

Socialist Indoctrination in Venezuela

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Abstract

We assess the nature and extent of socialist indoctrination of children in Venezuela during the government of Hugo Chavez. Our methodology consists on systematically comparing official elementary school textbooks published by the administration of President Chávez with those published by previous administrations. Our approach is twofold. First, we perform a qualitative comparison of the textbooks by coding relevant socio-economic and political topics. Second, we perform a quantitative comparison of the textbooks using text mining. We find strong evidence of socialist indoctrination in the textbooks published by the administration of President Chávez relative to those we used as benchmark. We find that the most common topics of socialist indoctrination include income redistribution, the promotion of government produced goods and services, patriotism and distrust of international trade. [add some numeric results]

Keywords:

Indoctrination, Socialism, Venezuela, Economic Education

JEL Classification: P1, Z12

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1. Introduction

Socialist regimes tend to display strong interest in public education. The *Likbez* campaign introduced by Lenin in 1919, for example, mobilized vast amount of resources to “eliminate illiteracy” under the Bolshevik Revolution. Similarly, two years after the victory of the Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro launched one of the most ambitious literacy campaigns in the world mobilizing teachers and volunteers all around the island.¹

Following this pattern, and only months after coming to power and declaring Venezuela a socialist nation, President Hugo Chávez embarked on a radical and ambitious reform of the Venezuelan educational system in 1999. The reform included renaming the public educational system the Bolivarian Educational System, developing new curriculum and launching specific education “missions” or campaigns.²

While the leaders of these regimes often claimed that their educational policies were designed to increase educational outcomes and inclusion, the truth is that they also included important political goals. As early as 1923, the Soviet Education Law remarked that “the whole organization of school life should promote proletarian class consciousness in the minds of pupils and create knowledge of the solidarity of labor in its struggle with capital...” (cite). In Cuba, the 1978 Code of the Child and Youth provided that the educational system should “work for the efficient protection of youth against all influences contrary to their communist formation.” (cite)³

The political goals of Venezuela’s educational system under President Chávez were equally bold. President Chávez approved a new curriculum called the Bolivarian Curriculum designed to educate children on socialist ideology featuring Karl Marx, “Che” Guevara and Simón Bolívar. The Ministry of Culture declared in 2009 that the curriculum was designed to help children eliminate “capitalist thinking” and better understand the ideas and values “necessary to build a socialist country” (MercoPress 2009).

In 2011, the Chávez’s administration published a new set of school textbooks called “Colección Bicentenario.” The textbooks followed the new curriculum and were taught in approximately 80% of the schools in the country. More than 40 million copies were distributed free of charge reaching more than six million children (cite). The presence of socialist indoctrination and pro-government messages in these textbooks was evident to many involved in education. In various reports, teachers claimed that these textbooks taught arithmetic us-

¹The literacy rate in the Soviet Union did increase from approximately 24% before 1917 to approximately 80% before World War II (Grenoble 2003). The Cuban literacy campaign increased the literacy rate from approximately 70% in 1959 to 96% in 1962 (Kellner 1989).

²Public expenditure in education increased from 5% of GDP in 1994 to approximately 7% in 2009 (WDI 2019). The literacy rate increased from 90% in 1990 to 95% in 2009 (WDI 2019). For extensive accounts of Venezuela’s education missions see Griffiths and Williams (2009) and Duffy (2015).

³In fact, the code mandated a three-year prison sentence for parents who taught a child ideas contrary to the official curriculum, i.e. ideas contrary to communism (Hudson 2002).

ing government food programs, English having children recite where President Chávez was born and civics enumerating the reasons why kids and the elderly should thank him (Dreier 2015). Our goal in this paper is to assess these claims.

Our methodology consists on systematically comparing the textbooks of “Colección Bicentenario” with those published by previous administrations for the same school grades. Our approach is twofold. First, we perform a qualitative comparison by coding relevant socio-economic and political categories. Second, we perform a quantitative comparison using automated text mining. Our analysis is limited to the social sciences textbooks. The pre-Chávez textbooks that we use for comparison were published at different points in time in a period covering more than a decade (1972 to 1986). Using textbooks published at different times within more than a decade allows us to minimize the influence of time fixed effects.

[Results]

The assessment of the nature and extent of socialist indoctrination in official school textbooks is important for different economic, sociological and anthropological reasons. American philosopher Philip Smith (1965) defines indoctrination as the process of teaching “a set of beliefs or a point of view in such a manner as to create the impression openly or subtly that what is taught is so true and important to the individual or social well-being that, by contrast, all possible alternatives are false and dangerous.”⁴ Thus, children indoctrinated on socialism may grow up believing that such economic and political system is the only true and safe alternative. In other words, these beliefs may determine the ideology or shared cognitive rules of the generations exposed (see North 1981 and Greif and Mokyr 2016). Ultimately, this ideology may impose a barrier to institutional change as the country faces different technological and economic conditions (see Murat and Jared 2017).

