the 1830's youth have been key actors in leading political revolutions against oppressive forms of government or social injustice worldwide to demand changes in society (R. Braungart & Braungart, 1993). It is also a way to understand and give social meaning to how and why young people participate in matters important to their everyday life. Moreover, it is particularly significant to study this phenomenon in developing countries, where new symbols of collective solidarity and sociopolitical change are often linked with young people's social and political identities (ibid). Therefore, the study of youth and their agency reveals how youth can become social actors and achieve social and political outcomes, when they as a cohort group

¹⁷ "Term Paper, GEOG 3054". This assessment paper from 2013 will be used as a guide to go into details about some ideas of the life-course and generational politics approach. This term paper was meant to start elaborating on the theoretical approach that was going to give social meaning to my research problem before doing fieldwork.

with similar characteristics and concerns, join together and participate in the political sphere (Fernández, unpublished), whether it is in the everyday informal politics (O'Toole, 2003; Skelton, 2010) or in formal organizations, such as political parties.

Youth participation worldwide in the informal, every day politics has increased in the last years (O'Toole, 2003; Skelton, 2010), whereas the same can not be said of the participation in the conventional politics, since according to Azmi et al. (2013) it has been declining. However, in the case of Venezuela, there has been an increase in all kinds of participation: from participation in students association, and student movements, to participation in political parties. Thus, youth in Venezuela defines the status quo by engaging actively in any form of political participation. This event proves that a new political generation is emerging, defying what many authors have called “political apathy” (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Harris et al., 2010; Skelton, 2010; Youniss et al., 2002).

So, one can question if there is a lack of interest from youth in political issues, or whether youth engages in other forms of participation that can also have political meanings. Is it really political apathy or are we encountering with new ways of participation? In the last ten years, youth have been more involved in Venezuelan politics due to the unstable social and political situation of the country. This had made youth more aware of their role as agents of change. They represent a new generation that breaks with old standards on how “to do” politics, and this has been well perceived in youth’s engagement in the political process in Venezuela. Also, youth in Venezuela have become *assets rather than risks to their communities* (Sherrod in C. Flanagan, 2009:298) , because they can use their knowledge and power to change social structures, and influence in the decision making process for a better outcome.

What is youth?

When trying to define “youth” many conceptualizations can be found, proving that there is no single way to define it. Youth is a concept that is rooted in western thinking, and it can have different interpretations depending on the context where the concept is studied; the concept *is constructed as a social category according to social expectations* (Furlong, 2009:5). So far a way of defining youth has been as a path to adulthood, ignoring their agency (Ansell, 2005). This is a very simplified way of understanding youth as it gives very little attention to their capacity to change and transform the reality

they live in. It also takes for granted the fact that during this stage of life, youth starts to develop their own understanding and interpretations of their self, and therefore, begins to acknowledge the reality they are immerse in (R. Braungart & Braungart, 1986, 1993).

Similar to Ansell's conceptualization is Skelton and Valentine's (1998) definition, as they state that youth is used to categorize people between sixteen and twenty-five years old *which bears no correlation with any of the diverse legal classifications of childhood or adulthood* (1998:5). According to this, youth seems to be conceptualized as "in-between" childhood and adulthood, without underlining the positive contributions young people can make to the social, cultural, economic and political sphere.

According to Bourdieu (1978), *youth is just a word (...) "youth" has been an evolving concept, layered upon layers with values which reflect contemporary moral, political and social concerns* (Bourdieu in Jones, 2009:1). This definition emphasizes the dynamism of the word youth, it is not a static phase with a static definition, on the contrary, it changes through time and it reveals the concerns and way of thinking of society at a given moment. Bourdieu's implication of youth just being a word means that youth has to be understood within society, it is not an isolated concept alienated from what goes on in a certain culture; as a matter of fact, it is impregnated with social and contextual meaning. Hence, youth can be seen as a reflection of the society they live in that has agency and capacity to not only act, but also react against established standards, and to mobilize and influence future generations.

It can be said that Bourdieu's conceptualization coincide with the UNESCO's definition of youth, since it explains youth as a heterogeneous group that is constantly changing, and it also adds to the idea that the experience of "being young" can vary across regions and within countries, thus, youth is more likely to be a fluid category than a fixed age group (UNESCO, n.d). In its definition UNESCO also establishes youth as *members of a community*, recognizing them as a social group with common characteristics that share some level of interdependence. The role of the context in these definitions is very significant, because it recognizes the fact that youth behave in different ways in different places worldwide, stressing the notion mentioned before that youth is a dynamic concept. The emphasis here is put on how young people perceive the reality they live in and how they take up actions to maintain, improve or change their social, economic, and political situation.

Whatever the definition one chooses to use, it is important to bear in mind that youth are potentially significant social actors and they remain a very important point of symbolic investment for society as a whole (Ansell, 2005). Finally, I suggest Bourdieu's idea should prevail when studying youth and the implication it can have on social phenomenon, as he quotes: "*Youth*" is a social construction with social meanings and it is the task of the sociology of youth to understand how and why these have developed (Bourdieu in Jones, 2009:1).

What is political participation?

Political participation is essential for achieving a successful democratic society (C. A. Flanagan & Sherrod, 1998). Since the late 1970's participation has been a key point in development practices and discourses; for some participation is considered as a means, while for other it is an end itself to achieve skills and knowledge to improve people's life (Hart, 2008). In any case, participation is very much related to the notion of empowerment and how this can change societies (ibid). However, it has been noted that many times youth has been left out of participatory practices related to policy formulation, and are not taken into account when decisions that affect their lives are being made (Ansell, 2005).

Since 1965, the UN has been promoting youth's participation in the development agenda, defining youth participation as a matter that involves economic, social, political and cultural participation (Ansell, 2005). Furthermore, the World Program of Action for Youth also highlights how youth can contribute and offer different perspectives, especially through youth organizations (UN, 1996). The document created by UNESCO called "UNESCO-mainstreaming the needs of youth" in 2002, claims at the very beginning of it that *the most ardent wish of young people is to participate, as full and equal citizens in today's world* (2002:2). This document states the importance of considering youth as actors, players and partners in the development process, and to mainstream their contributions through policies and programs in order for their participation to be equally valued (UNESCO, 2002).

For Skelton (2007), participation constitutes *the word, concept and discourse to engage with when doing research or working with children and young people in the context of development* (2007:2). Furthermore in her article, Hart mentions that participation is the process by which individuals take on decisions that not only affect their life, but that

also affects the community in which people live in, and that *it is the means by which democracy is built and it is a standard against which democracies should be measured* (Hart in Skelton 2007:11). This definition is related to Ariadne Vromen's (2003) interpretation, as she explains participation as *acts that can occur, either individually or collectively, that are intrinsically concerned with shaping the society that we want to live in* (Vromen in Harris et al., 2010:3).

By reading these definitions, it can be said that participation from all groups in societies should be a common practice in developmental processes. It also reflects values of good governance as it provides the space for people, in this case youth, to participate and to have a voice, at the same time that those voices are heard. In order to encourage youth to participate, there has to be a compromise from governmental and non-governmental institutions that young people's claims need to be heard, considered and taken into account when it comes to policy making, or that young people themselves are to be included in the decision making process of matters that have direct impact on their lives.

One of the reasons why people might think that youth are apathetic or indifferent to politics may have to do with the fact that their participation is not taken into account, and a way of youth reacting against it is by not participating in the most conventional politics (O'Toole, 2003). Thus, an image of young people as disenchanted with formal politics may be obvious, especially if one excludes all forms of alternative activism and only thinks of participation in representative politics (Harris et al., 2010). Therefore, it is important to consider the meaning of young people's participation and/or non-participation, as they can also be ways of reaction against what is already established. What is clear is that whether youth participates actively or passively, they still remain important components in social development. Therefore, to recognize young people's agency is integral to the recognition of the multiple participatory experiences that young people have (Vromen, 2003).

Finally, as Ansell (2005:235) explains, *meaningful participation constitutes an education for active citizenship*. In this case, political socialization can explain how political culture and attitudes are transmitted in society, at both individual and community level (C. A. Flanagan & Sherrod, 1998). Being an active citizen not only means to use the services and resources society makes available for its people, but it also involves being educated, involved and participative in matters that have an impact

on society. Through participation people learn how to use their potential and knowledge to be able to make better decisions, as well as to be at the service of people, since participation, although it can be an individualized practice, promotes cooperation and collective work (Ansell, 2005).

What is politics?

So far, very little attention has been given from Political Geography to the role youth plays in geopolitics (Skelton, 2010). To understand young people's engagement or non-participation in political activities it is very important to first define what is considered political. However, in many studies about youth and politics, there has been a narrow conception of what is political, and there is no clear explanation of how young people define political themselves (O'Toole, 2003; O'Toole et al., 2003).

In Political Geography, "political" is associated with the state, geopolitics, and nations; all these macro-structures are related to *Politics* (with capital P), and usually young people are studied from this kind of politics because of their absence or lack of participation (O'Toole, 2003; Skelton, 2010); they are in fact constructed as *political subjects in waiting* (Skelton, 2010:147). Thus, the narrow conception of what is political is mostly related to *Politics* rather than *politics* (O'Toole, 2003). But, if "political" is to be defined as informal, related to participation, personal, and studied from what happens at the micro level, then young people as key actors play very significant roles in society (ibid).

Skelton (2010) makes an attempt to explain that the distinction between *Politics* and *politics* should be used carefully when talking about young people's involvement in the political sphere. When it comes to youth's political engagement it is mostly recognized that they have been categorized within lower case p *politics* (ibid). This kind of *politics* is the day-to-day issues related to the development of political identities, and it is mostly focused on young people's actions (ibid). What Skelton (2010) argues is that youth should not only be recognized with one type of politics, since they can merge between *Politics* and *politics*, occupying two political spaces at the same time, and that Political Geography should challenge the boundaries that separate these two. This realization also supports the argument that young people's lives are not affected just by local practices, but that they are also influenced by what happens globally, unifying the micro-level *politics* with the macro-level *Politics* (ibid).

Some studies have come to the conclusion that the young generation is an apolitical one supported by arguments such as teenagers and young adults are not interested in conventional politics; they are less likely to be knowledgeable about politics, and they do not have an attachment to political parties (O'Toole, 2003). However, other researches question the argument of young people as apathetic or inactive, suggesting that although youth are turning away from *Politics*, it does not mean that they are not interested in political issues (ibid).

According to O'Toole (2003), such narrow definitions of what is political can be based on three assumptions that more or less explain the intricacies of youth's non-participation. Firstly, very little attempt is made to fully explore and understand how people themselves define politics, and what kind of activities they consider as political. An argument supporting this position is that many young people may be involved in activities that one can identify as political, but that young people themselves do not see it that way, rather they identify them as *minimal, politically related activities* (Henn in O'Toole, 2003:74). This lack of definition of what is considered political is probably what makes young people think they are not political actors. They do not perceive themselves as such because their idea of *Politics* remains hegemonic when it comes to participating in society.

