

# **“A Weapon as Powerful as the Vote”: Urban Protest and Electoral Politics in Venezuela, 1978–1983**

Alejandro Velasco

Days before Christmas in 1981, Earles Gutiérrez and three other youths stood waiting at the busy rotary in Monte Piedad at the eastern edge of the 23 de Enero neighborhood near downtown Caracas. When they spotted a city trash truck approaching, Earles and the others staged a roadblock and stopped the unsuspecting driver. Earles then forced his way into the cabin and drove the truck to the garbage depository area behind the 15-story, 150-apartment building across the street, one of 56 comprising this sprawling public housing project, Venezuela’s largest. It was the first time in weeks that any manner of trash service had come this way. Earles then instructed the driver to catch a bus at a nearby stop, take it a mile up the road to the local police station, and notify the officers on duty of what had taken place and where.<sup>1</sup>

Direct action was a fact of life in Monte Piedad as in other areas of “el 23.” For most of the 1970s, groups of residents here had set ablaze tires, refuse, and whatever car or bus passed by as a way to denounce problems ranging from irregular water service to police abuse. In the 1960s leftist guerrillas engaged in pitched battles against state agents, turning the sector into a hotbed of political

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1. Earles Gutiérrez, interview with author, 14 July 2005.

violence. And in 1958 on January 23—the neighborhood’s namesake—residents from Monte Piedad took to the streets to lend popular legitimacy to the coup that inaugurated a decades-long period of liberal democratic rule, long the most admired in the region. This deep history imbued the 23 de Enero neighborhood with a fraught symbolic significance within Venezuela’s social and political landscape, at once tied to the democracy-building project yet also marked as the site of some of the most dramatic challenges to that project’s consolidation.

Yet even against this backdrop, what came of the *secuestros*, or hijackings, of public service vehicles in December 1981 was rather extraordinary. The *Diario de Caracas*, first to break the story two days later, called it “a very special way for [the 23 de Enero] to get the attention of the trash collection service.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, that the hijackers did not mask their faces or set the vehicle ablaze was already uncommon for activist youth, especially those like Earles who fashioned themselves keepers of the old antiestablishment guerrilla tradition, more concerned with toppling the state than with parochial community problems. That they called for police presence was decidedly rare, given the probable reaction to what they well knew was an illegal seizure on their part. In fact, according to the *Diario*, “The police authorities initially treated the news as an act of violence, the kind that frequently occurs in the west [of Caracas, where the 23 de Enero is located]. But,” the article went on to remark, “when they went to the site they were met with a civic act of claims-making [*un acto cívico reivindicativo*].”<sup>3</sup>

In the time it had taken police to respond, Earles and the others had gone door to door alerting neighbors of their deed and calling upon them to join them in support. While they sounded a general “invitation” to participate, they especially targeted “those who work at home, who most feel the problem.”<sup>4</sup> When police arrived, the crowd of mostly women they found gathered around the truck was the result of this effort. Some of these women were veterans of a different tradition of mobilization, one that had long shunned the likes of Earles and antiestablishment agitation, even as they understood the role of extra-institutional protest and had themselves sporadically engaged in this to draw attention to their neighborhood’s aging infrastructure. Hours later, Caracas waste management authorities promised to dispatch a crew of 35 in order to “fully satisfy the neighbors.” In turn, neighbors also made a promise: to detain

2. “Secuestraron a cuatro camiones del I.M.A.U.,” *Diario de Caracas*, 21 Dec. 1981.

3. *Ibid.*

4. “. . . las trabajadoras de la casa, las que sienten más el problema.” Gutiérrez, interview.

the truck and return it undamaged only after they had seen "the last ounce of trash removed from the area."<sup>5</sup>

By dubbing it a "special" protest the *Diario* article underscored the novelty of the unlikely coalition of politically active youth and women who answered their calls to mobilize. It would take several weeks for the precise contours of the protest to emerge, as it dragged out into 1982, threatening to spill over into other sectors of Caracas and throwing the bulk of the state apparatus into a spin. Indeed, by the time in late January 1982 when residents released the last of the dozen trucks that they had eventually seized, national media, city councilmen, heads of public institutions, intelligence agencies, and military brass had mobilized around the neighbors' demands. President Luis Herrera Campíns, whose government had clashed violently with youth in the 23 de Enero for nearly a year, "furiously" chastised heads of public institutions and ordered an immediate "cleanup" of the neighborhood.<sup>6</sup>

How did a local protest over local concerns gain so much traction? Responding to reporters on that first day, neighbors "said that their action [was] an opportune contribution to help [waste management] contractors fulfill their promise to 'clean Caracas in December.'" <sup>7</sup> More than irony underlay their response. Instead, residents were relying on the language of accountability—the pillar of liberal democratic governance—to legitimize an explicitly illegal action aimed not at attacking but at upholding the authority of institutions and their responsibilities to citizens. Doing so implied redefining the boundaries of democratic citizenship at a time when conventional imaginaries of Venezuela's heralded multiparty democracy had begun to fray. Indeed, the hijackings and the conflicting cues that gave them shape—a president supporting the demands of hijackers, "workers of the home" mobilized alongside radical youth, a "civic" action consisting of the seizure of public and private property—illuminate the fraught nature of popular sectors' political presence during a crucial but frequently glossed-over period in Venezuelan history.

5. "... para dejar plenamente satisfechos a los vecinos." "Secuestraron' a cuatro camiones del I.M.A.U."

6. "L.H.C. 'furioso' dio 48 horas a los servicios públicos," *Diario de Caracas*, 23 Dec. 1981.

7. "Los vecinos dijeron que su acción se convierte en una contribución oportuna al cumplimiento de la promesa de los concesionarios de la recolección de basura de 'limpiar a Caracas en Diciembre.'" "Secuestraron' a cuatro camiones del I.M.A.U."

### Urban Protest and Politics in Venezuela and the Americas

Conventional accounts of the years between 1979 and 1983—the administration of Christian Democrat Luis Herrera Campíns—emphasize the economic missteps of a state facing the first signs of economic stress following years of oil bonanza. Most point to “Black Friday” in February 1983, when a government facing plummeting oil prices moved to devalue the currency, as “the visible beginning of the decline of Punto Fijo democracy.”<sup>8</sup> Over time, according to this narrative, the economic forces unleashed on Black Friday gave way to the collapse of a party system once presumed resilient, as the revenues that had once anchored power-sharing pacts among political elites began to dry up.<sup>9</sup> As Fernando Coronil writes, “Courting both popular sectors and foreign creditors, [Herrera Campíns and his successor Jaime Lusinchi] preserved the political and economic centrality of the state, channeling public resources to favored private interests, demobilizing the population through patronage, publicity, and repression, further concentrating wealth at the top, and placing the burden of the debt on the working population for generations to come.”<sup>10</sup>

To be sure, errant economic policy did mark Herrera Campíns’s presidency and after two decades of political turmoil would indeed bring the collapse of pacted democracy as Hugo Chávez swept into the presidency in 1998 promising to build a new republic.<sup>11</sup> But events like the 1981–82 hijacking of public service

8. Jennifer L. McCoy, “From Representative to Participatory Democracy?” in *The Unraveling of Representative Democracy in Venezuela*, ed. Jennifer L. McCoy and David J. Myers (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2004), 266. In October 1958, ahead of Venezuela’s first democratic elections since the 23 January coup that ousted Marcos Pérez Jiménez, the heads of three major political parties vying for the presidency agreed to constitute a power-sharing government to ensure the stability of the new democracy. The “Pact of Punto Fijo,” as it was later known in reference to the house where the signing took place, would come to characterize Venezuelan democracy through what Fernando Coronil has termed “the fundamental pact . . . the agreement to make pacts. This underlying accord entailed a commitment to avoid political conflict as well as structural change.” Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money and Modernity in Venezuela* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1997), 229.

9. Terry Lynn Karl, *The Paradox of Plenty: Oil Booms and Petro-States* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1997), 172–77.

10. Coronil, *The Magical State*, 370.

11. Terry Lynn Karl describes the pact-making system that characterized Venezuelan democracy post-1958: “Pacted democracies are established through elite bargains and compromises during the transition to authoritarian rule. They ensure their survival by selectively meeting demands while limiting the scope of representation in order to reassure traditional dominant classes that their vital interests will be respected.” Karl, *The Paradox of Plenty*, 93.

vehicles in the 23 de Enero belie the linearity of this narrative. Instead they suggest that the process of recalibrating pacted democracy as it began to fray was far more negotiated from above *and* below than is argued by accounts that rely on economic indicators and analyses of elite-level politics to make wider claims about the ways in which urban popular sectors responded to the shifts taking place around them. The result is a bevy of unanswered questions: if political elites were successful in "demobilizing the population," then what are we to make of the hijackings? And if "patronage, publicity, and repression" marked the state's effort to demobilize popular sectors, then why did the highest levels of the state respond by bending to neighbors' demands? If conventional periodization points to 1983 as the beginning of the decline of pacted democracy, then where do the hijackings fit within this narrative? Did they in fact reflect popular disenchantment with democracy, or did they instead lay bare the markings of a different vision of democratic citizenship? In short, how *did* urban popular sectors incorporate the first signs of crisis into their patterns of social life, and with what consequences?

Herrera Campíns's presidency was a period rife with conflict and negotiation between state and populace as each struggled to adapt to a changing political and economic landscape in the early 1980s. In particular, Herrera Campíns's presidential bid—which had rested on the promise to "reinvent" Venezuelan democracy 20 years after its founding by promoting greater popular participation in the political process—provided an opening for popular sectors to experiment with new tactics and discourses of mobilization. These new approaches focused nominally on claims to goods and services but more broadly on demands for better governance through direct accountability. In the 23 de Enero, residents would draw from a contradictory legacy of support for democracy at the ballot box, on the one hand, and radical anti-establishment agitation in the streets on the other. In 1981, residents would find ways to bring together these once conflicting currents while drawing on their electoral support of Herrera Campíns to claim a mantle of legitimacy for actions that otherwise stood outside legality. Rather than marking a decline of popular mobilization and politicization among urban popular sectors, this article argues that in the early 1980s, events like the hijackings constituted an affirmation of democratic values. Residents combined long-standing support for representative democracy with tactics forged in the fray of contentious protest to pursue basic principles of liberal citizenship: participation, accountability, and the power of elections to shape new horizons and opportunities.