The next section reviews related literature. Section 3 presents the qualitative comparison, section 4 presents the quantitative comparison or text mining, and section 5 concludes.

2. Literature review

There is, of course, a large body of literature that argues that one of the goals of public education is to indoctrinate.⁵ Lott (1990), for example, argues that indoctrinating, or “instilling the right views,” allows political entrepreneurs to lower the public opinion cost of wealth transfers and, therefore, to maximize support. In a follow up study, Lott (1999) argues that, given that totalitarian governments create larger wealth transfers, they also experience greater returns

⁴Similarly, Arthur (2003) defines indoctrination as the teaching of something “that is true or universally accepted regardless of evidence to the contrary or in the absence of evidence at all. It is a pejorative term.”

⁵See Kremer and Sarychev (2000), Lott (1987) and Sowell (1995) for surveys of this literature.

to indoctrination. This hypothesis is consistent with the cases of the Soviet Union and Cuba and, to a large extent, also with that of Venezuela.

The methodology we use to qualitatively compare the textbooks using coding categories has been extensively used in many disciplines. An early example applied to school textbooks is that of Litt (1963), who reviews the civic education textbooks used in three different socio-economic communities in the Boston metropolitan area. Trying to assess if different socio-economic communities differ in the kind of school textbooks they use, Litt (1963) randomly selects a sample of paragraphs from the textbooks and classifies their content under five different codes reflecting different political attitudes. Another important reference is that of Cheung, Monroy and Delany (2017) who used the same coding methodology to examine the prevalence of learning-related values in children's storybooks in the United States, China and Mexico.

The methodology of text mining...

Probably the study closest to our own is that of Abbott, Soifer and Vom Hau (2017) who try to assess the extent of nationalism ideology embedded in the textbooks of "Colección Bicentenario." Like we do, these authors qualitatively compare these textbooks with textbooks from before 1999.⁶ While these authors find important evidence of nationalism ideology embedded in the textbooks of "Colección Bicentenario," they argue that teachers in Venezuela resisted this ideology and provided a buffer that reduced the impact on children. There is, of course, an overlap in the political and economic categories emphasized by nationalism and socialism ideologies. Thus, some of our results are consistent with those of Abbott, Soifer and Vom Hau (2017). For example, a common result is that the textbooks of "Colección Bicentenario" display an evident glorification of Simón Bolívar as a socialist and anti-imperialist liberator.

Another important reference is that of Del Valle and Liberatore (2016) who also study the textbooks included in "Colección Bicentenario." However, while we analyze the textbooks written for primary school, they analyze one history textbook written for sophomores in secondary education. Nevertheless, their findings are similar to ours. They find that the textbook analyzed "manipulates the truth," uses "subliminal messages," and is clearly written "under socialist ideas."

3. Qualitative Analysis

As mentioned above, the textbooks of "Colección Bicentenario" followed the new Bolivarian curriculum and were freely distributed and taught in approximately 80% of the schools in the country. The textbooks that we review here are those dedicated to social sciences and assigned to first through fifth grade. These five textbooks ranged from 131 to 179 pages in length (with an average

⁶Like we also do, these authors focus on the primary school textbooks dedicated to social sciences. Additionally, however, they analyze those dedicated to history.

of 156 pages).⁷

To produce a relevant comparison, we juxtapose the textbooks from “Colección Bicentenario” to official social sciences textbooks assigned from first through fifth grade before Chávez became to power. These textbooks were published between 1972 and 1986 during the administrations of Rafael Caldera, Carlos Perez, Luis Herrera and Jaime Lusinchi. The five textbooks analyzed ranged from 75 to 180 pages in length (with an average of 114 pages).