Secondly, most of the literature relates non-participation with political apathy or indifference, instead of understanding the complexities and reasons why youth decides to not participate in political processes (O'Toole, 2003; O'Toole et al., 2003). To not problematize youth's non-participation means on one hand that research has not been able so far to identify other meaningful ways in which people participate. On the other hand, it proves that there are limited activities defined as political participation (ibid), undervaluing other ways where youth contributes to society. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge actions that can be identified as *political non-participation* (O'Toole, 2003:74), like electoral abstention, and that can have political meaning as well. Non-participation can be seen as an act of rebellion against the social order, instead of perceiving it as political apathy or indifference.

Furlong (2009:292) mentions that although youth may not be enthused by mainstream politics, they still show *high levels of interest and involvement in single issue politics and are engaged in less conventional ways in demonstration, civic disruption and direct*

action. Furthermore, a narrow conceptualization of the political and political participation, together with a top-down methodological research, limits the understanding of how people participate and also why they do not (O'Toole et al., 2003), thus more emphasis should be put into knowing what young people's own definition of politics is (ibid).

Lastly, there are few youth-specific explanations for declining political engagement among youth (O'Toole, 2003), since there is not enough evidence that shows the particular circumstances that can impact young people's lives. This can be due to the non-recognition of spheres where youth may be engaged (ibid). The problem of not differentiating between arenas where youth is politically active is that there has been a tendency to ignore generational effects, since there is no difference between the spaces and contexts in which adults and young people are politically engaged (ibid).

Regardless of whether one recognizes different kinds of politics, it is still important to rethink what counts as political understanding in contemporary societies, rather than to focus on youth's ignorance in political issues (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007). Finally, it is essential to bear in mind that young people should be seen and considered as political actors in the "here and now", since political practices and discourses will always have direct impacts on young people's lives (Fernández, unpublished), and most importantly, because youth are a politically active entity, that understand political process and take political action (Skelton, 2010). Considering youth will help to go in depth of what can be defined as political, since they can use their *political power through their practices, resistance, strategies and challenges* (Skelton, 2010:147).

To acknowledge that youth's participatory practices are not always oriented to achieve anti-state activism or cultural politics is to recognize that youth's participation can take the form of informal, individualized and everyday practices at different scales (Harris et al., 2010). This is important as it emphasizes the value of participating in any sphere at any scale. Lastly, through the knowledge of current practice, one can understand how young people practice participation, and therefore promote and implement policies that encourage and facilitate active participation in areas that are relevant to young people's lives (Vromen, 2003).

Analytical approaches

Within contemporary theory and research, the use of generational politics and life-course development are very important to understand age, age-group relations and sociopolitical change (R. Braungart & Braungart, 1986, 1993). According to R. Braungart and Braungart (1986:206), *age is one of the most basic social categories of human existence and a primary factor for assessing roles and granting prestige and power*; thus this is one among many ways in how one can study and understand politics. Nowadays, realizing politics from an age perspective is having more and more relevance, especially with the rapid growth of youth populations in developing countries (ibid), and the self-realization of youth's agency.

For C.A. Flanagan and Sherrod (1998:449) the study of youth's participation in politics from a generational point of view *emphasize the active, evaluative role of young people in negotiating the political realities of their social order and in creating change in the process*. Therefore, since political participation is considered to be a very important requirement for successful democratic societies, the study of this phenomenon can guide our understanding of political participation by citizens who want to achieve social change (ibid). On the other hand, a life-course perspective is important as it explains *complex configurations of pathways and transition biographies because it specifies the linkages of time and space* (Furlong, 2009:12).

Generational politics

Generational politics highlights historical and cultural events as determinant for structuring the mentality of a generation and merging its participants together, instead of focusing on biological age as an important factor (R. Braungart & Braungart, 1986). But firstly, I consider important to specify what is a generation, since there can be many conceptualizations of this term.

According to Mannheim (1964:170) *the social phenomenon "generation" represents nothing more than a particular kind of identity of location, embracing related "age groups" embedded in a historical-social process*. Mannheim's understanding of generation suggests that members of a generation share the experience of common historical events that will most likely shape a political consciousness among its members (Edmunds & Turner, 2005). In fact, many authors have defined generation in terms of distinctive attitudes held in common by members of a certain birth cohort

(Esler, 1984). For Eisenstadt on the other hand, generation refers to the *fact of reproduction and that each family experiences a sequence of people passing through the life cycle* (Eisenstadt in Vincent, 1999:11). This last definition makes more emphasis on the reproductive and biological role that generations play. For this matter, when I refer to generation I will do it using Mannheim's conceptualization, since he relates age processes within a historical time, and it can be better associated with the generational politics approach.

Another idea to take into account is that in much of the literature referring to age and politics, the terms generation and cohort are often used interchangeably (R. Braungart & Braungart, 1986). However, R. Braungart and Braungart (1986) suggest to make a distinction between both concepts. Cohort refers to a group of people born in the same interval of time and that age together, while a generation not only shares cohort membership, but also shares an age-group consciousness, as a very specific age group with distinctive attitudes compared to other age groups in society, and that *is directed toward influencing change* (R. Braungart & Braungart, 1986:213). In fact, R. Braungart and Braungart (1986) talk about three different ways for analyzing generational politics, which are: lineage politics, cohort politics and political generations. The first one refers to the study of politics from a kinship socialization perspective, while the two last ones focus on the social and historical conditions that play a part in determining the formation of political attitudes and behaviors. This explains why there can be such confusion between these two concepts.

In my research, I will mostly focus on political generations as a way to analyze generational politics, but without discarding the idea of cohort politics, since cohort interpretation explain how political attitudes during youth provide the bases for understanding subsequent political events (R. Braungart & Braungart, 1986). The link between cohort politics and political generations is that the former is needed to provide the context that will result in a political generation, having in mind that a political generation is formed when its members become conscious that they are bound together by a shared age-group consciousness and therefore act for political change (ibid).

The generational approach offers another alternative to study youth since age cohorts tend to experience the same historical events at the same time and consequently create a collective identity that can engage in political actions for example (Jeffrey, 2010).

Furthermore, as mentioned before a generation is aimed to influencing change and therefore its member can act as a social group. However, a political generation comes into existence *when an age group rejects the existing order, joins together, and attempts to redirect the course of politics as its generational mission* (R. Braungart & Braungart, 1986:217).

Life-course politics

The life-course politics approach explains political behaviors based on life-cycles interpretations (M. Braungart, 1984; R. Braungart & Braungart, 1986). It states that the different ages and stages of life are determinant forces for human experiences, and it explains that social change and historical development are rooted in the life cycle. Thus, in this approach age is used as an index in the life cycle that can show different attitudes and behaviors associated with each stage of life. Nevertheless, it is important to outline that although importance is given to bio-psychological changes over the life course, life-course processes have to be understood within changing historical events and by the social courses people follow (Elder, 1994; Pilcher, 1994). The life-course approach also represents a way of understanding *age-graded trajectories that (...) are subject to changing conditions* (Elder, 1994:5), which is a key notion to bear in mind, since it reflects the dynamism of developmental processes embedded in people's life.

Using a life-course approach is relevant since it offers a view at how one thinks about and study human lives (Elder, 1994). This approach revolves around four important themes or principles according to Elder (1994), being the first one the “interplay of human lives and historical time”. This principle explains that differences in birth year expose people to distinctive historical events. The second theme refers to “the timing of lives”, which emphasize that the social meaning of age is particularly important since it provides a temporal perspective to social events. The third theme has to do with “linked or interdependent lives” which mentions the notion of connectedness; this idea derives from the fact that human lives are usually integrated in social relationships across their life span. Finally, the fourth principle has to do with “human agency” since it also relates the individual to the wider social context by valuing people's capacity to make choices to build their lives (ibid). All these principles can be helpful for studying and understanding political behaviors in each stage of life.

The interpretation and understanding of life-course politics can be organized around the most important stages of life, where each stage reveals some identifiable behaviors and political thoughts over the life course (M. Braungart, 1984; R. Braungart & Braungart, 1986). This approach to politics states that each stage of life is linked to a set of needs, behaviors, attitudes, physiological changes, etc., that can have an impact on the way people perceive and respond to the political world (M. Braungart, 1984). Political behavior can be for example studied from four stages according to the life cycle: politics in childhood; politics in youth; politics in middle age; and lastly, politics in older adulthood (M. Braungart, 1984; R. Braungart & Braungart, 1986). For the purpose of this study, I will focus on politics in youth since it is an important stage in life for the development of political attitudes and behaviors. Regarding this, youth in Venezuela are the leading actors in the process of social and political change in the country because they have filled the vacuum that traditional political parties in the pre Chávez era have left; also, it is known that throughout history, youth have always performed leading roles in social and political revolutions worldwide (R. Braungart & Braungart, 1986).

Moreover, the importance of studying politics in this specific stage of life is very useful, as youth constitutes a very important social group in society with power to change the course of history, and also because during this stage of life people start to develop political awareness and a critical understanding of political processes (ibid). This political awareness and critical understanding will be mostly influenced by the historical context, and how it is interpreted by youth, creating a common consciousness that will shape political experiences (M. Braungart, 1984). During this stage of life, the examination of life-course politics becomes very important, due to the fact that each cohort of young people experience what Mannheim (1964) describes as a “fresh contact” with society and culture (see also Buss, 1975; Pilcher, 1994). This fresh contact is expected to make young people aware and critical of the political legacy left to them by the adult generation (M. Braungart, 1984). Furthermore, this fresh contact will change over time as young people start to include their own views and understanding of society, and as their political knowledge is shaped by their experiences as civic participants.

Lastly, I will like to mention Hareven (1994:439) since, in my opinion, she sums up what the life-course approach constitutes. She states that *the life-course approach is*

developmental and historical by its very nature. Its essence is the synchronization of “individual time”, “family time”, and “historical time”, and all this different “times” will shape young people’s political attitudes.

An interactive approach

According to R. Braungart and Braungart (1986) the study of the relationship between age and politics demands a broader understanding that includes aspects of the life-course development and historical events within the context of the socio political sphere. For this, R. Braungart and Braungart (1986) suggest an interactive approach that combines the aspects of life-course and the generational politics. The generational politics and life-course approach demands for a deeper understanding of socio-historical change and life-course development, as well as the interaction between both perspectives in influencing political behaviors and the way these relationships can change over time (ibid). The generational politics and the life-course development approach are usually used as separated categories when analyzing political behavior; however, it is important to bear in mind that these two can combine for a better understanding of age-group differences in politics, instead of using one perspective or the other as if they were mutually exclusive (R. Braungart & Braungart, 1986). Using both perspectives as a third approach can enrich the study of young people’s political participation in Venezuela, as well as it will provide more knowledge in understanding the impact youth’s behavior has in a wider social context.