Scholars of urban Latin America have tended to view the relationship between popular movements and electoral politics along two lines. For some,

intertwined processes of rapid urbanization and the advent of mass electoral politics in the early and mid-twentieth century contrived to turn Latin American cities, capital cities in particular, into incubators of radical movements that sought not simply access to state institutions but a broader reconfiguration of social and political relations to account for the new centrality of urban electorates. Population density, ease of movement, new forms of mass communication, and proximity to state institutions created a potent mix of elements ripe for the mobilization of newly enfranchised urban popular sectors, whose rapidly swelling numbers and demands clashed with the entrenched power of traditional elites.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, what Anton Rosenthal has identified as the “contestatory nature of public space” in urban Latin America, which had long since cemented a link between politics and spectacle, tended to be accentuated in contexts of electoral conflict.<sup>13</sup>

For example, Daniel James’s account of October 17 and 18, 1945, in Buenos Aires revealed how an “implicit contest over . . . spatial hierarchy and territorial proprieties” turned the spectacle of thousands of workers from peripheral areas crowding the city center in support of Juan Perón into a form of constituent power that would eventually translate victory at the polls into a mandate for radical reform.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, Herbert Braun observed how the Bogotazo riots following Jorge Eliécer Gaitán’s 1948 assassination resulted from the frustrated expectations of an increasingly urban electorate, which turned Gaitán’s public appeals for increased political inclusion of popular sectors into a public display of violence against erstwhile exclusionary “symbols of public power” in the city.<sup>15</sup>

But beyond spectacular displays of constituent power, whether viewed as riotous or radical, others have observed how urban popular sectors’ signature demands for housing, for public services, and for the legalization of living arrangements were more likely to result in appeals to the state rather than calls for its overthrow or dramatic reconstitution. The outcome was often political co-optation. As new political leaders found electoral constituencies among urban sectors seeking representation in newly democratic contexts, the resulting clientelistic relationships came to define the parameters of urban popular

12. Michael Conniff, introduction to *Populism in Latin America*, ed. Michael L. Conniff (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1999), 9.

13. Anton Rosenthal, “Spectacle, Fear, and Protest: A Guide to the History of Urban Public Space in Latin America,” *Social Science History* 24, no. 1 (2000): 47–51.

14. Daniel James, “October 17th and 18th, 1945: Mass Protest, Peronism, and the Argentine Working Class,” *Journal of Social History* 21 (1988): 455–57.

15. Herbert Braun, *The Assassination of Gaitán: Public Life and Urban Violence in Colombia* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 158, 202–4.

politics, depriving urban movements of far-reaching political impact. In addition, the often local nature of urban popular sectors’ demands tended to limit their potential scope. Thus Manuel Castells’s study of urban squatters identified relationships of dependency tying urban popular sectors to populist leaders, as Latin American urban movements “exchanged political allegiance and cultural heteronomy for urban services and the right to settle in the appendages of the world economic system.” Though exceptions existed, they did not disrupt the trend among urban movements in Latin America toward “subordination to the existing political order” rather than the pursuit of social change.<sup>16</sup>

Recent historical literature has noted how urban popular sectors’ relationship to electoral politics more often transcended populist dependency or clientelist co-optation, even if it rarely resulted in radical mobilization. Indeed, electoral opportunities dramatically expanded rather than limited the scope of demands by providing urban popular sectors with new avenues for mobilization, turning the electoral process into another, and often effective, means of achieving dual goals of political and social inclusion. For instance, Andrew Wood and James Baer, examining renter strikes in early twentieth-century Latin America, have noted how “a shift toward more broad-based democratic governance and a corresponding discourse of citizens’ rights provided renters, once excluded from the political process, with a powerful new framework from which to articulate their grievances.”<sup>17</sup> In her study of the struggle of favela residents in mid-century Rio de Janeiro against legal, political, and social exclusion, Brodwyn Fischer shows that a return to electoral politics “allowed for significant strategic innovations” that included the use both of “a whole range of pacific tactics” like interfacing with political parties, and more direct public pressure such as “open resistance” to state eviction efforts. Though the *favelados* were ultimately unsuccessful in securing formal legal rights to their homes, the experience left them “anchored to the city by the combined weight of community resistance, populist politics, and scarcely viable alternatives,” thus demonstrating the dynamic nature of urban popular politics.<sup>18</sup>

New theoretical work has focused on the dynamic interplay between radicalism and dependency, legality and illegality among urban popular sectors in

16. Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1983), 194, 325, 34.

17. Andrew Wood and James Baer, “Strength in Numbers: Urban Rent Strikes and Political Transformation in the Americas, 1904–1925,” *Journal of Urban History* 32, no. 6 (2006): 863.

18. Brodwyn Fischer, *A Poverty of Rights: Citizenship and Inequality in Twentieth Century Rio de Janeiro* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2008), 266–68.

democratic contexts. James Holston argues that the urban poor in São Paulo's periphery inhabit a liminal space; they at once possess formal participatory rights in democracy but live under conditions of practical exclusion. This results in democratic disjunctions, "contradictions between forms of government and practices of citizens, simultaneous expansions and erosions of rights, and other contradictions [that] characterize modern citizenship everywhere." These disjunctions enter political life as popular sectors participate in "a system of stratagem and bureaucratic complication deployed by both state and subject to obfuscate problems, neutralize opponents, and, above all, legalize the illegal." The result, Holston argues, is an "insurgent citizenship" that transforms the challenges of urban popular life into a new terrain of political opportunity, in turn helping to close the gap between aspirational and real democracy.<sup>19</sup>

This essay contributes to a literature that identifies the blend of institutional and extra-institutional mobilization characteristic of urban popular sectors not as an exceptional but rather as an essential element of democratic life in Latin America. Indeed, in contexts of institutional deficits, this form of mobilization that "employs both institutional and noninstitutional tools" serves a crucial democratic function of "social accountability," exerting pressure upon government outside traditional mechanisms of accountability.<sup>20</sup> And yet the case of the 23 de Enero is unusual. Unlike the bulk of cases examined by scholarship on urban movements, the neighborhood was not peripheral. Its residents were deeply implicated in a national imaginary that upheld their spatial and symbolic centrality, turning local issues into national issues through spectacular displays of constituent power. The case of the 23 de Enero and its 1981–82 hijackings suggests that physical and political exclusion need not inform insurgent forms of citizenship. Instead, the process may also apply to the resignification of urban space during times of structural transition, such as early 1980s Venezuela. In this sense, liminality itself emerges as the condition of urban popular politics in Latin America. Against this backdrop, efforts to realize the promise of democratic participation, accountability, and citizenship may be read as the radical potential of seemingly local forms of urban popular protest that straddle legal and extralegal, institutional and noninstitutional means.

19. James Holston, *Insurgent Citizenship: Disjunctions of Democracy and Modernity in Brazil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007), 198, 14, 313.

20. Enrique Peruzzotti and Catalina Smulovitz, "Social Accountability: An Introduction," in *Enforcing the Rule of Law: Social Accountability in the New Latin American Democracies*, ed. Enrique Peruzzotti and Catalina Smulovitz (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 7–10.



**Reinventing Democracy:**

**Luis Herrera Campíns, el 23, and the Elections of 1978**

In December 1978, Venezuelans swept Luis Herrera Campíns into office, capping a stunning electoral feat for the Christian Democrat COPEI party. After years of rapid economic growth, massive oil-derived revenues, and rising per capita income rates under the administration of Acción Democrática's (AD) Carlos Andrés Pérez, Venezuelans opted for an opposition candidate campaigning on a reformist platform, and a dramatic one at that.<sup>21</sup> Since early in the decade, Herrera Campíns had sounded increasingly forceful calls to "reinvent democracy" in Venezuela, a democracy that since its founding in 1958 had relied on power-sharing pacts among political, business, labor, and clerical elites to ensure stability and alternation of competing political parties in power. Still more remarkable was that Herrera Campíns's victory came with the support of urban popular sectors in Caracas, who had long shunned COPEI as a party identified with "rural and small town middle classes."<sup>22</sup> In fact, voters in Caracas had only recently come to accept the primacy of a two-party system in Venezuela; again and again they had favored smaller parties over not just COPEI but even over the nominally center-left AD, associated with trade unionism and working classes more broadly.

As one of the more populous working-class neighborhoods in Caracas, the 23 de Enero well reflected this peculiar pattern. Even prior to the founding of pacted democracy in 1958, residents here had already developed a strained relationship with the state. Amid an oil boom in the 1950s, the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez set out to transform Caracas into a showcase of mid-century modernity, replacing hillside settlements with massive, high-rise superblocks. None epitomized this ambitious project more than the 2 de Diciembre superblocks—so named to memorialize the 1952 coup that cemented Pérez Jiménez's rule. But the process had bred resentment among residents of long-established communities razed to make way for the new structures. By January 23, 1958, when a civil-military coup promising democracy finally ousted Pérez Jiménez, many residents of 2 de Diciembre took to the streets in support, a few days later renaming their neighborhood 23 de Enero to become symbols of a new national

21. Brian F. Crisp, *Democratic Institutional Design: The Powers and Incentives of Venezuelan Politicians and Interest Groups* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2000), 32.

