

When Polarization Trumps Civic Virtue:
Partisan Conflict and the Subversion of Democracy by
Incumbents*

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Abstract

We propose a novel explanation for the most prevalent form of democratic breakdown after the end of the Cold War: the subversion of democracy by incumbents. In the classics of democratization research as well as in mainstream democracy promotion practice, the public's disapproval is assumed to serve as a check on incumbents' temptations to subvert democracy. We explain why this check fails in polarized societies. In the latter, voters have a strong preference for their favorite candidate, which makes it costly for them to punish an incumbent by voting for a challenger. Incumbents exploit this lack of credible punishment by manipulating the democratic process in their favor. By contrast, a mass of centrist voters provides precisely the kind of credible deterrent against manipulation that polarized societies lack. Our analysis of an original survey experiment conducted in Venezuela demonstrates that voters in polarized societies are indeed willing to trade off democratic principles for partisan interests and that their willingness to do so increases in the intensity of their partisanship. These findings suggest the need to re-evaluate conventional measures of public support for democracy and provide a new answer to a fundamental question about its survival: When can we reasonably expect the public to serve as a check on the authoritarian temptations of elected politicians?

“Inherent in all democratic systems is the constant threat that the group conflicts which are democracy’s lifeblood may solidify to the point where they threaten to disintegrate society.”

Lipset (1959, 83)

“There are two positions: those who fight for their homeland, which is socialism, and those who struggle to subjugate Venezuela under the bourgeoisie, these are the two roads.

Repolarization: we, the patriots, and they, the traitors.

We are united, a unification that is repoliticized and repolarizing.”

Hugo Chávez on his campaign strategy in the 2012 presidential election¹

1 Introduction

When democracies break down, they do so in two very different ways. The first and most extensively studied form of democratic breakdown is the military coup.² This is how the Chilean military brought down Salvador Allende’s government in 1973 and how the Egyptian military ousted president Mohamed Morsi in 2013. But as Table 1 shows, beginning in the 1990s, military coups have been surpassed as the modal form of democratic breakdown by executive takeovers. This second form of democratic breakdown typically entails the gradual subversion of democracy by an initially democratically elected incumbent, as illustrated by the recent rise of authoritarianism under Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Vladimir Putin in Russia, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey.³

Executive takeovers present a number of puzzles for our understanding of the breakdown of democracy. First, unlike military coups, executive takeovers are initiated by

¹“Las 5 líneas de acción política.” *El Universal*, January 22, 2011.

²See e.g. Cheibub (2007), Marinov and Goemans (2014), and Houle (2016).

³Most research on democratization ignores the sharp differences between these two paths to democratic breakdown. For exceptions, see Maeda (2010), Ulfelder (2010), and Svobik (2015). For a recent review of the research on democratic breakdowns and electoral authoritarianism, see Gandhi and Lust-Okar (2009) and Lust and Waldner (2015).

Table 1: Democratic breakdowns via military coups versus executive takeovers, 1973-2016

| Period | Number of Democratic Breakdowns | | Critical Values at 5% Significance Level ^a |
|-----------|---------------------------------|---------------------|---|
| | Military Coups | Executive Takeovers | |
| 1973-1979 | 10 | 16 | [8,18] |
| 1980-1989 | 14 | 16 | [10,20] |
| 1990-1999 | 12* | 24* | [12,24] |
| 2000-2009 | 4** | 15** | [5,14] |
| 2010-2015 | 4* | 11* | [3,11] |

Note: Based on the Freedom House’s *Freedom on the World* country ratings, 1973-2016. A democratic breakdown corresponds to a downward change from Freedom House’s “Free” or “Partly Free” rating. See the Supplementary Appendix for details.

^a H_0 : “Military coups and executive takeovers are equally likely.” Critical values were computed using the binomial distribution. Significance levels *10%, **5%,***1% refer to a two-sided hypothesis test.

an elected incumbent and rarely involve the threat of force or overt violence. This suggests that incumbents are able to subvert democracy by exploiting vulnerabilities *within* the democratic process. Yet we know little about what these vulnerabilities are and why incumbents succeed in exploiting them in some democracies but not others. Second, executive takeovers tend to proceed gradually, often over several election cycles, and under vocal criticism by the opposition, the press, and foreign observers. Voters therefore have an opportunity to reject undemocratic incumbents without resorting to costly measures such as protest or violence – by simply voting them out of office. So why don’t they? Finally and even more perplexingly, many undemocratic incumbents, including the examples of Chávez, Putin, and Erdoğan, enjoy significant and genuine popular support.⁴ Why do voters who routinely profess pro-democratic values simultaneously support incumbents intent on subverting democracy?