The reason for why it is important to use such approach as an analytical framework is because it will help to bridge theory and empirical work. In order to do this, the use of my key concepts (youth, political participation and politics) will be useful as analytical tools in order to understand how these concepts are interrelated. The generational politics approach is what gives contextual meaning to the research, since it helps to understand youth as a collective. In my study, youth refers to university students between the ages of eighteen to thirty years old. The reason why I emphasize on university students is because they have been politically active, and still are in the forefront of political changes in the country, demanding more participatory spaces and playing important roles as social agents. Therefore, the generational politics approach highlights the role that young people, as a whole, play in Venezuelan politics.

This approach also helps to identify university students as a specific group that acts together in society against what they perceive as the inability of the Venezuelan government to manage the country's affairs, and that can be differentiated from other generations because of their high motivation to change society through politics. Furthermore, young people's exposure to very difficult situations in the country such as insecurity, scarcity, lack of opportunities, and media censorship have influenced their political consciousness. All these conditions have been perceived by the same age-cohort as factors that are putting young people's future at risk, and limiting their opportunities for a better future. Due to this, Venezuelan youth have recognized that by acting together they can achieve changes, and that it is their duty not only to their country, but also to future generations, to not remain indifferent to events that can have negative impacts for young peoples' lives.

Young people's political consciousness has also shaped their attitudes and behaviors; they are set to work for the progress and development of the country by joining together in the Venezuelan student movement. This movement is the result of how the political and social circumstances of the country have affected young people's lives, and how young people decided to engage with society. Moreover, the student movement was born within the universities, from university students, because they recognized their role as agents to mobilize and challenge the status quo.

The life-course approach is useful for understanding individual's behaviors and attitudes of young people in Venezuela. This approach is also needed to recognize how and why young people decide to involve in political practices. Since the life-course approach relates mostly with individual practices, the concept of political participation relates to how individuals participate actively in politics. For many students, one of the first opportunities they have to practice politics comes when they start the university. In the universities there are "universities governing bodies" that are mainly in charge of doing politics within the university; they have a structure and they follow certain principles such as participatory democracy and egalitarianism, student and alumni participation, etc. The university is an autonomous body that works separately from the state, and should be like that in order to preserve the universality of knowledge, culture, and ideology. Furthermore, since the student movement was born within and from students, they represent this universalistic aspect of the university that advocates for

values of good governance, equality and representativeness. Members of students councils, students center, and federation of university centers are all elected by students from the university, which means that students start to engage in political duties from an early stage in university life in order to elect their representatives. This first contact with university politics shapes a lot of the political attitudes and engagements that they later follow in their day-to-day lives.

Political participation is a concept that relates very much to the notion of formal or informal politics. Young people participate actively in a wide range of activities that either falls into one category or another. Universities represent the starting point where students organize themselves in order to achieve social changes, meaning that not all the activities they do are only directed to achieve change and progress in the universities. Therefore, it can be said that the university constitutes a very important space where political practices and attitudes start to develop. In this sense, most of the students are more engaged in informal politics, in the everyday-live activities, such as organizing and mobilizing students for voting or protesting; creating workshops or working groups for specific agendas; making use of the social networks to spread the information of the activities they are going to do and also to reach more people; joining in voluntary activities to help poor communities.

The goal of these activities is to spread information about the situation of the country, and to help empower people with knowledge in order for them to use their agency. Most of the activities young people do regarding informal politics can be, more or less, classified in two categories: activism and social participation. The former relates to activities students carry out to make them more vocal and visible, like protesting, manifestations, “street” movements, which are activities organized by and for young people on the streets to make awareness about the political situation of the country. The latter is related to activities that are aimed to service more generally, and that have a different social impact compared to activism because it refers to young people’s involvement in social problems that in origin may have a political implication, for example, foundations aimed to empower poor communities by giving workshops about rights and citizenship, all this organized, coordinated and implemented by students.

It is also interesting to notice that many students that start to practice university politics by being students’ representatives are eager to later get involved in mainstream politics

by joining political parties. This attitude is most noticeable in students that become leaders of the university community. Once students engage in mainstream politics they become very powerful leaders in their communities as they are able to mobilize young people in more formal activities, like for example promoting and emphasizing the right to vote, or to engage in projects where young people's proposals are taken into account. So it is a way to do politics from a youth perspective, with a particular vision and understanding of the context, since youth is the time when one starts to develop political attitudes and becomes more aware of the responsibilities one has towards society. This not only means that young people in mainstream politics work only in the benefit of youth, but that it is most likely that young people will take into account issues that are directed related with young people's lives.

Valuing and recognizing young people's participation from a life-course approach will help understand how and why youth engage in social and political processes, and how youth find different spaces, such as the street, the social networks, universities, helping in communities, etc., to make their voices heard and take action. The notions of political participation, formal and informal politics, and youth's own way of participating must not be seen as separate things, since they all merge at one point and give social meaning to young people's actions in society.

Summing up

In this chapter I have discussed the theoretical framework that gives social meaning to young people's participation in politics. Using age as a standpoint for studying political behavior is having more and more relevance nowadays, especially in developing countries that have a big number youth population. I firstly explained the importance of conceptualizing youth, political participation and politics to later go into details about the use of a generational and life-course politics approach in order to understand the relationship between age, politics, and social change. The former approach makes special emphasis in historical events for conforming generations with common experiences and attitudes, while the later explains political behavior in function of the life stage of a person. An interactive approach between generational politics and life-course is later suggested as an analytical framework, as it provides a deeper and broader knowledge about historical events and life-course development within the context of the socio political sphere.

5 The student movement in Venezuela

Student movements in Venezuela are not something new. As mentioned in chapter two, throughout the Venezuelan history, youth's presence in the political scene has always been related to critical political times. Most recently, the student movement of 2007 has been taking a major role in society as a political actor. I mention 2007 because it is a key year when students decided to take the streets, but previous events have been shaping the consciousness, attitudes and behaviors of the student movement. In this chapter I will give account of what makes this student movement different from previous movements. I will also explain the events that pushed this new generation to the streets to defend democracy.

In 2002 the country lived a huge strike, the biggest ever against Chavez's government. A strike promoted by a coalition between workers and private companies, and most important of all, supported by the oil workers from all levels in the industry. The strike lasted for two months and generated a strong contraction of the GDP and also weakened deeply the economic activity of the country (Fontiveros et al., 2009). Combined with this, the government political opposition, which promoted and supported the strike, had big weaknesses, the same ones that made Chávez win the elections in 1998: corruption, lack of discipline, selfishness, excessive ambition of power, arbitrary exercise of power, nepotism, etc. Given this political scene, students perceived the lack of an integral political vision and political immaturity from the opposition (ibid). Although Chávez governed with obvious inefficiency, the lack of prestige from the opposition was quite handy for Chávez as he used that as a political instrument to legitimize himself over and over again. After 2002, a year that marks a generational rupture with the past, a disillusioned youth with political leaders decided to find new ways of doing politics. The establishment of many youth political associations proves the generational interest to participate actively in politics.

In 2007 two important political events placed the students in the political forefront. The first important event has to do with the closure of the oldest television independent channel, RCTV, on May 27; the second event occurred after the closure of RCTV when former president Chávez called for a referendum to reform the constitution. These

constitutional changes attempted against many civil liberties, and therefore students felt the need to react in opposition to this reform. This last event is known as “the 2D referendum”, since the referendum took place on December 2nd of the same year. These two important episodes woke up among students a desire to act as an opposing force to the government and led them to mobilize people all over the country.

Two events gave life to the student movement; the first one was shutting off RCTV the way the government did (...) and I believe that gave students a reason to speak. The second error that the government made was the constitutional reform, because that gave the student movement more arguments to keep fighting (Carlos Graffe – Interview July 10, 2013).

After these events, the student movement was no longer perceived as a group of young naïve students that wanted to play the game of politics. The student movement became a group of social and economic pressure, with clear objectives and firm leaders that learned and understood that a new generation of change had to take place in the country, and students were willing to take that responsibility, guiding the country to a new vision of reconciliation (Fontiveros et. al, 2009).

Before the closure of RCTV

As I mentioned before, 2007 is the year when students decided to take the streets with manifestations and protests for their civil and human rights, but previous events took place in order to alert society about the risks of some of the government practices. These events mostly included young students, and from there, networks and connection started to grow between students, so when the closure of RCTV was effected, there was already a student organization that shaped the actions that followed the television channel closure.

***Defensa Nacional*¹⁸**

“Defensa Nacional” was a communicational and operational strategy to alert the country about the transfer of the country’s resources to foreign nations (Tovar Arroyo, 2007). To do this, it was necessary to achieve civil society’s participation, especially youth’s participation, since the ones who could better understand the dangers facing the nation

¹⁸ “National Defense”

were the young people, given that their future was at risk and they were the only ones most interested and able to commit to a long-term struggle. A struggle that could inspire their generation with the possibility to reform the country (ibid). Thus, “Defensa Nacional” focused on establishing bonds with Venezuelan youth; youth participation would guarantee new goals, new visions and new purposes to the Venezuelan political struggle, and the only way to boost youth participation was by assuming their leadership. For this, the “Red Democrática Universitaria¹⁹” was created; the network carried out presentations, events, conferences, and manifestations in the streets. From this network, parallel movements like “Dicho y Hecho²⁰” emerged that inspired and involved youth in the political scene (ibid). The group “Dicho y Hecho” was conformed by students and it aimed to carry out symbolic actions in the streets to denounce bad practices of public institutions (ibid).

Acostados por la Vida²¹

Although the “Red Democrática Universitaria”, “Dicho y Hecho” and other university and youth movements did not institutionalize, among its leaders remained the necessity and the will to transform the country (Tovar Arroyo, 2007). The idea of “Acostados por la vida” arises in 2006 to denounce massively, in a non-violent way, all the killings and assassinations of people due to insecurity, and the government’s lack of response to safeguard the life of its people. After this event, the movement had a better organization, and it realized the impact its actions had in society; protests were not only symbolic actions, they were also defending a fundamental right, the right to live (ibid). Youth remained active and networks between students started to grow gradually, which became very important when the television channel was forced to close, because there was already a previous organization that later materialized in a big movement of national protests (Tovar Arroyo, 2007).

The closure of RCTV

In May 28 of 2007 a number of events occurred that marked a breaking point in the history of student movements in Venezuela. From that day on, thousands of university students filled the streets with their continuous protests, and this gave rise with time to

¹⁹ “Democratic University Network”

²⁰ “Said and Done”

²¹ “Lie down for life”

the evolution of a solid leadership able to face the government (Cavet & De Bastos, 2012). The event that propelled students to the public sphere was the closure of RCTV on May 27; student's reaction to this event was forceful and strong against the government, sometimes violent. Students felt the TV closing was too drastic a measure; they felt the government went too far and it was unacceptable. RCTV was the oldest television channel in Venezuela and was known for having a critical opinion about the governments. This made civil society believe that students had awakened after a long lethargy, when in truth, students have always been present in the country's political development.