We read both sets of textbooks and recorded passages in which the text transmitted a concept, idea, recommendation or example suggesting socialist indoctrination (where indoctrination is defined as in Smith (1965)). The definition of socialism relevant for our purposes is that of Latin America’s “Socialism of the 21st Century.” Under this interpretation of socialism, the political and economic system favors collective or governmental ownership of the means of production but does not directly suppress private property. The Chávez’s regime, and those of other leaders subscribed to the same ideology in Latin America, respected, to different degrees, private initiative, market operations and the democratic process. In most cases, however, these regimes controlled strategic natural resources and promoted aggressive income redistribution in favor of workers, the poor and their political supporters. They accompanied these policies with a strong nationalistic and patriotic discourse (cite).⁸

Thus, if the textbooks of “Colección Bicentenario” contain socialist indoctrination, we would expect to find passages promoting ideas such as the need for income redistribution, the promotion of public goods, the importance of protectionism (as opposed to the importance of international trade), the rejection or condemnation of capitalism (as opposed to descriptions of the benefits of capitalism and free markets), the promotion of collective effort (as opposed to individual effort), distrust of private entrepreneurship, rejection of consumerism, the importance of patriotism and glorification of the leader or *caudillo*. We would also expect to find passages promoting certain aspects of Marxist theory such as the objective theory of value and the idea of surplus value or *plusvalía*. These categories are listed and defined in Table A.1 in the Appendix.

We used an iterative process whereby we first read the textbooks for first grade and identified a number of initial categories to be coded. We then added or consolidated categories as we read the rest of the textbooks. Coding required

⁷According to Venezuela’s Ministry of Popular Power for Education, the Bolivarian curriculum aims at developing “a new society with Venezuelan identity and a sense of justice, fraternity, peace, equity and freedom...committed to defend the sovereignty, unity and integration of Latin America and the Caribbean...” Although this curriculum was implemented in most schools, it was not officially established as the national educational curriculum, as this would have required the passage of new legislation (Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Educación (2007).)

⁸Other Latin American leaders subscribed to the Socialism of the 21st Century ideology include Evo Morales in Bolivia, Néstor and Cristina Kirchner in Argentina, Lula da Silva in Brazil and Rafael Correa in Ecuador. Although these leaders were elected democratically, several of them changed their country’s constitution to get re-elected and expand their political power.

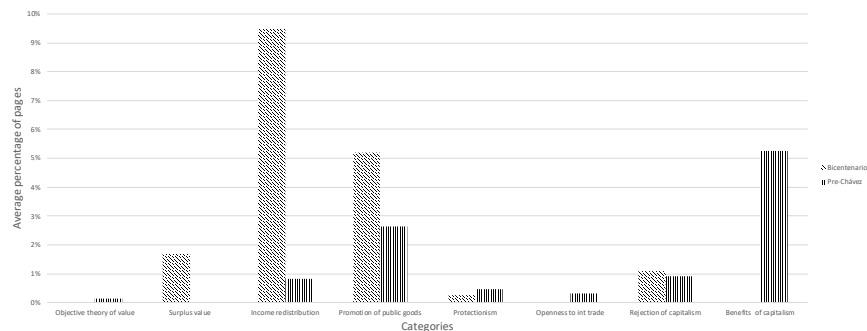


Figure 1: Socio-Economic Categories

careful attention to word choice, tone and idiomatic expressions. Whenever we found a passage that could be classified under one of the categories listed in Table 1, we recorded 1 under such category and noted the number of pages that the passage covered. We then added the ones under each category and the number of pages in which each category was mentioned. Notice that some passages could transmit concepts, ideas, recommendations or examples related to two or more categories at the same time. In such cases we recorded 1 for each category mentioned. Two of the coauthors of this paper went over this process independently. The initial agreement between the two coauthors was 85%. Discrepancies were resolved by reading the passages again and discussing the appropriate classification.

3.1. Results

Figures 1 through 3 present our results. The prevalence of socialist indoctrination is evident in all three groups of categories.

Within the socio-economic categories (Figure 1), it is highly evident the stronger emphasis on the idea of surplus value, the need for income redistribution and the promotion of public goods in the textbooks of “Colección Bicentenario.” Most notably, in average, almost 10% of the pages in each of the five textbooks of “Colección Bicentenario” reviewed included passages conveying the need for income redistribution (the 5th grade textbook actually had more than 16% of its pages dedicated to this category). For comparison, in average less than 1% of the pages of the textbooks from the pre-Chávez period were dedicated to this category.

Although the idea of surplus value or *plusvalía* was mentioned in only 1.7% of the pages in the textbooks of “Colección Bicentenario,” this percentage is relatively significant as not a single page mentioned such category in the textbooks from the pre-Chávez period. Also, while both sets of textbooks promoted the benefits of public goods, the frequency of this category in the textbooks of “Colección Bicentenario” was twice as high as in the textbooks from the pre-Chávez period (5.2% vs. 2.6%).