⁴Using list experiments, [Frye et al. \(2016\)](#) find that genuine support for Vladimir Putin in early 2015 was around 80%, which is consistent with similarly high public approval ratings reported throughout Putin’s tenure in office. [Treisman \(2011\)](#) shows that until 2014 Putin’s popularity mirrored Russia’s economic performance.

We address these puzzles by identifying a new mechanism that explains why high levels of polity-wide political polarization make democracies vulnerable to subversion by elected incumbents. In polarized societies, most voters have a strong preference for their favorite candidate or party, with only a few indifferent between those competing. Under these circumstances, an incumbent anticipates that electoral manipulation will present his supporters with a dilemma that may work to his advantage, even if most of them value democracy for its own sake: each of the incumbent’s supporters understands that punishing the incumbent for manipulating the democratic process by not voting for him amounts to supporting a challenger that she detests. The more polarized a society is, the greater the number of the incumbent’s supporters who resolve this dilemma by nonetheless voting for the incumbent – effectively tolerating his undemocratic behavior and allowing him to gain an unfair electoral advantage. Put differently, political polarization presents incumbents with a structural opportunity to subvert democracy: they can manipulate the democratic process in their favor and get away with it!

We develop the microfoundations for this argument with the help of a formal model that departs from existing research on democratization and electoral authoritarianism in several, key ways.⁵ In order to capture the process of subversion of democracy by incumbents, we focus on pre-election manipulation rather than election-day fraud. Existing models of electoral malpractice focus primarily on the latter.⁶ Yet when incumbents subvert democracy, they do so primarily by pre-election manipulation, with election-day fraud typically serving as a measure of last resort – deployed only after pre-election

⁵For related research on electoral authoritarianism, see [Blaydes \(2010\)](#), [Gandhi and Lust-Okar \(2009\)](#), [Knutsen, Nygard, and Wig \(2017\)](#), [Magaloni \(2006\)](#), [Levitsky and Way \(2010\)](#), [Miller \(2013\)](#), [Schedler \(2013\)](#), and [Singer \(Forthcoming\)](#).

⁶See e.g. [Fearon \(2011\)](#), [Little \(2012\)](#), [Little, Tucker, and LaGatta \(2014\)](#), [Chernykh and Svulik \(2015\)](#), and [Rundlett and Svulik \(2016\)](#). For exceptions, see [Egorov and Sonin \(2017\)](#), [Gehlbach and Sonin \(2014\)](#), [Gehlbach and Simpson \(2015\)](#), [Guriev and Treisman \(2015\)](#), [Little \(2017\)](#), and [Rozenas \(2016\)](#).

manipulation fails.⁷

A key challenge for modelling pre-election manipulation is the multitude of the often incremental and complementary forms that it takes: candidate and voter intimidation, media control, the abuse of state resources for campaigning, and electoral engineering, to name just a few. Our analysis tackles this complexity by focusing on two theoretically consequential aspects of pre-election manipulation common in its qualitative and historical accounts. First, the many forms of pre-election manipulation jointly add up to an “uneven playing field” that systematically undermines the fairness of electoral competition by favoring the incumbent (Levitsky and Way 2010; Schedler 2002). Second, unlike election-day fraud, pre-election manipulation can be observed by a subset of voters before the actual vote takes place. Such “informed” voters can in turn take the incumbent’s manipulation into account when deciding how to vote. In a departure from most models of electoral malpractice, we allow for the possibility that citizens genuinely value democracy and hence free and fair elections.⁸ Together, these theoretical assumptions imply that an incumbent contemplating pre-election manipulation must weigh the benefits of the unfair electoral advantage due to manipulation against the votes that he might lose if his own supporters, put off by manipulation, vote for the challenger instead.