A common new idea of how politics should be exercised has shaped the attitudes and behaviors of youth in Venezuela. Since the beginning of 2007, a void of political leadership from the opposition was felt among students, so it is no surprise that they decided to fill the political void by joining together in the student movement.

The closure of RCTV violated two human rights: freedom of speech and freedom of thought. From the beginning, students emphasized that their struggle and their protests were not only because of the television closure, it was also to claim their human rights; it was more a matter of public principles than private interests (Tovar Arroyo, 2007). Moreover, students promoted non-violent actions; they intend to achieve their objectives in a pacific way. The non-violent struggle is a mark that identifies and characterizes the student movement in Venezuela.

Hours after RCTV was shut off, students from different universities in the capital, Caracas, started to congregate to discuss about the actions to take against the government's measure; students wanted to find a way to do something and express their disagreement in a pacific and non-violent way.

In 2007 the idea that RCTV was going to be shut off was something people were preparing for (...) and young people started to be more sensitive about this issue. During this time we were already in the middle of a crisis, we had unemployment, and many companies had closed... but what drove students to protest strongly was a TV channel about to be closed, it was a great motivator for youth to get involved, which is kind of curious (Juan D. Tapia – Interview July 8, 2013).

The breaking point is the event in 2007, where I would say there was a big rage among people, especially among youth because they (the government) were taking away your right to choose (Carlos Graffe – Interview July 10, 2013).

In both statements, Juan D. Tapia and Carlos Graffe recognized the closure of the TV channel as an event that motivated young people to claim for justice. The idea that the oldest TV channel was being shut off implied that the government was taking away from people their freedom to choose and was sending the message at the same time that there was no freedom of expression. This clearly was perceived by civil society as a threat to democracy and most importantly, a threat to human rights. Thus, students deciding to take some action can be seen as a sign that youth do get involved in political matters, especially when civil rights and justice are threatened.

After RCTV's closure, students took the streets to protests against this measure. *Spontaneous movements*, according to Alexander Rueda, occurred within many universities at the same time but with no apparent organization. The feeling of many students against the closure was that it was their duty to go out and show their nonconformity. The question of whether these reactions were really spontaneous or not, can somehow be answered if one believes or understands that already a collective consciousness was in the process of developing in the students mindset due to continuous, ineffective, corrupt, authoritarian, arbitrary and unjust political practices in the country during many years. Therefore, more than spontaneous actions, students' reactions were a firm response to Venezuelan civil society and its government stating that they were fed up with the status quo and wanted to show that they had another way of conceiving politics; students had proposals for rebuilding the nation.

Plan "V"²²

"Plan V" was another strategy to mobilize youth that was organized and coordinated by the student movements and some political parties, and its aim was to teach youth how to protect their votes in electorate processes. This plan was conceived after the perceived apathy from youth in the presidential elections in 2008. The method of struggle was non-violent, and many workshops were given to more than ten thousand students

²² The "V" stands for Victory

nationally. In less than two months the Plan “V” platform reached six thousands people, all of them youth, willing to fight for their ideals and principles, with the motivation of reinventing their country from activism (Tovar Arroyo, 2007).

We started to understand that we had to defend our votes; with this affirmation Juan D. Tapia highlights the importance of voting among young people; it also shows that youth was very sure that the electorate processes in Venezuela was not a clean and transparent process, which could guarantee that results represented the true votes casted. In Venezuela, the democratic practice of exercising the right to vote, does not guarantee that people’s vote will be safeguarded, and it has become a common practice for young people to participate in elections as polling members.

Venezuelan youth has shown that they not only reject the government’s way of doing politics, but they also reject the way politics was carried out before Chavez. Youth in Venezuela represent the desire of changing the rules of the political game, they are aware of the imperfections of a system that far from achieving progress has created two opposite factions which cannot find common ground in the interest of the majority: those who are pro-government, and those who oppose it; there seems to be no will to reconcile these two realities from these two groups. However, the student movement is the in-between actor, it is neither one thing nor the other, but instead it represents the aspiration of many Venezuelans who want to unify both forces and both realities. The student movement is aware that they have to face a profound dilemma: two aberrant practices of doing politics in Venezuela that fight against each other while the country increasingly deteriorates (Tovar Arroyo, 2007).

“No” to the constitutional reform

In August 2007, the government formally announced its request to amend the constitution, which intended to reform thirty-three of the three hundred and fifty articles from the 1999 Constitution²³ (Cavet & De Bastos, 2012). One of the most questioned articles was art. 230, which originally expressed that the presidential term was six years with immediate reelection only once. However, in the new proposal the mandate was extended for seven years with the right to be reelected, omitting the “immediate reelection only once” part (ibid). The constitutional reform also contemplated different

²³ Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela’s Constitution <http://www.tsj.gov.ve/legislacion/constitucion1999.htm>

aspects such as the territorial political reorganization of the country; to end with the universities' autonomy; the management of foreign exchange reserves through the elimination of the autonomy of the Venezuelan Central Bank, and many other aspects that immediately generated reaction from opposition political parties and the student movement. With this reform, the government was showing its will to centralize more power, an idea that students quickly opposed to.

The student movement also perceived that a big problem they were facing was that all these constitutional changes were largely unknown by civil society. By acknowledging this, the student movement together with political parties and civil organizations started a huge organizational work to inform society about how important it was to vote against the reform. It was necessary for this to conform a unified organization between parties and the student movement in order to reach as many people as possible. It was a joint work aimed to win the referendum, arguing that it was necessary to vote “No” to the reform, at the same time that it was important to be present in the electorate process and be prepared to defend the election results (Tovar Arroyo, 2007).

The student movement started to go all over the country, to inform and educate people about the constitutional reform. We started to transmit a message (...) We had young spokesmen, guys that were 21, 22, 23 years old that were able to mobilize so many people, leaders that knew what were the problems facing the country and its people (Juan D. Tapia – Interview July 8, 2013).

During the months between August and December many workshops and informative events took place in order to inform civil society about all the rights and civil liberties they were going to lose if the constitutional reform was passed.

When you read the articles of the proposed reform, it was something crazy! Many rights were taken away; it turned the country into something else (Carlos Graffe – Interview July 10, 2013).

“Súmate”, a civil association promoting the defense of the votes, was also immersed in the process of informing people about the negative consequences the new reform had for the country. From its network of volunteers, mostly young people, they carried out workshops in poor communities through a program called “Ruta Ciudadana

Comunitaria²⁴”, to empower people with knowledge about their rights and why people should vote “No” in the December referendum.

With the program “ruta ciudadana comunitaria” our work was to empower real leaderships, and give people the tools they needed so they could recognize leaderships in their community and how to connect with other people from their community and how to connect with politics (María F. Isaac, FGD 1).

I realized that there was a polarized reality in the country that many people did not know about, and that is that in poorer areas there was no organization; there was nobody who brought a message... there was no other story than the one told by Chávez (Carlos Graffe – Interview July 10, 2013).

Young people realized they had in their hands the power to reach people from different social strata. By bringing a message, coordinating activities and showing that they were interested in including all social classes, they were received by civil society with open arms. Youth were getting involved in the reality of their country; they were working together with community leaders, and they were proposing an option to empower people through knowledge. They were also proposing bottom-up projects because they understood that by doing this they were addressing people’s necessities and problems.

A great number of street manifestations and protests took place during the campaign in favor of the “No”; these were coordinated and organized mostly by university students and political leaders, and as a result they achieved mass student protests and large participation from civil society as a whole. All these events and manifestations had the objective of calling out people to vote in the December 2 referendum, with the warning that voting was not enough; a commitment to safeguard the electoral act was necessary, from voting to counting all the votes at the end of the process. This resulted in a big number of young people volunteering as polling supervisors, a work that was decisive in the referendum process (Cavet & De Bastos, 2012). This election represented the biggest challenge to the student movement’s history, all the acceptance and hope that was created around students was put to test on the election’s day. The result of the

²⁴ Citizen’s Community Route

referendum was that the majority of the population rejected the proposal, the “No” option won, giving the student movement a victory that was also seen as a victory of society. There were students’ representatives in every state that maintained a continuous fluid of information and control of the event. The commitment of young people was very high, and this commitment showed a new historic attitude. This achievement allowed the extension and internal coordination of university actions, giving student leaders greater national consolidation (Cavet & De Bastos, 2012).

The two events that pushed the student movement to the political scene can divide the protests that took place in two stages; the first stage of protests was from May to July; the official message that the student leadership sent was directly related with the recognition of civil rights and unity between all sectors of the country, while students at the same time were protesting for more freedom. The second stage of protests started in September; the rejection to the constitutional reform from the student movement was unanimous, and the will to delve into the changes the reform was pursuing was generalized and supported by students’ representatives that had the time to develop their leaderships (Cavet & De Bastos, 2012). The organization and objectives of the protests and manifestations was shaped and improved by youth along the months until the point that youth became an important electorate force, that moved away from old ideas about political parties in order to join forces and work together towards a common goal, a goal that was superior than any leaderships from the past. The development of the student movement during 2007 allowed protests to not fade in a simple momentary discomfort, transforming the student movement in a national leadership force (ibid).

Students: the current political generation

The student movement has to be seen as a significant political actor in society. When students came back to the political scene in 2007, its actions were not directed to overthrow the government, instead students found in the student movement a way to channel all their discomfort against the government’s decision to close the television channel. Students became the new face of politics in society, as Carlos Graffe states:

We (young people) filled a political void that was felt in the country; we filled a void of opinion, of creativity, of new speeches, new faces, and a way of doing things differently (Interview July 10, 2013).

After the events in May, (the TV closure, massive manifestations and protests, and the referendum) students realized that they had big potential to influence public opinion, and that they needed to use it in order not to let people's motivation disappear. They also realized that they could use all the energy and enthusiasm students were showing, to effectively change the country. It was important to use that willingness to act in order to motivate youth, and give them a direction to follow; otherwise, all the spontaneous effervescence once showed by student was at risk of disappearing if it not channeled properly.

The value of education

A good example of how to channel young people's leadership skills have been through the LIDERA program, which is a one-year program focused on youth, with the orientation to train and capacitate emergent leaderships in different areas. By the time I interviewed Carlos Graffe, he was the president of the foundation "Futuro Presente"²⁵ which aims to create and empower tomorrow's leaders through the LIDERA program.

Young people have the chance to train themselves during one year with the best professors we have in the country specialized in different areas... there are not only political leaders, there are also student leaders, community leaders (Carlos Graffe – Interview July 10, 2013).