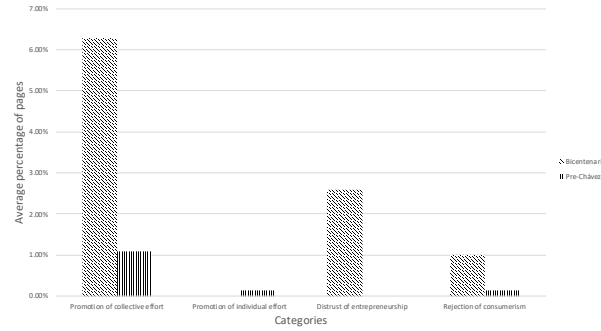


Figure 2: Social and Individual Behavior

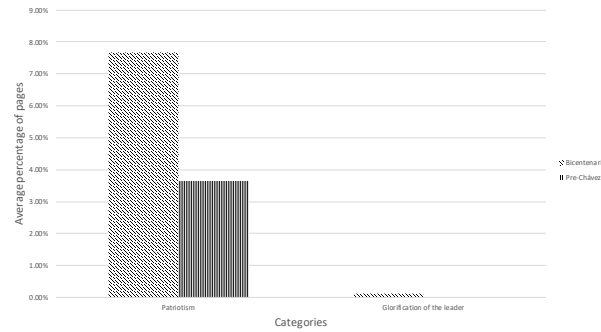


Figure 3: Politics

Interestingly, in average both set of textbooks dedicated approximately 1% of their pages to reject capitalism. However, more than 5% of the pages in the textbooks of the pre-Chávez period described some of the benefits of capitalism when not a single page in the textbooks of “Colección Bicentenario” did that.

Within the social and individual behavior categories (Figure 2), the differences between the textbooks of “Colección Bicentenario” and those of the pre-Chávez period are even more pronounced. The promotion of collective effort and the rejection of consumerism are approximately six and seven times more prevalent in the former than in the latter (6.29% vs. 1.1% and 1.01% vs. 0.15% in average, respectively).

We found passages displaying distrust of entrepreneurship in 2.6% of the pages of the textbooks of “Colección Bicentenario” but no instances of such category in the textbooks of the pre-Chávez period. Finally, hardly any of textbooks promoted individual effort.

Within the political categories (Figure 3), we found that the textbooks of “Colección Bicentenario” include more than twice as many pages dedicated to promoting patriotism (including the than their pre-Chávez counterparts. Con-

trary to our expectations, however, we only found one page in the former textbooks dedicated to glorify President Chávez.

3.2. Examples

Here are some examples of indoctrinating passages coded under the aforementioned categories. Notice how these passages tend to use strong language, appeal to emotion and reach conclusions without entertaining alternative explanations or evidence.

- Surplus value and patriotism

“We have a Republic thanks to Simón Bolívar. However, large land properties still exist and there are still poor peasants who work for large land owners. In these properties, the master earns a lot of money by exploiting these peasants. This injustice that keeps peasants without land must end.” (Social Sciences “Colección Bicentenario” 3rd grade, p.153)

- The need for income redistribution

“The North-South conflict resides on economic inequality, which produces social inequality. Society suffers a disease that can be cured. This disease is nothing but unequal wealth distribution.” (Social Sciences “Colección Bicentenario” 4th grade, p. 50)

“Poor kids are born every day. What an inhumane reality! They are born poor... Is it that poverty is a biological factor inherited by kids from their parents? No. Poverty is caused by the economic inequality that persists in society.” (Social Sciences “Colección Bicentenario” 2nd grade, p. 74)

- Promotion of public goods

“The sun asked the moon: What if their little eyes are sick and they cannot read in school? And the moon answered: They are given glasses and that’s it. The sun then asked: What if they don’t have money to buy them? And the moon answered: No *chamo* (friend), in Venezuela glasses are *gratiñan* (free)!” (Social Sciences “Colección Bicentenario” 1st grade, p.14)

- Promotion of public goods and rejection of capitalism

“Now we have social production companies. Their members don’t get wealthy. These companies charge lower prices, engage in charitable activities, help the poor and distribute its profits among all members. These companies do not look at all like their capitalist counterparts, do they?” (Social Sciences “Colección Bicentenario” 5th grade, p.17)

- Protectionism and rejection of consumerism

“We need to be responsible consumers. There are kids your age and even older who like to use brand name shoes and clothes. There are even people who don’t eat well in order to have money to buy these products. But what is a brand name if not a powerful company, in most cases foreign, that keeps making more money by selling its products in the entire world depleting the family budget? Let’s remember that in Venezuela and Latin America, most people are poor. Let’s say NO! to those brand name shoes and clothes because the ones made in Venezuela have the three bs: *bueno* (good), *bonito* (pretty) and *barato* (cheap). (Social Sciences “Colección Bicentenario” 4th grade, p.132).