22. Brian Crisp, Daniel Levine, and José Molina, "The Rise and Decline of COPEI in Venezuela," in *Christian Democracy in Latin America: Electoral Competition and Regime Conflicts*, ed. Scott Mainwaring and Timothy R. Scully (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2003), 284.

political project. In the ensuing years the neighborhood became a hotbed of antiestablishment guerrilla activity, as left-wing militants disaffected with the direction the political system took after 1958 sought to take advantage of the 23 de Enero's strategic location and symbolic weight to mount an urban guerrilla war against the state.<sup>23</sup>

Yet despite this agitation, the great majority of residents continued to flock to the polls every five years, flouting calls by insurgents to abstain. But their participation reflected a pattern of rejection of AD and COPEI, the two parties that emerged as the main political brokers of the era. In the first decade of democratic rule, between 1958 and 1968, even as AD and COPEI traded the presidency, the two parties combined never received more than 29 percent of the vote in the 23 de Enero. Instead residents had backed a far-ranging spectrum of third-party candidates. In 1958 they voted overwhelmingly for Wolfgang Larrazábal, the young officer who commanded the January 23 coup, and his supporters in the Communist Party of Venezuela. Though nationally he came a distant second in 1958, trailing AD by 15 points, Larrazábal again secured the most votes among residents of the neighborhood in 1963, this time coming in fourth. In 1968, the 23 de Enero again bucked the national trend and supported candidates of the Cruzada Cívica Nacionalista (Nationalist Civic Crusade, CCN), a party created by Pérez Jiménez as he sought to return to political life. Meanwhile COPEI, which narrowly won the presidency, came fourth in the neighborhood. By 1973, AD and COPEI had broken through, securing 62 percent of the vote. COPEI in particular more than doubled its support in the 23 de Enero, from 12 percent in 1968 to 28 percent in 1973. Yet it still trailed AD, the eventual winner, by six points. It would be up to Herrera Campíns to close the gap, which he did in 1978 when COPEI received 31 percent of the vote to AD's stagnant 34 percent.<sup>24</sup>

That sectors like the 23 de Enero superblocks—urban, working class, and previously unidentified with Christian Democracy—responded to Herrera Campíns's message of sweeping change was due to an electoral strategy that tapped into complementary frustrations: deteriorating public services among an increasingly urban electorate, and growing popular demand for more par-

23. Alejandro Velasco, "A Weapon as Powerful as the Vote': Street Protest and Electoral Politics in Caracas, Venezuela before Hugo Chávez" (PhD dissertation, Duke University, 2009), 41–61, 157–68.

24. Statistical information found in *ibid.*, 314–15. Between 1958 and 1988, Venezuelans cast two ballots every five years, one for president and one for congressional delegation, which was selected by voting for a party slate of preselected candidates.

participation in the democratic system.<sup>25</sup> Between 1960 and 1973, the population of Caracas had grown from 1.3 to 2.6 million, but a more startling figure lay in the unevenness that characterized this growth.<sup>26</sup> In 1959 just 17 percent of Caracas residents lived below the poverty line; by contrast, in 1978 that figure had ballooned to 48.5 percent.<sup>27</sup> The result was a far more urban and working-class electorate than ever before, concentrated especially in Caracas, which by 1970 accounted for one-fifth of Venezuela's total population. As one analyst reflecting on the 1978 elections noted, "a successful campaign for the presidency must respond to the demands of city people."<sup>28</sup> In response to this changing electorate, Herrera Campíns would focus his campaign on the place where urban and working-class concerns converged: the deteriorating state of public services.<sup>29</sup> Indeed a glaring disjuncture had marked Pérez's presidency: whereas revenues derived from the oil industry had fueled tremendous economic growth, even spurring major investments in water and electric services, the administration of public services had steadily deteriorated during his government, much as it had during every previous government.<sup>30</sup> Even AD's candidate, Luis Piñerua

25. In 1968, even as COPEI won the presidency for the first time in elections widely seen as marking the consolidation of Venezuelan democracy, it came third in the Caracas congressional vote behind parties nominally to its left (AD) and right (CCN). In elections in 1958, 1963, and 1968, COPEI placed no better than third in el 23, returning a high of 12 percent in 1968. In 1973, as the political system coalesced around AD and COPEI, COPEI more than doubled its 1968 total to reach 28 percent in el 23. Consejo Supremo Electoral, División de Estadística, *Las cuatro primeras fuerzas políticas en Venezuela a nivel municipal, 1958-1978* (Caracas: Consejo Supremo Electoral, 1983), 19.

26. For population figures, see Jose Hernan Briceño, "Caracas alcanzó ayer 2,615,484 habitantes pero no nos alegremos, porque el 44.9 por ciento de esa población vive en la marginalidad," *El Nacional*, 10 Aug. 1973.

27. Antonio de Liso, "La evolución urbana de Caracas: Indicadores e interpretaciones sobre el desarrollo de la interrelación ciudad-naturaleza," *Revista Geográfica Venezolana* 42, no. 2 (2001): 219.

28. Robert O'Connor, "The Electorate," in *Venezuela at the Polls: The National Elections of 1978*, ed. Howard R. Penniman (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1980), 57-58.

29. Michelena and Sonntag's study of the 1978 electoral process describes how corruption and public services were the two main issues candidates used. Jose Agustin Silva Michelena and Heinz Sonntag, *El proceso electoral de 1978: Su perspectiva histórica estructural* (Caracas: Editorial Ateneo, 1979), 131-33.

30. After falling in the first year of Pérez's administration, investments in water and electric services rose from -2 percent in 1974, to 31, 41, and 77 percent in 1975, 1976, and 1977, respectively, before falling again to 4 percent in 1978. *Cuentas nacionales (capítulos i-ii-iii)*, vol. 1, *Serie estadísticas de Venezuela de los últimos cincuenta años* (Caracas: Banco Central de Venezuela, 1994), 306-7.

Ordáz, had to contend with this reality, stressing throughout the campaign that he “would be the candidate of public services and housing,” after recognizing that Pérez’s government had sacrificed “certain needs of the people” in order to focus on macroeconomic growth.<sup>31</sup>

Few areas had suffered more and for longer from the deterioration of public services than the 23 de Enero. Just days after the overthrow of Pérez Jiménez on January 23, 1958, residents of the newly named neighborhood warned that a “lack of water and trash collection” in their community threatened the health of children and adults alike.<sup>32</sup> By the mid-1960s, even as the leftist insurgency raged in the 23 de Enero, political figures of the hard right had joined residents in decrying the physical and symbolic effects of irregular trash collection in the new democracy’s namesake community, especially as AD governments scaled back operations of the entity charged with administering the blocks, the Banco Obrero (Worker’s Bank).<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, squatter settlements proliferated in the neighborhood as rural migrants flocked to Caracas, further complicating efforts at normalizing trash collection in the area.<sup>34</sup> By the 1970s, waste management in the 23 de Enero had reached crisis proportions. Longer and longer interruptions in trash collection contributed to ever larger and more hazardous “mountains of trash” in areas previously reserved for children’s play (see figure 1).<sup>35</sup> Meanwhile, contacting media had proven increasingly ineffective at drawing attention, emboldening more and more residents to take to the streets to seek any solution to their problem with trash.<sup>36</sup>

During Carlos Andrés Pérez’s presidency (1973–78), the Caracas government attempted to rein in the garbage crisis in the 23 de Enero as well as in other popular sectors by implementing trash buyback programs. These encouraged residents of areas where access by compactors proved difficult to take their refuse directly to central processing stations. In the 23 de Enero, seven barrios formed part of the pilot program that serviced over 23 thousand residents in over four thousand households.<sup>37</sup> The following year, the city government

31. Michelena and Sonntag, *El proceso electoral de 1978*, 127–28.

32. “Faltan agua y aseo urbano en bloques 23 de enero,” *El Universal*, 27 Jan. 1958.

33. Germán Borregales, “Urbanización 23 de enero y desaseo dominical,” *Ultimas Noticias*, 27 Jan. 1966.

34. Diógenes Santander, “Falta de aseo urbano, escuelas, dispensarios y parques infantiles son problemas del 23 de enero,” *Ultimas Noticias*, 21 Jan. 1966.

35. Jesus Petit Medina, “Montañas de basura acumuladas en urbanización 23 de enero,” *Ultimas Noticias*, 9 Jan. 1970.

36. “Ni agua ni aseo urbano en barrio sucre del 23 de enero,” *Tribuna Popular*, 16 July 1970.

37. In el 23, the program served the Mirador, Alfredo Rojas, La Cruz, San Sousi, Unido, and Colinas barrios. *Memoria y cuenta del año 1974 presentada por el gobernador del Distrito Federal Diego Arria al ilustre concejo municipal* (Caracas: Imprenta Municipal, 1974).



Figure 1. January 17, 1974. Children at play in the area behind blocks 54-55-56, Sierra Maestra, 23 de Enero. Pedro Garrido/El Nacional.

began regular trash collection service to two areas previously covered by the buyback program.<sup>38</sup> But as the city’s population grew, so did waste. By late 1976, Pérez created the Instituto Municipal de Aseo Urbano (Municipal Urban Waste Institute, IMAU) to centralize trash collection and disposal. Yet the IMAU was soon overwhelmed by a 47 percent rise in trash collection, resulting in part from a system of “transfer stations” implemented to streamline delivery of garbage from Caracas to outlying landfills. In fact, owing to the strategic location of the 23 de Enero at the center of Caracas, as well as its wide roads, IMAU located its pilot way station at a busy intersection in the neighborhood.<sup>39</sup> While both the transfer system and its location were intended to be solutions, they soon proved a curse, as any disruptions in transferring trash to the landfills meant a

38. The two barrios were Observatorio and Atlántico. *Memoria y cuenta del año 1975 presentada por el gobernador del Distrito Federal Diego Arria al ilustre concejo municipal* (Caracas: Imprenta Municipal, 1976).

39. “El instituto metropolitano de aseo urbano recolecta hoy el 47 por ciento más de basura,” *Ultimas Noticias*, 26 Aug. 1977.

dangerous backlogging of waste, which in turn resulted in periodic protests by residents over odor and health hazards in the area.

In this context, Herrera Campíns would turn public services into a key campaign issue. As early as 1977, COPEI had made “efficient functioning of public services” one of six major policy aims of a future administration.<sup>40</sup> A year later, in a 400-page publication detailing plans for an eventual Herrera Campíns administration, titled *Mi compromiso con Venezuela* (My Commitment to Venezuela), public services had jumped to second among his priorities, behind education, which polls indicated ranked third among voters’ list of concerns.<sup>41</sup> What accounted for the shift was Herrera Campíns’s sense that public services, though tenth among 18 issues of concern to voters in a 1977 poll, marked the state’s most direct and everyday contact with citizens at large. Writing in *Mi compromiso*, Herrera Campíns noted that “it is through public services and state enterprises that the people measure the efficacy and efficiency of government. . . . public services operate as an immediate gauge for the people to see the state’s capacity to make the resources that the state invests socially reproducible and humanely useful.” Herrera Campíns’s plans to improve public services rested on a program to reverse the trend of centralizing services under Pérez and move instead to “stimulate and facilitate . . . the creation of public, mixed, and private enterprises for urban and residential waste management, and to promote the active participation of users, through their organizations.”<sup>42</sup>

Decentralization, privatization, and direct citizen participation especially were more than timely campaign issues for Herrera Campíns. Instead they reflected the core of an ideology of *herrerismo* years in the making, and which contrasted sharply with the hyper-presidentialism that had marked Pérez’s government. In particular, *herrerismo* held the promise of a broad-based reform program rest-

40. J. A. Pérez Diaz, “Bases del programa de gobierno del Dr. Luis Herrera Campíns, candidato presidencial del partido social cristiano COPEI” (paper presented at the I Congreso Social Cristiano Nacional, Caracas, 19 Aug. 1977).