This framework yields a new answer to a fundamental question about the survival of democracy: When can we realistically expect the public to serve as a check on the authoritarian temptations of elected politicians? Beginning with Almond and Verba (1963), a large research agenda spanning the study of civic attitudes, social capital, and civil society has proposed one answer: democracy survives when opportunistic elites are

⁷To document this claim we list and classify all instances of electoral malpractice that we encountered while compiling the data for Table 1 in the Supplementary Appendix. For a comprehensive discussion of electoral malpractice, see especially Schedler (2002) and Simpson (2013).

⁸This assumption is often implicit in research on electoral fraud and post-election protests; see e.g. Bunce and Wolchik (2010).

kept in check by an electorate with strong pro-democratic values.⁹ Our arguments and evidence suggest that this line of reasoning is critically incomplete. It fails to account for the fact that electoral competition often confronts voters with a choice between two valid but potentially conflicting considerations: democratic values and partisan interests. More specifically, by manipulating the democratic process, incumbents can present their supporters with the Faustian choice between an anti-democratic incumbent whose policies or leadership they find appealing and a pro-democratic but unappealing challenger. In a sharply polarized electorate, a significant fraction of the incumbent’s supporters will be willing to sacrifice fair, democratic competition in favor of reelecting an incumbent who champions their interests. Voters in polarized societies become pro- or anti-Chávez, Erdoğan, or Trump first and democrats only second.

Our framework further naturally accounts for one of the most prominent propositions in the study of democratization: that a strong middle class is essential for democratic stability (Lipset 1959; Moore 1966). The literature on the role of the middle class in democratization has been plagued by an overabundance of plausible conjectures but a dearth of explicit microfoundations.¹⁰ Our focus on the distribution of partisan preferences suggests one such microfoundation: The mirror image of a polarized society is one with a large mass of ideological centrists. Because centrists see little difference between competing candidates on ideological or policy grounds, they can “afford” to place a greater weight in their voting decisions on electoral fairness than can more partisan voters. In turn, centrists are the first to abandon an undemocratically acting incumbent in favor of a challenger, and a large enough mass of ideological centrists provides precisely the kind of credible deterrent against manipulation that a polarized society lacks.¹¹

⁹See [Welzel and Inglehart \(2007\)](#) for a review.

¹⁰For exceptions, see [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2005\)](#), [Ansell and Samuels \(2014\)](#), [Boix \(2003\)](#), and [Debs and Morrison \(2015\)](#).

¹¹While our notion of ideological centrists is both narrower and more precise than that of the “middle

In order to evaluate our framework empirically, we designed a survey experiment that examines a key mechanism in our theoretical model: that even pro-democratically minded voters are willing to trade off democratic principles for their partisan interests when confronted with a choice that pits the two against each other. As a part of a nationally representative survey of Venezuelan voters conducted in the fall of 2016, we asked respondents to choose between two presidential candidates whose characteristics varied along several dimensions. All but two of these were chosen to generate artificial differences that would conceal that our main interest was in how respondents' choices were shaped by variation in candidates' proposals about economic policies and pro- or undemocratic political reforms. Venezuela is a prominent instance of an incumbent-driven subversion of democracy, which for reasons that we discuss in detail in Section 3 offers a fortuitous opportunity to evaluate our arguments at the level at which they are hypothesized to operate – that of the individual voter.

One advantage of an experimental design that is closely guided by an explicit theoretical framework is that we are able to both estimate the causal effects of candidates' economic and democratic platforms on voters' decisions as well as to structurally identify key parameters from our model. Consistent with our theoretical predictions, we find that i) voters indeed value democracy for its own sake, but that ii) they are willing to accept undemocratic political reforms when these are proposed by a candidate whose economic policies appeal to their interests, and iii) that voters' willingness to accept such a trade-off is increasing in the intensity of their partisanship.