- Rejection of capitalism and patriotism

“Bolivia is the perfect example. It is the poorest country in South America and yet, apart from rich vegetation, it has minerals like zinc, copper and silver and is the second largest producer of tin. It has small amounts of oil but plenty of natural gas. Bolivia did start exporting natural gas but continued to be poor. Who controls the production and distribution of those commodities? Foreign companies from rich countries from which Bolivia purchases food, machinery and other expensive goods. In 2006, however, Bolivia nationalized its hydrocarbons and has increased its investment in solutions to social problems that affect the people.” (Social Sciences “Colección Bicentenario” 4th grade, p.48)

- Rejection of capitalism and surplus value

“The human and environmental problems got worse at the beginning of the XX century because a) the European industry experienced strong growth and the one in the US and other countries started to develop, and b) inequality increased between the proletariat majority affected by poverty and the rich and small group of factory owners and commercial companies.” (Social Sciences “Colección Bicentenario” 2nd grade, p.137).

In the textbooks from the pre-Chávez period, the attitude towards capitalism and private companies was markedly different. Here is an example:

“The C.A. Electric Company of Venezuela is a private company. This service costs a lot of money. When we pay our bill we are helping the company to function well.” (Social Sciences (1978) 4th grade, p. 80)

It is also interesting to see the different treatment that certain historical episodes receive in both sets of textbooks. Here is, for example, the way the textbooks from the pre-Chávez period described the production of oil at the beginning of the XX Century:

“At the beginning of the XX Century, Venezuela became an important oil producing country. This meant that massive amounts of money entered the country and was used to modernize our nation. Oil improved our economy and allowed us to raise our standards of living. In a short period of time we went from being an agricultural country to an oil exporting country with vast economic resources.” (Social Sciences (1986) 1st grade, p. 40)

And here is how the same historical episode was described by the textbooks of “Colección Bicentenario”:

“This phenomenon is known as the ‘peasant exodus.’ According to the dictionary, exodus means to depart, to leave. They left the rural areas and had to change jobs. They went from being peasants to being oil workers. But do not believe for a second that their life conditions improve. There are many novels and stories that describe the sufferings of these workers as they were being exploited by their foreign bosses.” (Social Sciences “Colección Bicentenario” 1st grade, p.19)

The treatment of the Spanish colonization was also strikingly different:

“With the arrival of the Spaniards we also got big ships that facilitated transportation. They also brought donkeys, mules and horses that were used to transport products from farms to towns and ports.” (Social Sciences (1986) 1st grade, p. 48)

“When we see in this picture the face of a poor Peruvian indigenous person we understand that the injustice brought up by the Spanish colonialism is still present today. This injustice is what prompted this person’s ancestors to rebel.” (Social Sciences “Colección Bicentenario” 1st grade, p.19)

4. Text Mining

5. Conclusion

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World Development Indicators 2019 (Venezuela Education percentage of GDP)

Appendix A.

Table A.1: Coded Categories

Category	Definition
Socio-Economics	
Objective theory of value	According to Marxist theory, the value of goods and services is given by the amount of labor required to produce them.
Surplus value (<i>plusvalía</i>)	According to Marxist theory, workers' compensations are typically unjustly low as they do not reflect the full value produced by labor in the production process.
Income redistribution	Economic equality is seen as a valid social goal and, therefore, income or wealth redistribution through government intervention is a valid social policy.
Promotion of public goods	Promotion of the idea that goods and services produced and/or provided by the government are better, cheaper or more widely distributed than private goods.
Protectionism	Promotion of the idea that buying domestically produced goods or services over imports is better for the domestic economy.
Openness to international trade	Remaining open or unbiased against the purchase of foreign goods and services.
Rejection of capitalism	Rejection of private ownership of resources and allocation of goods and services through free markets.
Description of the benefits of capitalism	Description of the incentives generated by private ownership of resources and the benefits of allocating goods and services through free markets.
Social and Individual Behavior	
Promotion of collective effort/decisions	Praise or exaltation of the virtues of collective effort.
Promotion of individual effort/decisions	Praise or exaltation of the virtues of individual effort or behavior.
Distrust of entrepreneurship	Emphasis on the potential negative consequences of private entrepreneurship and free enterprise such as income inequality and environmental damage.
Rejection of consumerism	The idea that people should not purchase goods and services in even greater amounts.
Politics	
Patriotism	Strong preference for one's country (including domestically produced goods and services) and distrust of anything foreign.
Glorification of the political leader or <i>caudillo</i>	Praise, applause or exaltation of the current political leader or <i>caudillo</i> .