41. Luis Herrera Campíns, *Mi compromiso con Venezuela: Programa de gobierno para el período 1979–1984*, vol. 1 (Caracas: COPEI, 1978), xv. Asked in early 1977 what issues should be of “immediate” priority for a new administration, respondents answered: reduce the cost of living, fight crime, build more schools, create jobs, support agriculture, improve living conditions for the poor, build more public housing, eliminate corruption, improve medical care, improve public services, help the elderly, improve collective work ethic, improve public administration, improve roads, distribute wealth better, control private industry, promote arts and science, promote decentralization. This was a nationwide, face-to-face poll of 2,260 adults. “Electorate Perceptions on the 1978 Presidential Campaign” (Caracas: Datos, C.A., 1977).

42. Campíns, *Mi compromiso con Venezuela*, 197, 207.

ing on the premise that Venezuela had successfully transitioned into a period of political stability under representative government. The democratic system should begin to set aside inter-elite pacts in order to move toward a "participatory democracy where people and communities are present, in solidarity, and creatively, in decision making; [where they] responsibly develop their initiatives, provide their opinions and receive a fair share of the benefits of their effort."<sup>43</sup>

Residents of the 23 de Enero would find a more lasting connection with Herrera Campíns over this ideology than even over the promise of better public services. Indeed, their periodic protests over public service deficiencies during the previous decade had only scratched the surface of deep grievances about the evolution of Venezuelan politics since 1958. That they had again and again shunned AD and COPEI at the polls, even supporting Pérez Jiménez's failed electoral bid in 1968, reflected significant ambivalence about what many considered the false promises of the "revolution of '58."<sup>44</sup> But their disenchantment with the political system ran only so far. Most had also rejected guerrilla violence in the 1960s as counterproductive. By 1973 most had also accepted the primacy of a two-party system.<sup>45</sup> Yet their continued resort to street protests reflected a desire for greater governmental accountability and for a public voice greater than that provided in the quinquennial elections of pacted democracy.

In three areas—rejection of violence, respect for electoral democracy, and calls for more direct forms of participation and accountability—residents of the 23 de Enero reflected nationwide trends. In a poll conducted ahead of the 1973 elections, 64 percent of Venezuelans had reported that the vote was the only way to influence government; an even higher number, 93 percent, reported that the vote was "a very important factor in politics," and 88 percent responded that elections were necessary in order to have democracy. But when asked if they felt they had influence over politics, 66 percent, about the same number who said voting was the only way to influence government, reported feeling that in fact they had little influence, suggesting that most saw the vote as a rather weak form of participation. In fact, asked if they would still vote if it were not compulsory,

43. Diaz, "Bases del programa de gobierno del Dr. Luis Herrera Campíns," 411.

44. In testimony repeated often among older resident of el 23, Emilia de Pérez of Block 27 recalls that during the most intense periods of urban guerrilla conflict in the 1960s, she could hear neighbors screaming from their apartment balconies, "Pérez Jiménez, forgive us for we knew not what we were doing!" at the National Guardsmen posted below. Emilia de Pérez, interview with author, 27 Apr. 2005.

45. Velasco, "A Weapon as Powerful as the Vote": Street Protest . . . , 315.

47.7 said they would do so, while 48.9 reported they would abstain.<sup>46</sup> In 1978, among youth voters, that number was higher, 51.3 percent, compared to 46.1 who said they would still vote if it were not compulsory.<sup>47</sup>

And yet nationally, support for democracy ran high: asked in 1977, “what do you think about democracy, that is, about Venezuela’s political system?” 77 percent responded that they were either “very happy” (27 percent) or “more or less happy” (50 percent), compared to 13 percent who thought democracy should be replaced and 10 percent who did not know.<sup>48</sup> Among youth in 1978, the number (26 percent) who felt “another type of system” should replace the existing one was higher than that of the general population, while 58 percent thought it was either working well (8 percent) or should be “fixed somewhat” (50 percent).<sup>49</sup> All told, what these seemingly contradictory figures suggested was that disenchantment with the pacted system was indeed growing, but support for democracy—compared to alternatives raised in the poll such as communism and dictatorship—remained strong, whatever its failings. What most sought was greater influence through a fine-tuning of the existing system.

This was precisely the message Herrera Campíns had championed for years, even against mainstream currents within his own party. Beginning in 1969, just as COPEI made history by becoming the first opposition party in Venezuela to take the reins of government through elections, Herrera Campíns had begun to decry pacted democracy as elitist and tending to prevent a sense of popular ownership in the political process: “It is not enough to vote every five years. New and truly participatory forms are what citizens long for. . . . Real participation must replace the current formal representation.”<sup>50</sup> Even with his party at the helm over the next five years, then-senator Herrera Campíns

46. Enrique Baloyra and John Martz, “Baloyra/Martz Poll #1973-Baloyra: 1973 Pre-Election Poll—Basic Political Attitudes of the Venezuelan People” (Caracas: Universidad Simón Bolívar, 1973). This was a nationwide, face-to-face poll of 1,521 Venezuelans. Question 111 asked, “Do you believe people like you have or do not have the power to influence what the government does?” Question 113 asked, “Finally, do you believe that voting is the only way you can influence what the government does?”

47. “Gallup Poll #1978-Gm033a: Political Attitudes among the Youth” (Caracas: Gallup, C.A., 1978).

48. For those wanting to replace democracy, choices included socialism, military, strong, more responsive, dictatorship, communism, and other systems. The largest group of 45 percent thought a “socialist” system should follow. The next highest response was “other systems,” at 13 percent. “Electorate Perceptions on the 1978 Presidential Campaign.”

49. “Gallup Poll #1978-Gm033a: Political Attitudes among the Youth.”

50. Luis Herrera Campíns, “Promoción popular y concejo (01–31–69),” in *Palenque*, ed. Guillermo Yepes Boscán (Maracaibo: Fondo Editorial IRFES, 1979), 184–85.



continued to sound off on the limits of representative democracy. In September 1972, as he battled unsuccessfully for the presidential candidacy as part of the so-called "Avanzado" wing of COPEI, Herrera Campíns assembled Christian Democratic figures from throughout the Americas for a seminar on participatory democracy.<sup>51</sup> His own keynote address sought to burnish his credentials as a mainstream politician nevertheless attuned to popular demands for greater influence, arguing for the need to "reinvent democracy" by moving from a "representative to a participatory" form of government.<sup>52</sup>

Ironically, COPEI's 1973 loss to AD allowed Herrera Campíns to coalesce COPEI around him, as it meant, according to historian Donald Herman, that "the party would now be ready to support a candidate of the left."<sup>53</sup> His message of reform received another boost once Pérez's administration became marked by greater, not less centralization. In this context, Herrera Campíns set out to give final shape to herrerismo. In January 1977 he organized a public seminar aimed at lending specificity to "participatory democracy," the preliminary results of which informed COPEI's platform at its August convention.<sup>54</sup> Though short on details, it promised to "promote people's consciousness [*toma de conciencia*] about matters that affect them," especially at the local level "where [they] encounter democracy's efficiency or lack thereof every day."<sup>55</sup> And reflecting poll data, it also upheld the primacy of democracy while making forceful calls for citizens to seize its promise of accountability: "No other system provides the resources democracy offers to punish corruption . . . and denounce and correct bad mechanisms and practices of government." By 1978, when he published *Mi compromiso*, Herrera Campíns formalized participation as "the central axis of my government," further stressing that the state would use "all its resources to stimulate the personal and social actions" of citizens through what he called "state advocacy."<sup>56</sup>

51. Steve Ellner, *Rethinking Venezuelan Politics: Class, Conflict, and the Chávez Phenomenon* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2008), 77–78.

52. Luis Herrera Campíns, "De la democracia representativa a la democracia participativa" (paper presented at the Seminario de Democracia Participativa, Caracas, 4–15 Sept. 1972).

53. Donald L. Herman, *Christian Democracy in Venezuela* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1980), 103.

54. J. Lossada Rondon, "Instalará Herrera Campíns seminario sobre democracia participativa," *El Nacional*, 22 Jan. 1977. "Copei hara su programa de gobierno con las conclusiones del seminario 'Hacia Una Democracia Participativa,'" *El Nacional*, 30 Jan. 1977.

55. Diaz, "Bases del programa de gobierno del Dr. Luis Herrera Campíns," 414.

56. Campíns, *Mi compromiso con Venezuela*, xii.

All told, the idea of a state acting as the advocate of a citizenry encouraged to participate more actively in their daily local political life was powerfully appealing for sectors like those in the 23 de Enero: urban, working-class, and long eager for precisely this kind of message from a mainstream candidate with a legitimate chance to win. Come election night, Herrera Campíns won with 45 percent to Piñerua Ordáz's 43 percent nationally. In Caracas, too, Herrera Campíns won a plurality of 46 percent of the vote to Piñerua Ordáz's 44 percent, a first for a COPEI candidate. In the 23 de Enero, Herrera Campíns also broke new ground, securing 39 percent of the vote to Piñerua Ordáz's 38 percent, marking the first time COPEI scored a presidential plurality in the neighborhood.<sup>57</sup> The residents had taken a chance on a candidate who had called on citizens to seize a greater stake in government by demanding accountability. As *herrerismo* faltered, they would do just that.