Carlos Graffe also pointed out that LIDERA was totally free of charge, which permits the access of youth from every social class. Another important value of this formative program is that it recognizes young people's agency, and it capacitates youth so they can acknowledge how they can serve better their community, society, university, etc. It was very interesting to notice that many of my interview participants took part in the LIDERA program at one point.

I think that there are many young leaders in Venezuela; the people from LIDERA are like the core of young leaderships in the country. I did LIDERA last year... young people feel the need of leadership; we feel that we want to do something. (Alejandro Gómez, FGD 1).

²⁵ Present Future

LIDERA's objective is to train youth in leadership and policy; the program is in collaboration with many universities from the country and the IESA Institute (...) the program is not necessarily only about politics but it does comprise everything that has to do with leadership and social matters (Alexander Rueda – Interview – July 9, 2013).

The value young people put in training and education is very important. They recognize in education a tool for facing the country's problem. This political generation highlights the importance of being well prepared in order to have critical thought and argumentation when discussing the ways to achieve progress in society. That is why this new generation has such a strong impact in society, because university students know very well the value and necessity of developing their intellects in the universities; they also about the value and necessity to have spaces for debate and exchanging ideas and opinions. One of my participants, Berymar Deza, made a statement related to this, she said:

The university, which is the place for knowledge, gives you a different perspective. You notice who are the people who come from the university because they're different (Interview July 15, 2013).

I remember this sentence stayed in my mind because it explained that university students had a different standpoint, a certain level of knowledge that allowed them to participate in society, and that also allowed their participation to generate some output. By this I mean that it was recognized from my participants that it was important to know how to participate, and that university students had a different way of participating in society compared to other collectives or groups. For example, university students are encouraged to participate in important decisions regarding their university, like electing the students representative of each faculty. Students are encouraged to speak up and listen, to be tolerant and to be able to debate opposing ideas with argument and constructive criticism. University students from an early stage in their studies start to get involved in student movements, and from this academic platform they find a way of bringing their knowledge and capabilities to help their communities.

Education is the driving force for social development and progress, and this is something widely recognized among Venezuelan youth. Unfortunately, the education

system in Venezuela is poor and inefficient, and does not reach all. Many children from the more deprived areas of the country or cities, do not even have the chance to go to school since their basic needs, such as housing and food, are not covered in the first place, so children since an early age have to work on the streets, missing the opportunity to acquire a basic education. In this sense, Jose A. Bucete pointed out:

The problems in Venezuela touch many different areas, and the first one is education; there are statistics many people are not aware of, out of 10 students that finishes primary school, only 4 continues to high school, and only 2 graduates. There are not enough high schools. Out of 10 young people that get into university, only 1 graduates. The average is very low! (Interview July 9, 2013).

The lack of education is one of the biggest problems that has caused so high levels of poverty in the country. Young people that have had the chance to go to school, and later to university are really aware of the value of being able to have access to education in a country where there are so huge contrasts and differences in opportunities. Moreover, education from a civic and ideological point of view is also greatly valued.

Students recognized that it is fundamental to introduce in the schooling system knowledge about civic education and politics. For example, in both FGDs I carried out, participants mentioned the importance of promoting and implementing civic education from high school to create a political culture and a political consciousness. This can create spaces for encouraging ideological discussions among young people. Also, training within political parties is important to make sure its members know and understand what kind of ideology represents the party, and to understand the kind of ideas that characterize the party and its actions.

Finally, studying abroad has also been an opportunity for many young students to acquire some training or education that can later be used in their home country. Some students have carried out training programs that have to do more with political participation, how to organize political parties, and how to organize youth; while other students have carried out exchange programs to learn more about another culture and to see how they can export some of the positive aspects and experiences to their home country. This shows a lot of commitment and responsibility towards their own country,

as students try to find ways of empowering themselves through knowledge and education in order to serve their country in a more effective way.

Many young people have gone abroad to get training and education, but always with the intention of coming back to Venezuela (Juan D. Tapia – Interview July 8, 2013).

A technological generation

This political generation also represents the technological advances of the modern era. The use of technologies is a vital resource for the student movement. Students organize, coordinate and mobilize people through the social networks, Internet, instant messaging.

Nowadays, many institutions have wanted to restrict our freedom of thought and our freedom to write what we want, and thanks to the social networks this freedom has prevailed, and information continues to flow quickly (Manuel Aguirre – Interview July 8, 2013).

The social networks have created a space of participation for young people. Through their use, people can be informed quickly of the important things happening in the country, and can also be informed about events and activities that are being organized. The social networks have also the power to reach more and more people regarding time and space; it is easier for young people to use this important tool to broadcast their opinions, ideas, and discussions. It has become a tool for young people to communicate. It is a home turf for youth where they have found a way to create virtual communities to share ideas about the situation of the country, as well as coordinating and bringing together many people for different political or social events.

That young people are more interested in politics nowadays, I believe it has to do with the media, especially with the Internet, twitter, Facebook, and the mass use of social networks (Elvis Zea, FGD 2).

We (youth) are more involved with the social networks, and these inform about everything! Especially with twitter everybody knows what is happening in politics (Gabriela Vargas, FGD 2).

Vision of this political generation

What makes this generation different from others is that the student movement is on its way of finding its own identity different from the past, a path that it is different from the partisanship that has always characterized politics in Venezuela; different from socialism and capitalism, the new generation want the value put on human beings and not in the praise of a political economic system. The student movement advocates for a model of inclusion, union and cooperation. Youth want to help poor people overcome poverty and make richer people aware of their responsibility to help; they want all political ideologies to participate; they want cordial relationships with the rest of the countries; they want foreign investment and protection of the national production; finally they want to maintain their culture and values within a system of solid democracy. They want both sides of Venezuela to reconcile because only by doing that they know that progress can be achieved in the country. That is the spirit of this new generation of leaders of the twenty-one century, the spirit of political humanism (Fontiveros & Sandoval, 2008).

In brief it can be said that this new political generation is a generation with a vision and values, which does not want to with the current status settle and has a critical voice; they want to be an inspiration for next generations, and most importantly, they want to raise the value of men and women higher than the value of any political or economical system. The student movement in Venezuela has helped society realize that the practice of building and constructing a future for the country was delegated entirely exclusive to politicians, and that now it is the time for society to wake up and get involved in a process that is also the responsibility of civilians; Venezuelans have come to realize that building a better democracy has to be an inclusive project, where all spheres of society have to participate, not only politicians (Tovar Arroyo, 2007), and that rehabilitating political practices is essential to building a platform for the exchange of ideas and visions of the country. This political generation insists in the importance of dialogue between pro-government and opposition; that is what humanism is about, finding spaces of encounter and acknowledging the things each group in society has in common with the others, instead of emphasizing on their differences. Nowadays, youth are the ones who can renovate the vision of progress of the country. Young students, after hearing in their homes, universities, in the media and in the streets that it was necessary to rehabilitate the country, have decided to take the lead and set their goals for the

encounter of both sides of Venezuela (ibid). The student movement understands clearly that the language and dialogue tone and message has to change, and that it is of utmost importance to promote spaces for sharing different ideas and visions of what the country could and should be. The student movement of 2007 offers a change in the language of politics: ideas, visions and humanism, a reform of the language through the exercise of dialogue and non-violent resistance (ibid).

This political generation proposes as a starting point for reconstructing or rehabilitating the country, the sincere recognition of civil and human rights in Venezuela. While criminality, poverty, restriction of thinking differently, weak public institutions, unemployment, injustice, and unawareness of human rights continue to prevail, the problems of the country will still persist. It is not the government what worries youth, it is the current culture instead. It is not necessary to distinguish between good or bad, socialists or capitalists, because everyone at the end should advocate for a humanistic view (Tovar Arroyo, 2007).

Summing up

In this chapter I have tried to give account of what the student movement is, and some of its characteristics. I have also tried to explain the events that occurred before student's appearance in the public scene as political actors, as well as the reason for why students decided to take the lead in the reconstruction of the country. They have achieved a new consciousness on people not so much based on political ideologies but based on humanistic values, and they have transmitted this message to Venezuelan society. Also, they have created awareness on Venezuelans about how important it is for everyone to take on political responsibility and not delegating entirely to politicians the task of changing the country. Furthermore, the most important achievement of the student movement was winning the referendum on December 2 in 2007, because they proved society and the government that they were capable of transmitting a message to society by being transparent and honest in their execution and their goals, getting involved with the people in order to create awareness about the proposed constitution.

Humanism seems to be what identify this political generation; this strand is not concerned in emphasizing the differences that can exist between different ideologies or different vision of the country, instead it tries to find a space of reconciliation and dialogue, highlighting the things each group have in common and from there start

achieving progress in the country. Students appearance in the political scene have also proved to society that building democracy is a process that requires the involvement of every member in society, and that cannot be delegated to politicians only. Finally, the student movement of 2007 is a generation of change; they represent the general discomfort among young people regarding the socio political context in Venezuela.

6 Individualized practices

Young peoples' attitudes towards politics

Most of young people who are now between twenty-five and thirty years old, had a different conception of the country and its history by the time Hugo Chávez won its first election back in 1998, when most of them were teenagers. Before Chavez there was no need for discussing politics all the time; it was not an important issue in the life of young people. As Alexander Rueda mentions: *In the time of our parents, in the 70s and 80s everything was fine and you simply didn't have the feeling that something could go wrong*, proving that deep political participation is something that is directly correlated to periods of political instability. For a generation that has lived part of its youth in a situation of continuous political tension, it can be difficult at the beginning to realize the need of getting involved in politics at an early age. At the same time, it is the continuous tension the reason to prompt young people to become politically active; they realize sooner than most youth in other countries how much they have to lose if they do not get involved.

In Venezuela, youth have lived the last fifteen years under the influence of a highly politicized environment; families started to divide according to their support or non-support to Mr. Chavez; schools and universities became fertile grounds of political socialization since they constantly talk about the situation of the country. Therefore, it is not surprising that children from an early age already know the names of ministers and mayors; nobody is exempt from politics. In a very short time span youth had to assume a political position; in many cases young people tend to assume the same position of their parents. Again, socialization processes have a lot to do with how children and youth start to enter the political world through their parents; in most of the cases they tend to follow their ideals since it is what they have been listening to in their homes, in family reunions, etc., what tends to influence the most their growing political opinions. However, it is important to outline that although youth are greatly influenced by the political stand of their relatives, it is not always the case that they end up thinking similarly. With age people tend to develop different attitudes and behaviors related to politics, and this are influenced also by the particular social and political situation of the country at the times they have had to live. In Venezuela, youth have acknowledged they

cannot follow their parents' or society's ideals, since these have failed deeply; those same ideals and criteria are the ones, which created the current status. Youth have adopted their own interpretation of the country's situation and collectively have decided to do something different about it.