These findings are both statistically and politically significant: Our estimates imply, for instance, that a candidate who proposes to maintain the current, heavily partisan

class," the manner by which it contributes to democratic stability is remarkably close to that originally articulated by Lipset more than 50 years ago: "A large middle class tempers conflict by rewarding moderate and democratic parties and penalizing extremist groups" (1959, 66).

composition of the Venezuelan Electoral Commission and Supreme Court instead of reforming these institutions to be politically impartial incurs a penalty equivalent to the loss of voters whose left-right positions span as much as 50% of the ideological distance between the former president Hugo Chávez and the current opposition leader Henrique Capriles. As suggested by our theoretical analysis, however, most such defectors are ideological moderates. Unlike strong partisans, these voters can “afford” to put their concerns about the fairness of electoral competition ahead of their economic interests or political ideology and, crucially, appear to be no different from more intense partisans in their support for or understanding of democracy. Strong partisans, meanwhile, stick with their preferred candidate even if he adopts an undemocratic platform and are effectively trading-off democratic principles for their partisan interests. Alarming, the large 50% ideological distance spanned by moderate defectors translates into as little as a 20% drop in the anti-democratic candidate’s vote share due to the extreme polarization of the Venezuelan electorate.

Our finding that a significant fraction of ordinary Venezuelans are willing to trade off democratic principles for their partisan interests most likely understates the implications of this phenomenon for the vulnerability of polarized democracies to subversion by elected incumbents. After all, voting against an undemocratic candidate when doing so goes against one’s economic interests is one of the least costly forms of opposition to authoritarianism. Nonetheless, one-half of the respondents in our experiment are not even willing to go so far as to *say* they would do so. If they are unwilling to vote against an anti-democratic candidate in a hypothetical survey scenario, they are unlikely to vote any differently in a real-world election, and they are almost certainly not going to engage in the many crucial but much costlier forms of resistance to authoritarianism – like protest or civil disobedience.

These results call into question the conventional wisdom about the robustness of public support for democracy around the world. After all, Venezuela has historically exhibited some of the highest levels of support for democracy in Latin America as measured by conventional, direct-questioning techniques (Canache 2012). Our analysis of standard questions like “Democracy may have problems but it is the best system of government; do you agree?” confirms this. Yet once confronted with candidates that, just like Venezuelan politics today, effectively implies that voters choose between a candidate that is democratic and one that espouses their economic interests, one-half of respondents chose the latter. In other words, they are partisans first and democrats only second. Alarming, even the strongest form of directly measured support for democracy – as in the answer “Strongly Agree” to the question just above – is no better at predicting the vote for the more democratic candidate than the flip of a coin! We propose that this discrepancy emerges because conventional techniques are subject to social desirability bias (c.f. Schedler and Sarsfield 2007) and, by design, fail to capture voters’ willingness to trade off democratic values for other, potentially competing political ends that are at the heart of our theory. We may therefore think of our candidate-choice experiment as an alternative technique for measuring support for democracy that, instead of relying on answers to direct questions, infers it from respondents’ choices in scenarios that mimic real-world political decision-making.

2 The Model

Consider the following electoral manipulation game between an incumbent, a challenger, and a large number of voters. We distinguish between *uninformed* voters, who make up an α fraction of the electorate, and *informed* voters, who make up the remaining $1 - \alpha$

fraction; $0 < \alpha < 1$. Informed voters base their voting decisions on the candidate’s policy platform and the fairness of electoral competition. Specifically, each voter i evaluates the two candidates’ policy platforms according to the negative quadratic distance function $-(x_i - x_j)^2$, where x_i denotes i ’s ideal policy and $x_j \in \{x_A, x_B\}$ denotes the incumbent’s and the challenger’s policy platform, respectively.

While informed voters may differ in their preferred policies, they all agree that electoral competition should be democratic and prefer candidates that compete fairly. Specifically, each informed voter suffers the disutility $-\gamma\mu^2$ if the incumbent manipulates electoral competition in his favor and wins.¹² The term μ reflects the amount of the incumbent’s *manipulation*, while $\gamma \geq 0$ is a *civic virtue* parameter that captures informed voters’ sensitivity to manipulation.¹³ Thus in an electorate with civic virtue γ , an informed voter with the ideal point x_i obtains the payoff

$$u_i(x_j, \mu) = \begin{cases} -(x_i - x_A)^2 - \gamma\mu^2 & \text{if the incumbent wins; and} \\ -(x_i - x_B) & \text{if the challenger wins.} \end{cases} \quad (1)$$

In contrast to informed voters, uninformed voters’ electoral decisions are driven entirely by the incumbent’s degree of manipulation μ .¹⁴ We do not directly model the specific mechanism by which manipulation sways uninformed voters due to the large number of distinct forms that pre-election manipulation can take. Instead, we simplify our analysis by

¹²Our assumption that only the incumbent can engage in manipulation captures the most frequent real-world scenarios: Incumbents have disproportionately greater access to the tools of manipulation by virtue of controlling the state apparatus. A model in which both the incumbent and the challenger can manipulate is a straightforward extension of the current setting.