#### **“Clean by Christmas”:**

##### **Public Service Collapse and the Fall of Herrerismo**

By the time Earles Gutiérrez, his brother, and two friends set out to hijack a trash truck on December 19, 1981, “public services had disappeared” in the 23 de Enero superblocks. As Earles recalls, only the “well connected” had home phones; electrical wiring had corroded and been replaced by dangerous “spider-webs” of cables hanging outside windows; water service remained at best inconsistent and at worst absent; working elevators were rare. And of course, trash lay everywhere, uncollected for over three weeks. Some trash chutes (*ductos*) were backed up to the 14th floor. Gustavo Rodríguez, another resident of Monte Piedad, recalled that “the worms had started to eat the blocks.”<sup>58</sup> These were just the latest examples in a long list of grievances that had been accumulating throughout 1981, 25 years after the founding of the neighborhood. In August, for instance, residents of Monte Piedad reported that a sewage pipe leak months earlier had unleashed a “river” of waste, and despite repeated pleas to the agency charged with administering the blocks, no repairs had been made.<sup>59</sup> At the same time, residents of blocks 42-43-44, at the western edge of the 23 de Enero, alerted the press that, besides perennial water shortages, only one of six elevators servicing 450 apartments was in working order, with some having broken down

57. Velasco, “‘A Weapon as Powerful as the Vote’: Street Protest . . .,” 315.

58. Gustavo Rodríguez, interview with author, 23 Aug. 2005.

59. José Manuel Pérez, “Río de aguas negras afecta a vecinos del sector D del 23 de enero,” *Últimas Noticias*, 18 Aug. 1981.

seven years earlier.<sup>60</sup> And in September, mudslides in Monte Piedad claimed several of the neighborhood's main access roads, again with no repairs in sight despite repeated efforts to contact authorities.<sup>61</sup> By early December, a full-page story in the national daily *El Universal* reported on living conditions in the area, concluding that it was in a "terrible state of abandon."<sup>62</sup>

The state of public services in the 23 de Enero dramatized the extent to which Herrera Campíns's administration had faltered following early signs of reform. Indeed, on taking office in March 1979, Herrera Campíns had taken several significant steps to realize the calls for reform that had informed his campaign. Responding to civil society groups, he had established a cabinet-level position on women's affairs, demonstrating how the axes of "participation" and "state advocacy" that underlay his vision of democratic society might successfully converge.<sup>63</sup> Through a program of weekly roundtables with citizens at large, Herrera fashioned a direct channel of communication with popular sectors outside the realm of organized civil and political society, in the process demystifying the image of the "almighty state" that had arisen during Carlos Andrés Pérez's presidency. Similarly, Herrera had sought to arrive at a more accurate rendering of the needs of urban popular sectors by having Fundacomun (Foundation for Municipal and Community Development), a once touted, USAID-funded urban renewal agency that had recently been plagued by politicization, conduct the first nationwide census of urban barrios in 1979, followed by a second census in 1980.<sup>64</sup>

The 23 de Enero had also witnessed early signs of improvement. While violent student protests had greeted Herrera Campíns just days after his inauguration, these were fewer signs of youth disaffection with the new administra-

60. José Manuel Pérez, "El drama de un solo ascensor para 5 mil personas de 3 bloques clama por urgente atención oficial," *Ultimas Noticias*, 18 Aug. 1981.

61. José Manuel Pérez, "Sigue derrumbándose la calle real de Monte Piedad," *Ultimas Noticias*, 15 Sept. 1981.

62. Gilberto Carreño, "Terrible abandono en el 23 de enero," *El Universal*, 2 Dec. 1981.

63. Elisabeth J. Friedman, *Unfinished Transitions: Women and the Gendered Development of Democracy in Venezuela, 1936–1996* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 2000), 179–82.

64. Charles Boyce, a U.S. adviser to Fundacomun during its early years in the late 1960s and early 1970s, wrote on the politicization and nepotism that came to plague the agency during the 1970s. Charles P. Boyce, *International Development Assistance: Learning to Get It Right* (Washington, DC: American Planning Association, 1999), 11; *Inventario nacional de barrios: Estudio diagnóstico de los barrios urbanos de Venezuela*, vol. 1 (Caracas: Fundacomun, 1979); Talton F. Ray, *The Politics of the Barrios of Venezuela* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1969), 121.

tion than with the outgoing government, under which 12 students had died in clashes with police.<sup>65</sup> Youth and left sectors in the area had quickly warmed to Josefina Delgado, Herrera Campíns's appointee to *jefe civil* (the neighborhood's highest civilian authority). When a local day school run by a Communist Party militant burned down in late 1981 under mysterious circumstances, the director recalls being "surprised" at the sympathy and support Delgado offered her.<sup>66</sup> Other youth of the time recall how Delgado had interceded on their behalf when police detained them for political activism in the neighborhood.<sup>67</sup> Delgado would remain *jefa civil* for nearly all of Herrera Campíns's term; her long tenure was a dramatic departure for a post long marked by pomp and rapid turnover, and reflected Herrera Campíns's efforts to bolster local government.

By 1980, contentious collective action of the kind that had characterized the 1970s had mostly given way to cooperation between state and civil society sectors in the parish. Once-skeptical neighbors had begun to work alongside police to fight crime, resources for education and athletics had increased, and plans to install a parish council to interface with city officials on matters of public services and order had begun in earnest after a presidential decree mandating "community participation in regional development" took effect.<sup>68</sup> Similar measures helped COPEI sweep municipal elections in 1979, the first time they were held separately from presidential and congressional elections, taking 51 percent nationally to AD's 31 percent; in Caracas COPEI candidates claimed 49 percent to AD's 28 percent.<sup>69</sup> By early 1980, pundits openly speculated on whether a new era in Venezuelan politics was afoot, marked by the rise of the so-called Chris-

65. "El Bravo Pueblo" (database), ed. Margarita López Maya (Caracas: 2006).

66. "Manos criminales incendiaron centro cultural 'Voz del Mirador,'" *Tribuna Popular*, 4–10 Sept. 1981.

67. Lisandro Pérez, interview with author, 21 May 2005. Pérez, a lifelong resident of one of the squatter settlement communities in el 23, had been a militant of underground guerrilla organization Bandera Roja during his teens in the early 1980s, becoming a cadre by the mid-1980s. He recalls that on at least two occasions between 1980 and 1983, Delgado interceded on his behalf when Metropolitan Police detained him for his political work. In an ironic turn, in 2005 Lisandro Pérez became jefe civil of el 23 after local groups resisted the appointee of Caracas's pro-Chávez mayor.

68. "La comunidad se unió a la policía para combatir a los delincuentes," *El Nacional*, 31 Dec. 1979. Bernardo Piñango, a local youth trained in a local gym, won Olympic silver in 1980. Rafael García, "Hay que tomar en cuenta al 23 de enero para los panamericanos," *Últimas Noticias*, 12 Feb. 1981.

69. Consejo Supremo Electoral, División de Estadística, *Las cuatro primeras fuerzas políticas en Venezuela a nivel municipal, 1958–1978* (Caracas: Consejo Supremo Electoral, 1983).

tian left and its champion Luis Herrera Campíns. Wrote one analyst, "Never has the future been brighter for Venezuela's Social Christians."<sup>70</sup>

But by 1981, little of that early optimism remained. In 1980 a quick succession of crises effectively ended efforts at state-led reform. In a bid to stem the tide of spiraling debt and spending that marked Pérez's presidency, the Herrera Campíns government engaged in a program of austerity marked in part by the elimination of price controls and subsidies. The result was a 74 percent spike in year-to-year inflation, leading to plummeting popularity ratings for the government.<sup>71</sup> During a border dispute with Colombia in the fall of 1980, Herrera Campíns put in motion an effort coupling participation and state advocacy similar to one that had helped spur advances in the women's movement, soliciting opinions from civil society sectors to set policy. But in matters of foreign affairs this kind of participation proved more a hindrance than an asset. Unable to mediate between conflicting sectors, the president instead let their conflict play out, effectively withdrawing from the process. The result was a form of "participatory" politics marked less by coordination between state institutions and civil society than by a laissez-faire approach to governance, in essence signaling a shift from a politics of deliberation to a politics of delegation.<sup>72</sup>

But where herrerismo most suffered was in the area Herrera Campíns had again and again indicated was the everyday gauge of democratic performance: public services. Already in 1980, deteriorating living conditions in Caracas had contributed to the president's plummeting poll numbers. In March the situation

70. David Myers, "The Elections and the Evolution of Venezuela's Party System," in *Venezuela at the Polls: The National Elections of 1978*, ed. Howard R. Penniman (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1980), 240.

71. In early 1980 a Gallup poll showed that 64 percent of Venezuelans considered their family's living standards to have increased or stayed the same during the previous year, reflecting the offsetting impact of rising costs and rising wages. "Political Opinion in Venezuela" (Caracas: Gallup, C.A., 1980). Venezuelan economist Pedro Palma details six primary reasons for inflation's continued rise during this period, among them "the compulsive rise of wages and salaries in accordance to the Wage and Salary Increase Law in effect since January 1980, which was not met by a parallel increase in productivity." This combination of greater spending power and output levels that were slow to rise resulted in higher competition for a similar number of goods, pushing prices up. Pedro A. Palma, "La economía venezolana en el período 1974-1988," in *Venezuela Contemporánea, 1974-1989*, by Pedro Cunill Grau et al. (Caracas: Fundación Eugenio Mendoza, 1989), 194-95.

72. Leandro Area and Elke Nieschulz de Stockhausen, eds., *El Golfo de Venezuela: Documentación y cronología* (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1984), 526-27. Alfredo Toro Hardy, "La política exterior durante los últimos quince años," in Cunill Grau et al., *Venezuela Contemporánea, 1974-1989*, 258.

even garnered international attention when Herrera Campíns's planning minister remarked to the *New York Times*, "Things have gotten so bad that it is almost impossible to improve the efficiency of public services."<sup>73</sup> Waste management in particular reflected the worst of the state's failures. Where Carlos Andrés Pérez had consolidated waste management services around a newly created agency (IMAU), Herrera Campíns's response, in keeping with his decentralization efforts, had sought instead to transform the IMAU into an administrative entity.<sup>74</sup> Rather than collecting trash it would lease routes to private contractors selected by a bidding process, reflecting Herrera Campíns's call to find "public, mixed or private" enterprise solutions wherever needed.