Youth's way of reasoning and analyzing the reality of the country is a result of how the situation has forced somehow young people to adopt a certain level of political maturity at an early stage of their lives. After 2002, youth realized it was time to break with the old way of thinking that wanted to be imposed on young people; they realized, the hard way, it was time to understand they reality of their country in order to build a new vision of progress and development; marching and protests were not going to be enough without a deep commitment of what was important to take care of and how to do it (Fontiveros et al., 2009).

Politics from an early stage in life

Engaging in politics from an early stage in life is important for developing a sense of responsibility in matters that go from the micro level, such as everyday issues, to the macro level, involving state policies. Youth also begin to develop attitudes and behaviors that correlate with the contextual situation, meaning that they are able to understand and analyze the reality they have to live in, and take on actions for improving their situation. In Venezuela, the current political generation has had to live a very polarized setting, which makes it difficult to achieve a common goal for progress and development in the country. Moreover, political differences seem to be above everything, making it difficult to find a common space for encouraging dialogue between opposite ideas. Individually, young people have recognized the need for involving in the country's affairs and changing the status quo. There has been a process of maturity in each person that has been shaped by the critical situation Venezuela is going through, and this process has developed a collective consciousness that gave as a result the current political generation. In other words, this political generation would not have been born if each of its members had not individually recognized their role as social agents, and had not assumed the responsibility of being part of the transition that is changing the attitudes of society towards politics.

As mentioned before, the development of individual political attitudes and behaviors is also the result of socialization processes that take place in a country, whether it is in the

privacy of each home, or in schools. Young people's attitudes and curiosity towards politics usually start to develop at home, meaning that they start to have their first contact with the political world and the political language from an early age in their life.

My father has always been interested in politics, and I have had many conversations with my parents about the topic; it has been really interesting because I learn a lot from them (Milexis Ochoa – Interview July 5, 2013).

My grandfather used to be a member of COPEI, and I used to go with him to the meetings and talk with politicians from the old school. I was the youngest (Miguel Salas, FGD 2).

In Venezuela, as Mariel Bertrand says, *politics was not a relevant or important issue before, nobody was worried about it, and it was a boring topic!* However, due to the social, economic and political circumstances, young people had to start worrying about politics and the consequences of bad political decisions from an early age because their future and opportunities were at risk. Thus, politics went from being a boring and irrelevant topic, to people's everyday concern.

Political citizens

As mentioned before, the most current topic of discussion nowadays in the country is politics. Everyone seems to be aware of the situation of the country, and the reality of the country is so unsustainable that it generates anxiety among people. This anxiety is released somehow by talking about the country's problems at any place, such as family reunions, parties, when queuing at the supermarket or at the bank, etc. Politics is something that got into the lives of people, as Carlos Luciani mentioned:

Nowadays the situation of the country forces you to participate in politics, even if you don't want to do it; I have tried to escape from it, I go out in the streets and try not to talk about politics, but how can I avoid it? When I visit a client the conversation always ends up in politics. The only way of avoiding politics in Venezuela is by leaving the country (Interview July 20, 2013)

Even when people do not want to get involved in political discussions, they end up talking about it anyway.

I feel that many people became interested in politics simply because politics entered their lives. Whoever tells you “I am not political” is wrong, because everyday politics puts more restrictions on people’s lives, every day is harder to get your passport issued or your ID, every day is harder not to be a victim of insecurity... (Juan D. Tapia – Interview July 8, 2013).

These are only examples of how my participants explained that although some people do not want to be involved in politics or are not interested in it, it still affects them indirectly. This points out the fact the many people are not aware of how political subjects they really are, basically because some people only relate politics with matters that are more connected to *Politics* (with capital P) at the institutional and governmental level. But is in the day-to-day practices that people realize that *politics* (with lower case p) interferes in all the issues that directly affect people’s lives. Moreover, when I asked my participants what politics was for them, sometimes the question was not easily answered, many had to stop for a moment and think and their immediate answer did not relate in many cases with the day-to-day issues. This pattern was more consistent among participants that were not involved in political parties or that were not so politically active. However, those who had political affiliations to some parties, or those who were more actively involved in politics, did relate the everyday issues as something that was directly connected to politics. As an example of how some participants were not sure how to define politics is the following extract from an interview:

I: Mariel, what do you understand by politics? Or what kind of activities do you relate with politics?

Mariel: umm... I don't know.

I: what do you think politics is for?

Mariel: politics is what moves the country nowadays, when you ask me about politics I think about this terrible government, and I don't know what else to say.

I: In what way do you think you are politically involved? How do you participate in society?

Mariel: right now I am quite distant from politics, because as I told you before, it has become an uncomfortable subject (...) In this country everything evolves

around politics, and I think it shouldn't be like that, I think more attention should be paid to other things.

I: What do you exactly mean by “other things”?

Mariel: well, to what happens in the economic and social aspect for example... they (politicians) mix everything with politics and it shouldn't be like that.

I: But when you talk about economic and social aspects, don't you think that behind that there is a political background? You mentioned before that you try to keep away from politics because you don't want it to affect you, but until what point do you think it doesn't affect your life?

Mariel: it does affect me! It affects my day-to-day. The country has changed, and things are not going well. I am a professional and I can't find a job.

I: So, politics even if you don't want to, or even if you want to stay away from it, does affect your daily life...

Mariel: ...although I do tell you that right now I'm not participating in any association or political party.

A narrow conception of what is politics was perceived in some of my interviews; this also made me understand that many people are not aware of their role as social agents. However, they still engage in political activities such as protests or manifestations. Depending on people's level of involvement in politics, their definition about it is broadened and enriched; therefore they are able to link everyday issues as a consequence of bad political management. The final reflection is that it is difficult to become separated from politics because politics is in everything people do in society. Delinquency and poverty, economic crisis, scarcity of basic products, insufficient medical supplies, etc., are in some way direct consequences of bad political decisions and a deficient management of the country's internal problems, and these issues end up affecting the whole society.

Politics as a means for achieving social change

Politics whether it is with capital or lower case p (*Politics, politics*) it is surely a way to achieve social, economic and why not, political progress in a country. Many young people are somewhat disenchanted with politics and political parties, since politics have been used more as a way to retain power rather than as a means to transform the reality of the country. Moreover, having a narrow conception of what is politics also

contributes to people having quite a negative image about it since they do not identify themselves as social agents; instead they continue relating bad politicians with bad political practices.

There is a myth that politics is something bad, resulting in an anti-politic attitude... I believe that is false (...) all citizens are political citizens (Manuel Aguirre – Interview July 8, 2013).

However, there are many people who do agree that politics is the act that can change societies. A way of doing this is by getting involved in political parties. For many years, political parties in Venezuela, even if recently formed, have been discredited because many people still associate them with the bad practices of the past; nevertheless youth also recognized that political parties are the pillar of democracy, and one of the only peaceful ways of generating changes. A few years ago being part of a political party was criminalized in Venezuela, and this has been aggravated by the fact that the government has also attacked deeply political parties to discredit them. For Jose A. Bucete, active member of PJ, he says:

I can't conceive democracy without political parties, because it is through political parties where people are really active, where people are disciplined, and trained, where people discuss how to do politics (Interview July 9, 2013).

This statement underlines the positive values of participating in politics through political parties; additionally, political parties are a reflection of how consolidated a democracy is, since they are one of the most important ways of channeling ideas and carrying out proposals from citizens. Furthermore, through politics it is possible to operate in a community that may have deep structural problems, such as lack of sanitation, lack of educational institutes, bad communication networks, etc.

Another important aspect is that being part of a political party is something that is voluntary, so young people who decide to engage in this sort of activity shows a big level of responsibility and commitment to their society. For Jose A. Bucete, being a member of PJ was hard work, which requires a lot of discipline and especially to be in touch with many different realities and many people. He also recognized that it is important that the politician sits down and listens to the people so he can understand

their needs. Thus, in politics people can find a wide range-reaching instrument to help society change; it is a means to take actions at all levels of society and most importantly, it is an instrument to achieve social development, something very important in the Venezuelan context.

I remember that with the student movement we went to communities to explain what was the reform about, but we did it by organizing social activities, not only to talk about the reform (...) Particularly, I'm an altruistic person, and within politics I saw the opportunity to help people... In Venezuela a lot of people need help (Alexander Rueda – Interview July 9, 2013).

This highlights the importance of implementing a humanist agenda at the same time as economic and political development is implemented, especially in a country like Venezuela, where sixty percent of the households are below poverty level according to UN's definition. Alexander Rueda is one example of how he found in politics a way of reaching the most needed through a foundation called "Sonríe Valencia"²⁶. He used to be member of a political party but after some time he decided to focus more on social activities. His foundation aims to build civic culture by rescuing important values of the city, and he does this by following a cultural, and social agenda. Thus, the role that foundations and NGOs play in the humanistic development of social programs is very important as well, because they tend to emphasize more on social policies reaching a wider range of people. However, Alexander Rueda did highlight the fact that through politics the range of impact is wider compared to a foundation, since politicians are the ones who take the decisions that have greater repercussions in society. Additionally, many young people who are still disenchanted with political parties or simply do not feel political parties are the best channel to participate in society, take action through foundations, NGOs, or civil organizations like Súmate, conforming these as participatory places where youth can have an impact on society from a social perspective.

Finally, the most important reason for why youth decide to participate in politics, whether it is through a political party or through foundations, NGOs, etc., is because

²⁶ "Smile Valencia"

they know they have a lot to lose if they decide to remain passive, as Alexander Rueda mentioned:

Despite all the problems we have in Venezuela, youth that decided to stay here and not migrate, still know they have a lot to lose, therefore the need of getting involved in politics is fundamental to achieve any change or to generate actions that can have an incidence on whatever it is you want to change (Interview July 9, 2013).

Spaces of resistance: the University and the streets

Public universities and the streets have become the two places where youth participate more notoriously in political activities and other actions, which have had public impact. These two spaces have provided a platform for action for young people. In the university, students and young political leaders have found the place to bring together all the students and organize them for different actions, whether they are events, manifestations and protests, or to pass on statements, call for debates and have assemblies with the student body. The university is also the space to recruit people for carrying on activities outside the university, such as in communities. On the other hand, the street has become the space for showing societies discontent or to create awareness. Through the years the streets have become the space par excellence to defend civil and human rights. Therefore, both spaces, university and the street, have been spaces of resistance and public denunciation where youth have carried out their actions.

The University as an autonomous space

The university represents the space that guarantee students civil and human rights; it is also a space that values the importance of promoting freedom of speech, of thought, and the freedom to choose what a person wants to become. The university has always been a reference for freedom because it has always remained autonomous and independent from the political sphere and partisanship. This has allowed this academic institution not to take sides with any particular government, and continues to promote criticism and denunciation against bad governmental practices.