But in January 1981 the effort exploded in scandal when an operations manager was arrested for soliciting over \$20,000 in exchange for lucrative trash route contracts. Subsequent investigations would expose a far-flung web of extortion plaguing the privatization process.<sup>75</sup> The government nevertheless pressed ahead with its plan. In late November, officials at the IMAU announced that they had leased trash collection services in Caracas to four independent firms.<sup>76</sup> It was an unprecedented move toward privatization in Venezuela, promising to bring efficiency to an area of everyday life that had come to symbolize the state's administrative incompetence. But even at this late stage, confusion marked the process. The Caracas city council, during a discussion regarding ongoing trash problems afflicting the city, discovered that the IMAU charter afforded them oversight of the institute even though they had long since "relinquished" that role, assuming the agency to be autonomous.<sup>77</sup> Embarrassed, the council quickly summoned IMAU's director and the private company chiefs. After a year of bidding, negotiation, and scandal, a frustrated IMAU director all but begged to be rid of his post, saying "they would be doing me a favor" by

73. "Despite Its Wealth, Caracas Sits in Garbage and Smog," *New York Times*, 17 Mar. 1980.

74. Details of IMAU's restructuring appear in the Natural Resource and Environment Ministry's 1983 yearly report, corresponding to activities undertaken in 1982. Jose Joaquín Cabrera Malo, *Memoria y cuenta: Año 1983* (Caracas Ministerio del Ambiente y de los Recursos Naturales Renovables, 1983), 66–68, 345–46, 69.

75. Ricardo Marquez, "'Capo' en irregularidades del I.M.A.U. es un muy alto personaje que permanece oculto," *Ultimas Noticias*, 1 Feb. 1981. Ricardo Marquez, "Presidente del I.M.A.U. declaró durante 4 horas por presunto pago irregular de un millón a constructora," *Ultimas Noticias*, 19 Feb. 1981.

76. Cabrera Malo, *Memoria y cuenta: Año 1983*.

77. Marco Tulio Paez, "El concejo municipal descubrió que tiene acceso a la dirección del I.M.A.U.," *El Universal*, 1 Dec. 1981. Florelena Lopez, "Tibio debate en el concejo sobre la basura en la ciudad," *El Universal*, 1 Dec. 1981.

asking for his resignation.<sup>78</sup> Meanwhile, seeking to bring some measure of calm and optimism, owners of the newly hired companies vowed to have Caracas "clean by Christmas."<sup>79</sup>

Beyond administrative troubles, 1981 had also seen a renewal of fatal student clashes with police after a year of relative calm. Ahead of the January 23 celebrations, protests over deteriorating school conditions left one neighborhood student dead under conditions later investigated as police brutality.<sup>80</sup> Student protests would continue over the next few months, as well as reported detentions of student activists in the neighborhood.<sup>81</sup> By early December 1981, just as the garbage problem neared crisis proportions, the 23 de Enero and west Caracas more generally exploded into a new round of violent clashes between youths and police, once more resulting in the death of a high school student at the hands of police.<sup>82</sup> One major newspaper, reflecting on the ensuing protests, which continued until mid-December, noted simply, "Western Caracas has been turned into a battlefield."<sup>83</sup>

By December 1981, a bruised and battered Herrera Campíns administration had fallen into patterns of corruption, mismanagement, and street conflict that plagued his predecessor and that Herrera had vowed to end upon taking office. Even voices within the administration acknowledged the gulf between its once lofty rhetoric of participation and accountability and their difficulty in bringing

78. Hugo Colmenares, "Edmundo Arias, presidente del I.M.A.U.: No me han pedido la renuncia pero me harían un gran favor," *El Nacional*, 2 Dec. 1981.

79. Marco Tulio Paez, "Empresas recolectoras de basura ratifican al concejo municipal del D.F. que Caracas estará limpia en Navidad," *El Universal*, 3 Dec. 1981. Ironically, this episode transpired as Caracas hosted a continental summit on urban waste management, during which participants from throughout the Americas coincided in noting that "deficient" services were endemic in the continent. "Los servicios de aseo urbano son deficientes en Latinoamérica," *El Universal*, 2 Dec. 1981.

80. "Protesta en el 23 de enero por la muerte del estudiante," *El Nacional*, 20 Jan. 1981. "Investigaran a agentes de la policía metropolitana por caso mamera y disturbios en el 23 de enero," *Ultimas Noticias*, 10 Feb. 1981.

81. "Conato de disturbios estudiantiles en el 23 de enero," *El Nacional*, 5 May 1981; Marinela Hernandez, "Denuncian detención de juvenes del 23 de enero," *Ultimas Noticias*, 25 Feb. 1981; Antonio Marin, "Otra vez disturbios en el palacios fajardo," *El Nacional*, 27 Mar. 1981.

82. Carlos Castillo, "Muerto estudiante durante disturbios en el Liceo Luis Espelozin," *El Universal*, 4 Dec. 1981; Francisco Gomez, "De un perdigonazo al corazón murió el liceista del Luis Espelozin," *Ultimas Noticias*, 6 Dec. 1981.

83. Carlos Castillo, "Incendiaron automóviles de 11 profesores," *El Universal*, 12 Dec. 1981; Antonio Martin and Hugo Colmenares, "En un campo de batalla se convirtió el oeste de Caracas," *El Nacional*, 10 Dec. 1981.

it to fruition. In an early December 1981 “Seminar on the Needs of the Population” sponsored by the World Bank, Alba Illaramendi of Fundacomun took up the matter directly: “We are aware that it is not enough to speak about popular participation to show that we have a democratic system; it is more important to create the mechanisms and facilitate the conditions so that participation is made real.” Still, she reaffirmed the administration’s basic commitment to a more participatory model of democratic governance as both viable and necessary in order to encourage popular ownership of the political system, especially among urban popular sectors: “The [Herrera Campíns government] is emphatic in stating that participation is the form by which the people take an active presence and don’t delegate their abilities to think, to act, and to create.”<sup>84</sup>

But for residents of the 23 de Enero, “participation” proved an elastic term. In 1978 they had participated through their vote, in part responding to Herrera Campíns’s calls for a new, more open, more local, and more accountable democratic regime. Earlier in his administration they had participated by collaborating with the state more closely than ever before. Now, as *herrerismo* faltered in its efforts at state-led reform, participation would come to convey other meanings. Indeed, Herrera Campíns’s stated vision—of a “participatory” politics that would rise from a “conscious and organized” citizenry to forge a “truly democratic society”—remained a powerful call to arms, providing an opportunity for residents to reinvent democracy on their own terms.<sup>85</sup>

#### **“A Weapon as Powerful as the Vote”: The Hijackings Begin**

On Saturday, December 19, Earles Gutiérrez, his brother, and two friends slowed traffic in the rotary in front of block 7 in Monte Piedad. When a trash truck en route to the local way station neared, they blocked the road and Earles, holding a metal tube under his shirt, boarded the truck, telling its frightened driver, “Unfortunately, you will pay for the consequences of what we are suffering. You will be fired, and we will have our trash picked up.” When police arrived, they stood their ground: “All we want in exchange for the truck is that you commit to send someone to pick up this trash.” Some argued that they should not give up the truck, but Earles recalls, “In a hijacking, you have to negotiate.” So they gave up the truck, with a promise that cleanup personnel would arrive by Monday, January 21. As the *Diario de Caracas* wrote when it picked up the story, it was a “very special way” to protest.

84. “Estamos conscientes de que no basta hablar de participación para evidenciar que tenemos un sistema democrático,” *El Universal*, 6 Dec. 1981.

85. Campíns, *Mi compromiso con Venezuela*, 13, 16, 12.



The decision not to burn the truck but rather to seize it was born of a long-running struggle among militant youth in the 23 de Enero. Some of these conflicts were reflected in the trajectory of Earles and his brother. At the age of eight, Earles already belonged to a group of “Revolutionary Pioneers,” which tried to attach itself to veterans of the 1960s urban guerrilla struggle. Among them was Gustavo Rodríguez, a former guerrilla who in the 1970s had started cultural associations that doubled as clandestine revolutionary groups, and who would go on to mentor Earles and help coordinate the hijackings.<sup>86</sup> By contrast, Earles’s brother, several years older, was part of a generation that shunned guerrilla veterans for having given up the armed struggle. The result was a conflicting approach about how best to move forward a message of revolutionary change.

Consider the following example. In 1978, violent clashes over water shortages in the 23 de Enero had resulted in a massive demonstration organized by an unusual collaboration among local factions.<sup>87</sup> The magnitude of the support surprised them all. Yet an argument between Earles and his brother ensued when the latter argued that a woman present at the demonstration, an AD militant whom he derisively called a “*sapo*” (toad), should be excluded. Earles recalls telling his brother,

It’s not that they’re *sapos*, it’s that we create terror when we climb onto the rooftops [and throw stones at the police], and when they’re terrified people need to find an escape, and that escape may be to reject us, it will never be to support us because they don’t identify with that. So it’s not that they’re *sapos*, it’s that we haven’t had the methods to incorporate people into the process. And that woman is fighting because she feels affected by the

86. Rodríguez, interview. In the early 1970s, Gustavo Rodríguez dropped out of college to work alongside a friend who had recently returned from studying theater in the United States and who had been influenced by the Black Power movement. By that time, in block 3 where he had lived since the days of Pérez Jiménez, “there was a group of youth who were very restless, very animated, who were in need of an organization, needing to have someone shape them.” So they took over a local church in Monte Piedad and established a “Casa de la Cultura del Pueblo” (House of the People’s Culture) where they held workshops about “politics, sex, abortion,” and showed Cuban, Mexican, and Chilean revolutionary films. When his friend and his family were “kicked out [of el 23] at gunpoint,” the work turned clandestine and covert. For instance, as he recalls, they organized puppet shows with explicitly revolutionary content, performing throughout el 23.

87. José Manuel Pérez, “Bochinches en el 23 de enero por falta de agua con participación de encapuchados con armas largas,” *Ultimas Noticias*, 6 Oct. 1978; José Manuel Pérez, “Con la ropa lavada desplegada como banderas recibieron el agua,” *Ultimas Noticias*, 8 Oct. 1978.

problem of water and repression. And she's also affected by the terrorism that results when we climb on the rooftops.<sup>88</sup>

For this stance, Earles earned a reputation as a "liberal" among his brother's circle. Yet he continued to argue that the way to generate support was by finding common ground: "The only people who mobilized in *el 23* were women, and the only men were militant youth. All the others were busy playing the ponies."

Still, when the matter of hijackings came up in December 1981, according to Earles some among this group feared it as "extremely radical, terrible, we're going to end up in jail." They proposed instead to take the piled-up trash and burn it on the streets, but Earles recalls saying, "we've tried that crap forever and it's always the same, we're the ones who end up picking up the trash, people from the community ended up picking up our mess." Others proposed another familiar tactic, like climbing up the rooftops to throw rocks and yell chants. Upon discussion, they agreed: "We have to find another way." And reflecting some of the political breadth he claimed characterized his outlook, Earles asked an *adeco* (AD militant) friend to join him, his brother, and a third friend in staging a hijacking. After going door to door alerting neighbors of their deed, and their intentions not to burn the truck but rather to use it as leverage, they successfully assembled the crowd of women that greeted police on their arrival.

On Monday, December 21, however, no signs of the promised cleanup had materialized. Neighbors then reportedly staged an emergency assembly and agreed to hijack "everywhere and anyone who had anything to do with" the problems in the neighborhood.<sup>89</sup> Meanwhile their tactics became more militant, using weapons and taking to major roads, not just in the 23 de Enero, in search of passing trucks from the electric service, telephone and water companies, and the press. Despite this radicalization of tactics, their support increased, especially among those with little record of participation. "Blocks 1 and 2 were the most reactionary. Later they participated the most. That shows that we had a wrong political approach to things." Even one *adeco* who had collaborated with an underground antiguerrilla movement in the 1960s joined in. For Earles the reasons were clear: "It was a matter of services . . . everyone was affected." But that did not mean they failed to see this as an opportunity to gain a foothold for later political work: "We took advantage of that situation, yes. We went in deep into every building, [and it was] excellent. We achieved a knockout punch

88. Gutiérrez, interview.

89. Gilberto Carreño, "Las mujeres del 23 de enero secuestraron vehículos oficiales y privados," *El Universal*, 22 Dec. 1981.

[*tubazo*]. . . From twelve organizers in blocks no. 1 through 7, we went to nearly 200 overnight. . . Even in block no. 1 where they never had anything, we ended up controlling 30 apartments."<sup>90</sup>

By the next day, all major national dailies had picked up news of the hijackings. The popular *Ultimas Noticias* gave the protest a full-page spread, sympathetically reporting on the hijackers' demands while stressing the difference between their actions and the violence that had characterized previous mobilizations, even as recently as a week earlier.<sup>91</sup> *El Nacional* devoted several pictures and a headline of "Tons of Trash in el 23" to the protest.<sup>92</sup> *El Universal*, whose truck was among those hijacked, wrote of "a disaster of trash" in the 23 de Enero as residents had yet to receive the "Christmas bonus . . . promised by the IMAU director."<sup>93</sup> And indeed, asked by reporters why they had undertaken to hijack the property of the state, neighbors replied: "[Our] action is an opportune contribution to help contractors fulfill their promise to 'clean Caracas in December.'"<sup>94</sup>

In the discourse of the hijackings the "radical" character of neighbors' methods seemed not to defy but rather to rely on their loyalty to the institutional structure of representative government; it derived its power not by challenging the legitimacy of the state but rather by appropriating its own logic of accountability. From the viewpoint of the state this modality marked a significant enough departure from prior narratives of violent protest to limit its earlier repressive response. On December 23, Luis Herrera Campíns made a dramatic intervention. Caracas's major daily blared on its front page: "[Herrera Campíns], 'furious,' gave public services 48 hours." The announcement followed a "stormy" emergency meeting called by Herrera Campíns between the Caracas governor and the heads of public service institutions. According to the president's chief of staff, Asdrubal Aguiar, "Herrera Campíns understood that the protests that happened in the 23 de Enero and other areas of the capital

90. Gutiérrez, interview.

91. Cruz Moreno, "Por segundo día consecutivo en el oeste: Retenidos 3 camiones y un jeep de la basura por habitantes de sierra maestra como protesta," *Ultimas Noticias*, 22 Dec. 1981.

92. Antonio Martín, "Toneladas de basura en las calles de catia y 23 de enero," *El Nacional*, 23 Dec. 1981.

93. Gilberto Carreño, "En el 23 de enero: La basura causa estragos," *El Universal*, 23 Dec. 1981.

94. "Los vecinos dijeron que su acción se convierte en una contribución oportuna al cumplimiento de la promesa de los concesionarios de la recolección de basura de 'limpiar a Caracas en diciembre.'" "Secuestraron' a cuatro camiones del I.M.A.U."



Figure 2. December 23, 1981. Onlookers stand by as bulldozers work on Christmas Eve, removing tons of accumulated trash behind block 6, 23 de Enero. Giorgio Lombardi/*El Nacional*.

were not to ‘alter public order.’” Instead, they were the “natural reaction of a community that feels unattended in its basic needs.” Aguiar went further, noting that by “express orders” from the president, there was to be “no retaliation against protesters.” Instead, he ordered the agencies to sign “an affidavit of commitment” so that in 48 hours’ time they would attend to the public services of the 23 de Enero in particular, but also other areas of Caracas in order “to detect irregularities before they reach critical levels, as they did in the 23 de Enero.”<sup>95</sup>

Over the next two days, IMAU authorities reportedly deployed nearly two hundred trucks and two dozen bulldozers to the neighborhood (see figure 2).<sup>96</sup> In addition, the water service dispatched crews to fix leaks in both sewer and water mains in Monte Piedad.<sup>97</sup> Asked by reporters how they viewed the measures

95. Daisy Argotte, “La ira presidencial sacudió las voluntades: Una ‘operación cayapa’ dejó limpio al 23 de Enero,” *Diario de Caracas*, 24 Dec. 1981; “L.H.C. ‘furioso’ dio 48 horas a los servicios públicos.”

96. “Operativo de emergencia en el 23 de enero,” *El Universal*, 23 Dec. 1981.

97. Gilberto Carreño, “En el 23 de enero: Las autoridades respondieron al clamor de los vecinos,” *El Universal*, 24 Dec. 1981.

that had forced their presence, public service authorities on the scene agreed that "residents are perfectly justified in staging their protest."<sup>98</sup> Comments like these helped to galvanize other popular sectors around Caracas, who pointed to the 23 de Enero as they contemplated seeking solutions to long-standing grievances of their own. In Caricuao, for example, another high-rise working-class housing block built in the early 1960s and located in southwestern Caracas, residents reported to the press that "maybe the forms of pressure of the 23 de Enero are more convincing." But a sense of cultural disdain tempered an otherwise veiled admiration for what residents of the 23 de Enero had undertaken and the attention they had managed to receive. According to one local woman, "One day I told the people at INOS [water service] that if they didn't send water, we were going to do the same thing as in the 23 de Enero. Of course it's not that we want to act like them in the 23 de Enero because . . . well, we are a more cultured area than the 23 de Enero, but it looks like things in this country can only be fixed in the wrong way [*a la mala*]."<sup>99</sup>

Comments equating forms of protest with "culture" exposed how in early 1980s Caracas, class sensibilities informed acceptable standards of mobilization; hijacking public service vehicles was clearly seen as a "wrong way" of seeking redress. But this particular comment also revealed changes in the spectrum of acceptable forms of mobilization, changes that reluctantly linked the means of a protest to its ends. Indeed, from the perspective of residents of the 23 de Enero, it was precisely a culture of contentious protest that had enabled residents finally to find a space where tactics once broadly condemned now found some acceptability on the basis of their efficacy. In turn, residents had found efficacy in tactics once broadly condemned by tying those tactics to the discourse of accountability through direct participation that underlay *herrerismo*. And in fact, as the hijackings raged, on December 27 authorities revived the discourse of participation that had anchored *herrerismo*. Addressing urban popular sectors in the southern state of Guárico, Alba Illaramendi of Fundacomun once more urged communities to seize the mantle of direct participation as a crucial component of democratic citizenship in Venezuela: "It is indispensable that [communities themselves] promote, participate, and protect the work that is developed to resolve the needs that you yourselves have pointed out."<sup>100</sup>

98. Cruz Moreno, "190 camiones y 25 maquinas se necesitaron para sacar la basura de muchos meses en el 23," *Ultimas Noticias*, 24 Dec. 1981.

99. Daisy Argotte, "El regalo de caricuao llevo en barriles de Basura: Otra parroquia que amenaza con hacer crisis al estilo 23 de enero," *Diario de Caracas*, 29 Dec. 1981.

100. "La marginalidad solo se supera con la participación de la comunidad en la toma de decisiones," *El Universal*, 28 Dec. 1981.

Back in the 23 de Enero, the cleanup measures begun before Christmas had proven to be stopgaps at best. By December 26 all equipment and personnel had cleared out, while much trash remained uncollected. Meanwhile public service entities took to accusing one another of ongoing problems in the area, with IMAU officials blaming the superblocs' administrator, the Instituto Nacional de la Vivienda (National Housing Institute, INAVI), of negligence.<sup>101</sup> Neighbors shared their frustrations with reporters; said one, "We were taken for saps."<sup>102</sup> By New Year's Eve others seemed to lose hope that they would ever resolve their "eternal calamities."<sup>103</sup>

Beginning on January 3, residents hijacked another batch of trucks, vans, and cars. Behind block no. 1 neighbors draped one hijacked vehicle with a sign reading "Against the lack of public services, we will continue the hijackings! Enough promises!"<sup>104</sup> To sustain the protest over time, neighbors relied on an intricate system of task sharing drawn from the 23 de Enero's multiple organizing traditions. Erstwhile guerrillas and militant youth formed the core of those who staged the roadblocks, seized the vehicles, and kept them under guard overnight, drawing from their tactical experience forged in the fray of antiestablishment conflict, for instance by deflating tires so that the only way to move the trucks was to tow them out. According to Earles, each seized truck was "assigned" to a building whose residents then assumed responsibility for it. Meanwhile, *amas de casa*, or housewives, gave the protest its public face, speaking to reporters about the nature of their specific grievances and following up to ensure the coverage was "credible [*fedigno*]." As days turned to weeks, community members discussed their options during daily assemblies at the various buildings in Monte Piedad where vehicles were being detained, also setting up guard shifts to ensure the vehicles' safekeeping. When it seemed that attention to the protest was waning and the state was ready to wait them out, neighbors organized mass rallies to which other sectors of the superblocs contributed "representatives" to assist with logistics and stand in solidarity.