Students have also recognized the university as a space of resistance against government, particularly because there have been many attempts from the government to change aspects of the university for their own benefits; for example, government

wants to change school curricula obstructing academic freedom; it has also tried to make the university a governmental institution which could have affected enormously not only in the quality of education, but also its openness and tolerance for all ideologies and ways of thinking.

The government is not interested in youth's education in the university, because the more mediocre people are, the easier it is to manipulate them (Jose A. Bucete – Interview July 9, 2013).

The idea that supports this argument is that for an authoritarian government, such as Venezuela's today, the government is not very much concerned in youth's education and training since later they can develop their own critical thinking and maybe decide in the future to become a member of any political party, not just the one supporting the government, or to just be a truly productive person for the country with their own ideas and models. The Venezuelan government perceives this as a threat to their hegemony and power. They know the power that educated youth can have and how youth's political participation can change the status quo in society. Moreover, coincidentally when I was conducting fieldwork, the public universities were at strike because teachers were demanding a raise in their salaries, something that has not occurred since 2005. Since 2005 until these days the economic situation of the country has been quite unstable and inflation has grown dramatically. Venezuela has had the largest inflation in the world for the past few years, so it is logical to think that with the salary teachers are earning nowadays, it is not enough to make a decent living as a professor. Same can be said about almost all professions in the country.

Furthermore, even though the government has not increased tuition fees, they have not improved universities services either; this is apparently done in a conscious effort from government to destabilize the universities and restrains access.

Buses that provide a free service for students for taking them to universities are almost in disuse! And the government doesn't approve any budget for transport because it's not interested in youth attending university, and you know why? Because the government has consistently tried to get the university on its side of doing politics, but when they have tried, they have always failed (Jose A. Bucete – Interview July 9, 2013).

Another reason why students are so conscious about participating actively in society is because they know that universities should prevail as autonomous spaces. They want to keep it a space where different ideologies can be debated, a space that encourages dialogue and understanding of other points of views; a space that has always had a critical point of view.

When you talk about university, you are talking about a universe of thoughts that integrate everything, and integration has not only to do with education, but also with the political transcendence in one's life (Berymar Deza – Interview July 15, 2013).

This fragment highlights the importance of the university as a starting point for creating political attitudes, as well as the values and importance of sharing ideas and ideologies, and this is something this political generation has recognized, that there is place for everyone's ideas, and that nobody has to impose their opinion over anyone. This shows maturity when it comes to dialogue, a very important aspect for this generation, because it is seen as the way to reach a better understanding of other people's visions as well as a more complete understanding of the reality of the country.

Finally, one statement that underlines the importance of the university as an autonomous space, especially in such context where there is a lot of political unrest and where the government wants to impose its political ideology over people, goes as follows:

While there is democracy in the university, there will be democracy in the country (Manuel Aguirre – Interview July 8, 2013).

This shows that students are aware of the importance of defending the university in order for it to remain a space of inclusion, knowledge production and intellect, but at the same time it shows hope and a willingness of youth to protect something as valuable as education, and to continue promoting the university as an independent space from governmental politics. Students know that the university is the temple of plurality, and the place where personality is shaped, where different ideas are interchanged and life criteria is constructed (Fontiveros & Sandoval, 2008), and youth know that these values are worth fighting for.

The street as a space of encounter and struggle of young people

Many times I have mentioned that in the political struggle students “took the streets”; clamming the streets as a space for young people goes back to the 28-generation, when university students found in the streets a new space of struggle against an oppressive and tyrannical government. Since then, the street not only represents a space for resistance, but it also carries great symbolic meaning because it is a space in which people can practice their human and civil rights. It is a space where all citizens, opposition and pro-government meet to claim for their right to choose, their right to freedom; these rights are the same for all Venezuelans regardless of political ideology.

The street symbolizes that both all faces of the country can be encountered instead of confronted, although in the last fifteen years the streets have been used a space for confrontation. Yet, what is the street? It seems interesting to acknowledge what constitutes the street in Venezuela since it is not only a physical space. The street is also promoting assemblies in communities; it is talking, analyzing and debating what is happening in the country with people from all ideologies; it is where people express themselves at the same time they recognize each other’s ideas; it is a space for recognizing oneself and the contextual problems, which are the same for everyone and go well beyond political ideologies. The street per se is the recognition of all the realities existing in the country as well as a clear mean for denouncing and claiming improvements of the political, social and economic system.

In the last few years, the street in Venezuela has become the space where youth are vocal and visible through different activities. In fact, many of the events organized by the student movements are called “street movement”, because they take place in the street with the intention to reach a wide number of people. Following this idea, the activities carried out by the student movement can be divided in two groups: activism and social participation, both are carried out within the broad conception of the street. Activism is more related to those activities students carry out to make them somehow more visible by society; within this category, activities such as massive protests, manifestations, street movements, which are activities organized by student’s collectives aimed at raising awareness about the political situation of the country, or also with the objective to denounce a specific problem. An example of this can be the event “Acuestate por la vida”, mentioned in the previous chapter, in which the goal was

to denounce insecurity by concentrating people that had to lie down in the street for one minute, in representation of all the people who have died as a consequence of delinquency and insecurity. Carlos Graffe, a young activist who is very committed to changing the social and political reality of the country and is continuously organizing activities in the communities, explained another example of activism:

(...) we started to generate a street movement, in fact it was called “Estudiantes en la calle²⁷” and it was about people in the streets, it was not for universities. It was for the street but using university students for carrying on actions in the streets. We stood in traffic lights, bridges, we placed banners in the city... that kind of activism, and I think that contributed to generate consciousness around the topic (Interview July 10, 2013).

Furthermore, it was important that these activities not only created and raised consciousness among the people, but also that they added more people to the cause. It is worthless to protest if it is not going to have an impact on people and get them involved. Another important aspect to take into account was to have very clear in everybody’s mind whom was the target of the protest, and for whom was the message directed, in this sense Carlos Graffe stated:

For me the protest is against the government, but it is also a message for the people (...) when you increase the government’s political cost when they want to do something, things change, and the political cost can only be increased if there is a consciousness among people about what is happening (Interview July 10, 2013).

This highlights the individual’s responsibility to make sure to be informed of what is happening in the country and at the same time prompt them to take actions. However, activism needs to be accompanied also by social participation. This kind of action generate a different social impact compared to activism because it is related to youth’s direct involvements in social problems, which originally may have a political implication. In this sense, foundations and NGOs aimed at empowering poor

²⁷ “Students in the streets”

communities are a clear example. These programs often organize workshops and activities that help people to have the necessary knowledge to be active citizens not only in their communities, but also in society. Social participation is a matter of sharing the responsibility of helping communities so they can be autonomous and independent in social, and political matters. Also voluntary, and social activities fall into this category of social participation.

Lastly, activism and social participation fall into the category of informal *politics*. These activities are aimed at mobilizing, raising people's awareness and including them in any participatory activity whose goal is to have a positive impact in society. On the other hand, students that from an early stage in university start to develop responsibilities as student leaders, are most likely to continue exercising *Politics* from a more formal stand within political parties. Both paths are equally important when it comes to assess youth's political participation, since through both ways social, cultural, economic and political change can be achieved, the difference lays on the means each category uses in order to achieve such changes.

Summing up

In this chapter I have explained young people's attitudes towards politics given the current socio political context in Venezuela. These political attitudes are the result of socialization processes, where young people start to interact with political issues and initiate a political conversation and debate from an early stage in their lives. Moreover, I have tried to explain that in many cases there is a narrow conception of what is politics, since citizens do not recognize themselves as political subjects when in fact they are. Furthermore, the role of politics as a tool for achieving social change is a very powerful reason for why young people decide to get involved in politics from a more social perspective. Finally, I have also mentioned the university and the streets as the two main places where young people in Venezuela take on several different actions to train themselves and achieve a deeper knowledge about the reality of the country, and to create consciousness among people and make use of public spaces as spaces for resistance to the government's radical policies.

7 Merging collective and individualized practices

Since 1928 until these days, there have been many different struggles to make Venezuelans recall the kind of country they have wanted to build all along (Fontiveros et al., 2009). In 1928 there were only two universities in the country, today there are more than fifty. Nowadays there is no excuse to remain indifferent towards what happens in the world and what actions to take in order to maintain progress and stability in any country (ibid). In Venezuela, there still remain evils from the past, like selfishness or militarism, which have prompted its government leaders to be at the same time autocratic politicians and civil libertarians; but the advancement of a democratic culture and the hard learning of the dangers of populist demagoguery, have created a conscious of responsibility in Venezuelans, which has in the new political generation its best advocates (Fontiveros et al., 2009).

In 2007, a group of young idealists announced the vindication of civil and human rights as a means and an end itself for changing the way politics has been carried out in Venezuela. The life of students conforming this political generation has been deeply influenced by violence, insecurity, fear and economic crisis. Stability is not something that is embedded in this youth political culture; youth, culturally and regardless of its socio economic position, is very much influenced by the double reality of the country. That is why this political generation searches for a real reconciliation driven by a common generational consciousness that goes beyond confrontation, and instead advocates for dialogue and a more humanistic view about politics.

After the closure of RCTV there was a lot of repression against students. The student movement reacted strongly making the vindication of freedom of speech and the right to protest, which was being severely limited by authorities, their main demand. This, together with the non-violent tone of the struggle are the main things that characterize the student movement of 2007 (Cavet & De Bastos, 2012). Hence, this political generation does not have the idea of using politics as a tool for war; rather they prefer to use political dialogue and debates as its strength mark (Fontiveros et al., 2009).

The student movement is a democratic movement seeking a modernization of the political system within the law, which also promotes the individual's autonomy. This is

in response to a collectivist and statist system of the past 15 years, which has not been able to create wealth and which sacrifices individual's freedom. Therefore, Venezuelan society has learnt the hard way that the current system will not bring progress, prosperity or modernity to the country, rather it will keep impoverishing the country more and more.

There is a large and growing sector of society that is increasingly critical of government policies, actions and tone; they demand more spaces and opportunities for dialogue, to be able to promote reconciliation among Venezuelans and to recommend a peaceful and democratic solution to the social crisis in the country. That is why the student movement advocates so much for dialogue, because they see it as an opportunity, perhaps the only peaceful one, for the government to change its political model and promote this dialogue through education. In the last fifteen years there has been a large qualitative leap in the political maturity of the average Venezuelan resident, something very important in order to be critical and analytical. This will enhance the language and content of political debates.

This political generation has understood that in order to achieve changes in the country, there has to be a coordinated political struggle that includes both realities of Venezuela, those who support the government and those who opposed it. This means to politicize civil society by giving them organizational tools to take this transitional process in their hands and become real social actors. Therefore the need to organize and coordinate people in order to create awareness becomes a key factor.