But sustaining the protest took its toll. William Rangel, who alongside Earles had helped organize the hijackings, recalls that during nightly meetings

101. "600 ductos destruidos: El I.N.A.V.I. es el culpable de la acumulación de basura en el 23 de enero," *El Nacional*, 2 Jan. 1982.

102. Daisy Argotte, "No funciona la cayapa para limpiar el sector: Los habitantes del 23 de enero 'cayeron por inocentes,'" *Diario de Caracas*, 27 Dec. 1981.

103. Cruz Moreno, "Servicio de ascensores, falta de agua y basura calamidad permanente en el 23 de enero," *Ultimas Noticias*, 31 Dec. 1981.

104. "En el 23 de enero siguen secuestrando vehículos oficiales," *El Nacional*, 8 Jan. 1982.

with neighbors disputes routinely erupted as long-standing personality conflicts flared up. Some even used the assemblies to vent marital problems, hinting at the level of intimacy that developed over time. In another instance, a National Guard officer confronted some of the youth militants over the release of one of the trucks. As tempers flared, guns were drawn, and only after several minutes did tensions ease. The National Guardsman, meanwhile, left without the truck.<sup>105</sup> And when mid-level public service officials showed up at an assembly where neighbors expected directors, one neighbor yelled, "then you are also hijacked!" before the rest of the assembly talked him down.<sup>106</sup> But the major source of dispute remained what to do about the trucks. One sector, led by youth, advocated burning them. Another sector, led by adults, forbade it. At root lay a careful balancing act between pressure and violence, one that threatened to spill over at any moment. For instance, on January 9, neighbors staged a demonstration aimed at keeping up the pressure on authorities and the media's attention. But when unidentified gunmen shot at the crowd, leaving one woman wounded, some among youth militants argued that the time had come to fight violence with violence. Some even began burning tires to block the streets for several hours before other neighbors reminded them of the fragility of their alliance.<sup>107</sup> By January 17, to show they continued undeterred, residents seized another three public service trucks.<sup>108</sup>

Their resolve paid off. In an assembly on January 19 at a local elementary school, 400 residents filled the dining hall to witness as the directors of the IMAU, INOS, and the electric service signed affidavits guaranteeing that they would commit enough resources to conduct a complete, long-term overhaul of the neighborhood.<sup>109</sup> Four days later, 24 years since the overthrow of Pérez Jiménez had set Venezuela on a path toward democracy, residents celebrated as the first of the crews began work and the last of the trucks rolled out.<sup>110</sup> Asked

105. William Rangel, interview with author, 19 Feb. 2005.

106. Frank León, interview with author, 28 July 2005.

107. José Manuel Pérez, "Agoniza Dama herida durante manifestación en el 23 de enero para reclamar solución a problemas," *Ultimas Noticias*, 11 Jan. 1982.

108. Desiree Santos Amaral, "Secuestrados otros 3 vehículos y van once por protesta de habitantes del 23 de enero," *Ultimas Noticias*, 18 Jan. 1982; Cruz Moreno, "No ceden habitantes de Monte Piedad y mantienen retenidos 10 vehículos," *Ultimas Noticias*, 19 Jan. 1982.

109. Marinela Hernandez, "Habitantes del 23 de enero comprometieron a organismos a solucionarles sus problemas," *Ultimas Noticias*, 21 Jan. 1982.

110. Cruz Moreno, "El 23 de enero llega a sus 24 años en plena lucha porque se cumplan servicios públicos," *Ultimas Noticias*, 24 Jan. 1982.

if they felt they had lost an opportunity to build a political movement, Frank León, one of the youth militants, replied they had, to an extent. “There were frustrations,” he said, but “it was politicized in that people identified you as revolutionary, they respected you.” Above all, said Frank, “we had the satisfaction that we achieved what we set out to do.”

In the immediate aftermath of the hijackings, the Caracas city council debated the merits of residents’ tactics. Its president denounced the tactics as “beyond all established order, it is lamentable that this should take place for the simple reason that it has negative consequences . . . especially when there are perfectly acceptable mechanisms to reach an understanding.” A Christian Democrat councilman concurred, criticizing residents for presumably acting against their own interests by letting themselves be manipulated: “By no means do I think violence is the solution. . . . If the community allows itself to be taken by activists who don’t want solutions to problems because they live off of that cauldron, they will never be able to live decently.” A councilman for the Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement toward Socialism, MAS) party offered lackluster sympathy while counseling dialogue: “I understand that what took place in the 23 de Enero is a reflection of dramatic neglect that affects the people of that area, forced to use extreme measures, even though I think that the correct approach would be to attack the root of the matter and the most convenient initiative to that end is dialogue.” But Gladys Gavazut, an independent, broke ranks and issued a blanket condemnation of the council while lending full support to the measures taken by the residents:

The council has ceased to be a popular instrument to become a museum instead, and the participation offered by [the government] was nothing more than a ploy that was discarded when they realized that it might be useful for the people to hold accountable, at a given time, those who direct the fortunes of the nation. . . . I justify [the hijackings] and even more in the case of a neighborhood that has been so beaten. The time comes when a community tires and takes actions that are the manifestation of a people that cannot find solutions to the problems it faces.<sup>111</sup>

In the press, columnists reflected on the underlying implications of the hijackings. Artist Manuel Manauere, who years earlier had collaborated in the design of the superblocks, offered a scathing rebuke of public officials who failed

111. All city council quotes come from Maria Laura Lombardi, “Se justifica el secuestro de un camión?” *El Nacional*, 21 Jan. 1982.



to see the larger problems of representation exposed by residents' protest, opting instead to focus on the legal aspects of the hijackings:

They are the symbols of a people . . . that continues to hang on to the hope that Venezuela will go down the path of authentic legality. . . . The very fact that there exists a popular sector like the 23 de Enero, which keeps lit the torch of just claims, is living proof that the light of hope has not died out. It is also testimony that there is a Venezuela that is beaten down, but not defeated."

For Manaure the implication was a clear portent of things to come: "This community will have within a short time the opportunity, once more, to use efficiently and wisely a weapon as powerful as the vote is in a democracy. We are certain they will use it in the next elections with reflective criteria, as a crushing protest in the face of the cruel injustices it has endured."<sup>112</sup>

The hijackings had already illustrated how residents of the 23 de Enero had come to harness the power embedded in electoral politics. Herrera Campíns's call to reinvent democracy through direct participation in local affairs, and residents' support for electoral democracy in general and specifically for Herrera Campíns's transformative message in 1978, had provided them with the room to experiment with new languages and practices of protest. They used their majority support for electoral democracy to temper radicalizing influences in their midst and radicalized the way they made demands by drawing from the tactics of an earlier era of organized guerrilla conflict. This new form of protest deployed the language of accountability that anchored state-led messages of democratic renewal in Venezuela of the late 1970s and early 1980s. In this sense, Manaure's exhortation to view the hijackings as a larger commentary on the broken pacts between the state and its citizens, and to view the illegality of the hijackings ironically as a plea for "authentic legality," laid bare the extent to which residents could deploy claims to accountability to mobilize political sectors even while engaging in extralegal tactics.

## Conclusion

The history of the hijackings related here shows that the process of recalibrating representative democracy in Venezuela as the political system frayed involved far more negotiation between state and electorate than conventional accounts

112. Mateo Manaure, "El 23 de enero: Un bravo pueblo," *El Nacional*, 23 Jan. 1982.

propose. The hijackings also suggest that demobilization and patronage scarcely account for how some sectors responded. In addition, these events indicate that the process began long before the state faced the worst of the economic crisis that would later engulf it, and involved not just economic claims but also political claims, in particular for better government. Like political elites, popular sectors also experimented with new language and tactics of mobilization in response to the effects of structural shifts taking place around them. These responses drew from competing traditions of grassroots organizing long gestating in the underbelly of Venezuelan democracy, at once liberal in their ends but radical in their means. The actions of these grassroots sectors, which had long shunned and done battle with the state, were tempered by a current of support for the premises of liberal democracy and its promise of good governance, as citizens were urged to hold the state and its institutions accountable to its responsibilities to the electorate.

To bring together these currents residents drew strength from two unexpected sources. The first came courtesy of the state itself. Herrera Campíns had been elected on a promise to increase participation in the political system, in turn breeding accountability. By 1981, Herrera had abandoned the calls to “reinvent democracy” that informed his presidential bid. Yet the vision of a “participatory” politics proved a lasting stimulus for popular mobilization. In particular, it conferred powerful legitimacy, and leverage, to bold and new popular efforts to defy political elites. It was precisely this mantle of legitimacy that residents of the 23 de Enero would seize to mount such an effort. The second unexpected source of strength came from within the parish. While the call to organize and claim more participation provided a stimulus to challenge long-held assumptions about state power and its legitimate arbiters, it nevertheless presented the residents with a challenge of their own: how to go about organizing. Indeed for decades the area had developed a reputation as a hotbed of mobilization, political and otherwise. Yet this image ignored stark differences in tactics, goals, and participation among currents of activism broadly glossed as “radical.” More importantly, it underestimated the scope and strength of local networks of support for the pacted system, which the 1978 elections confirmed as never before. In short, while mobilization had marked the place of the 23 de Enero neighborhood in the national imagination, organization among its residents had long proven elusive. In the hijackings, residents found ways to bring together these once-clashing currents, drawing strategically from each to transform local heterogeneity from a liability into an asset.

The success of the hijackings transformed more than the physical face of the 23 de Enero. They contributed to a new era of popular mobilization in

which community struggles were imbued with political content as usually mainstream sectors embraced a leadership and tactical repertoire originally fashioned around radical ideological goals. These sectors also placed limits upon insurgent leaders and tactics, forcing once antiestablishment groups into negotiating with Venezuela's state. As community activists gained a radical political edge, one-time insurgents came to recognize the legitimacy of the representative system. The result was a hybrid political consciousness that held direct-action tactics and loyalty to the founding premises (and promises) of liberal democracy as complementary rather than antithetical. By hijacking the property of the state while adopting its logic of accountability, residents of the 23 de Enero were marking not just a new modality of protest but also the emergence of a new consciousness of participatory politics in Venezuela.