Politics can be humanistic

A humanistic view about politics proposes that progress in society is only possible as long as dignity and human rights are respected. In Venezuela a lot of people die weekly, millions suffer from poverty, corruption is embedded in people's everyday life, and militarism seems to be gaining more terrain in civil society. For this reason, young people resist, through dialogue and understanding. Student movements, civil associations, NGOs, artists, intellectuals, journalists, professionals, etc., each from their own sphere, tries to create, participate, and find pacific ways for national conciliation, as well as for creating a more responsible and tolerant society; one which is less authoritarian and more democratic. In a slow, but continued process, individuals, groups, and communities that had no relationship among them have come together and

formed a wider national consciousness for a democratic rehabilitation of the country, with the intention of transforming politics as a fundamental platform to exchange ideas, dreams and visions of the country (Tovar Arroyo, 2007).

Humanistic politics advocates for encounter and dialogue, where people can understand and tolerate each other, and where there is room for every political ideology and tendency. Its basis resides in the knowledge and respect of human rights. This political generation has a humanistic goal and they also see it as a meeting point for both realities in Venezuela. University students and youth in general have renovated the language for interaction; they want dialogue, democracy and freedom as the means for discussing politics. Therefore, it can be said that Venezuelan youth have a humanistic orientation in their political and social perspective.

The 2007 student movement's contribution to the history of Venezuela has been significant; they have been able to propose a new way of doing politics which has little to do with political parties' traditional ways and puts greater focus on people. Values such as respect, understanding, tolerance, dialogue, reconciliation and will to accept different visions for changing the country is what gives this new political generation a significance in the history of the country. With the closure of RCTV many could have thought that youth were upset just because a media channel was being shut off, when in fact what this TV closure represented was that youth's access to the world, to freedom, to knowledge, and the right to choose was being taken away. Therefore, what drives this political generation are human values that goes beyond individual differences. Young people believe in changing society by changing individuals first, however, they recognize that this is not an easy and simple task, and that it is indeed a long term process that will take a lot of work and sacrifice.

An added value

The Venezuelan student movement has proven clearly how youth can engage in modern issues using technology, creating networks through virtual communities, using the social networks to communicate, and at the same time engage in political reform. They combine both, technology and politics, creating their own way of doing politics whether it is with capital or lower case "p" (*Politics, politics*). This added value is something new in society, not only the way people communicate has changed, but it has attracted young people to participate in a space that used to be more related to the adult world,

that is the political sphere. Thus, Venezuelan youth is contributing to the production of new knowledge related to politics, since the student movement shows that young people have a different and more humanistic approach to politics.

Young people can be as competent and responsible as adults when it comes to politics. What this political generation is showing is that there are other ways of conceiving and doing politics. Values such as education, solidarity and looking beyond personal egos have been characteristics of youth in Venezuela. They want to achieve progress by acknowledging all the different realities in the country, and by encouraging a non-violent path for change. The student movement has been able to achieve a change in society's consciousness; they made civil society aware that it is everyone's responsibility and duty to be politically active agents in formal or informal ways. Students want to become a symbol of unification within the polarized Venezuelan society. From the beginning, their claims included all sectors of society, whether they were pro-government, opposition or independent. They have achieved a generational consciousness that recognizes the failures of the past and are willing to take the lead in a new direction for a better country, including all sectors of society, building a more inclusive, participative and just democracy, as Darela Sosa in Cavet (2008:67) says: *One of the main values of the student movement is its plurality, its intention of peace, national reconciliation and freedom.*

On the generational aspect, the importance and relevance of the student movement of 2007 in Venezuelan history will be reflected in the long term. History will be the objective judge of that. It was not only about what happened in 2007 with the TV closure and the constitutional reform, but also what happened in the mindset of young students which could have the potential to change a whole generation. It was a cultural change for a whole generation that suddenly did not feel alone anymore, since it had a student movement backing up youth's ideas and motivations.

Students do not see problems in Venezuela as statistic facts, they see problems as real issues because they suffer them and are affected by them. The lack of response from the government to the main needs of the population has been a very important reason for youth to engage actively in politics. Therefore, the role of students during times of socio political crisis is fundamental, as youth takes responsibility for their future and engages politically in the progress of their country; this engagement allows new leaderships to

arise. Also, a different consciousness among youth triggers their participation, creating civil organizations, movements, or participation from activism to achieve social and political change. Furthermore, in this process, life-course aspects also intervene such as individual practices and decisions that are taken according to age and socialization processes that in certain way have an influence in the political attitude of young people. In certain historical times, young people tend to have a bigger presence and high political participation, and are more willing to mobilizations compared to adults that can be more reticent in their actions.

Finally, student movements usually appear in the political scene due to academic, social or political discontent, however their motives tend to adapt depending on the context they are living in. In Venezuela students do not only protest against the government, but they also do it against inefficiencies in schools, against the economic and social crisis, etc. In any case, students are political and social actors that can have a great influence in society, and in fact, this has been the case in Venezuela. Today's political struggle is based on the reconciliation of the country, by bridging both facets of Venezuela and rebuild a better a nation. It is time to achieve a unity that transcends the parties' unity; a time to connect problems with people regardless of their political position.

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Appendices

Appendix I

In the following table I describe briefly the participants' profile that took part in individual interviews. This helped me to have an overview of the people who were participating in my research, their characteristics, and political affiliation.

Alexander Rueda

Age: 26 years

Occupation: Civil Engineer

Participatory practices or experiences:

- Was a member of PJ for 3 years.
- Currently he is the founder of the foundation "Sonríe Valencia".
- Participated in the LIDERA program (training for young emergent leaders). In 2010-2011 he traveled to Spain to study Public Policy.
- Manifestations and protests.

Berymar Deza

Age: 28 years

Occupation: Lawyer. Currently working at the state's attorney's office

Participatory practices or experiences:

- Community works in poor neighborhoods.
- Participated in university policy.

Carlos Graffe

Age: 27 years

Occupation: University student

Participatory practices or experiences:

- Student leader and activist.
- President of the foundation "Futuro Presente", coordinator of the LIDERA program.
- Manifestations and protests.

Carlos Luciani

Age: 30 years

Occupation: Informatics' Engineer

Participatory practices or experiences:

- During elections helps to mobilize people to election centers
- Manifestations and protests.

Fidel De Nobrega

Age: 27 years.

Occupation: Degree in Public Accounting

Participatory practices or experiences:

- Manifestations and protests.
- Participates in political debates.

Jose Antonio Bucete

Age: 28 years

Occupation: Lawyer and professor at Carabobo University

Participatory practices or experiences:

- Member of PJ since he was 19 years old (organization secretary of Carabobo State).
- Was running for city council when I interviewed him.
- Started in politics in his last year of university through students' movements.
- Manifestations and protests.

Juan Daniel Tapia

Age: 29 years

Occupation: Lawyer

Participatory practices or experiences:

- Member of COPEI (director of the National Youth program).
- In 2006 he participated in a program organized by the UN for Latin-American youth to train people in political organization and participation.
- Student leader.
- Manifestations and protests.

Manuel Aguirre

Age: 22 years

Occupation: University student

Participatory practices or experiences:

- Member of PJ (social secretary of Valencia).
- Participated in a program called "Voto Joven" to promote and encourage young people to vote.
- Participated in the LIDERA program.
- Manifestations and protests.

Maria Teresa Gómez

Age: -

Occupation: Musicologist

Participatory practices or experiences:

- State coordinator of Súmate

Mariel Bertrand

Age: 28 years

Occupation: unemployed

Participatory practices or experiences:

- Used to participate in university policy during her university years.
- Manifestations and protests.

Miguel Sanz

Age: 28 years

Occupation: IT Engineer

Participatory practices or experiences:

- Participates during elections as member of polling processes.
- Manifestations and protests.

Milexis Ochoa

Age: 22 years

Occupation: University student

Participatory practices or experiences:

- Participates in voluntary activities in her community.
- Participates in exchange program to the US.
- Manifestations and protests.

Participant A

Age: 16 years

Occupation: College student

Participatory practices or experiences:

- Participated in exchange program to the US.
- Although he still does not have the age to vote, he mentioned that during Election Day he helps to mobilize people to their voting centers.

Participant B

Age: 16 years

Occupation: college student

Participatory practices or experiences:

- Participated in exchange program in the US.
-

Appendix II

In the following table I describe briefly the profile participants who took part in FGDs. This helped me to have an overview of the people who were participating in my research, their characteristics, and political affiliation.

Focus group discussion 1: Súmate

General context: all participants were volunteers in Súmate, a civil organization dedicated to build a more just democracy, and that provides technical capacity to facilitate citizens' participation processes. My participants have been involved in logistic activities during Elections, and they also have the chance to participate as instructors in workshops about civic education and rights in communities. All of them have had participatory experiences in manifestations and protests. Many young people find in Súmate a space where they can exercise their participation.

Participants:

- **Alejandro Gómez.** 24 years. Fireman and activist.
- **Miguel Salas.** 18 years. University student.
- **Andres Freites.** 19 years. University student.
- **María Fernanda Isaac.** 28 años. University student and activist.

Focus group discussion 2: Carabobo University

General context: the group dynamic took place in Carabobo University with students in the first year of Political Sciences. The language and level of the dynamic was very high; these students showed a high level of understanding of different political strands and ideologies, so their interventions were most of the time very deep in content. Although participants in this FGD were quite young, the majority explained they have chosen to study the career of political science due to the current situation of the country. All my participants had different political ideologies, and the debate was at all moment very enriching and civilized.

Participants:

- **Emmanuel Rodríguez.** 24 years.
 - **Jhonny Tarazona.** 18 years.
 - **Ezio Assiso.** 21 years.
 - **Elvis Zea.** 18 years.
 - **Ricardo Semoni.** 18 years.
 - **Gabriela Vargas.** 18 years.
 - **Andrea Pool.** 19 years.
-

Appendix III

Interview guideline

- What do you understand by *participation*? (What's your concept about this term?)
- What do you understand as *political*?
- What kind of activities do you relate with the concept of *political*?
- How would you define political engagement?
- In what way or ways do you think you participate in political activities?
- How would you define *active citizenship*? Do you consider yourself as an active citizen?
- Do you consider important youth's involvement in politics? (Whether it is in formal or informal politics) Why?
- How would you consider that participation could have an impact on society?
- Do you think that youth's participation in Venezuelan politics has increased in the last years? Why?
- Do think that Venezuelan's youth are defining a new political generation? If yes, how is this new generation different from previous generations? Can you identify attitudes and behaviors from this new generation?
- From where does your interest in politics begin? (Influence from home, from school, from your community...)
- What issues concerns you regarding your everyday life?
- Are you member of any political party, or youth association? If yes, what motivates you to engage with this way of participation?
- How does young people organize when it comes to political or civic engagement?
- Where do they organize? Can you identify spaces of participation?
- Can you identify participatory experiences? (Standard individualized measures of participation; party and union involvement; community-based organizational involvement; collective-action involvement; discussion of a range of social and political topics)
- What type of participatory experience do you think has more impact in society, and why?