¹³We intentionally keep this parameter constant across voters in our theoretical analysis. In order to focus on the role of polarization, we want to set aside the possibility that the incumbent may engage in manipulation by exploiting an uneven concern about the fairness of electoral competition across the electorate. We examine the plausibility of this assumption in our analysis of the candidate-choice experiment in Section 3.

¹⁴This distinction between informed and uninformed voters is inspired by the models of special interest politics pioneered by [Baron \(1994\)](#) and [Grossman and Helpman \(1996\)](#).

assuming that when the incumbent does manipulate, he gains an electoral advantage among a subset of the electorate – the uninformed voters – and we capture the effectiveness of the various “technologies” of manipulation via the parameter M . Specifically, we assume that the incumbent obtains a $\frac{1+\mu M+\epsilon}{2}$ share of uninformed voters’ votes, while the challenger obtains the remaining $\frac{1-\mu M-\epsilon}{2}$ share. We interpret ϵ as a small, exogenous perturbation that occurs at the time of the election and is commonly believed to be uniformly distributed on the interval $(-\sigma, \sigma)$, where $0 < \sigma < \frac{1}{2}$.¹⁵ Thus in the absence of manipulation, $\mu = 0$, uninformed voters split evenly between the two candidates. We let $0 \leq \mu \leq 1$ and $0 \leq M \leq 1$ so that in the extreme case when $\mu = 1$, the incumbent obtains the vote of at most all α uninformed voters.

In order to examine the implications of the electorate’s polarization for manipulation, we let $1 - \pi - \delta$ fraction of voters’ ideal points x_i be distributed uniformly along the interval $(-\frac{1}{2}, \frac{1}{2})$, with the δ fraction of voters’ ideal points forming a mass point at the center of this interval, and the remaining π fraction of voters’ ideal points forming two equally sized mass points at the limits of the interval; $0 \leq \delta < 1$ and $0 \leq \pi < 1$. The parameter δ thus captures the electorate’s ideological *centrism*: an electorate with δ close to 1 has a large mass of centrist voters; an electorate with $\delta = 0$, by contrast, effectively lacks such voters. Meanwhile, the parameter π reflects the electorate’s *polarization*: in an electorate with π close to 1, most voters’ ideal points are located at ideologically opposed poles.

The two candidates are policy-motivated in the Calvert-Wittman sense ([Calvert 1985](#); [Wittman 1983](#)): each has an ideal policy θ_j that he would like to implement but understands that he will get to do so only if he wins the election. Each candidate’s payoff is decreasing in the absolute distance between his ideal policy θ_j and the policy x

¹⁵There are a number of plausible microfoundations for this assumption: new events or information may change the size of uniformed voters or the composition of voters who turn out may change (for non-political reasons like the weather, for instance.)

implemented by the winner of the election, $u_j(x) = -|x - \theta_j|$.¹⁶ Without a loss of generality, we let the incumbent's (challenger's) favorite policy be to the right (left) of the expected median voter, $\theta_B < 0 < \theta_A$.

At the beginning of the game, the two candidates simultaneously announce their policy platforms x_A and x_B , and the incumbent chooses an amount of manipulation μ . Next, voters vote, the exogenous shock ϵ is realized, and the candidate that obtains the most votes wins and implements the policy he proposed.

Before moving further, note that the payoff structure in (1) has a number of political consequences. First, it implies that if the candidates propose different platforms, informed voters who are ideologically closer to the incumbent than the challenger will be willing to tolerate a positive amount of manipulation in exchange for the incumbent's more favorable policy. To see this, suppose that $x_A > x_B$ and observe that for $\mu > 0$ informed voter i is indifferent between the incumbent and the challenger if

$$-(x_i - x_A)^2 - \gamma\mu^2 = -(x_i - x_B)^2,$$

or equivalently if i 's ideal policy is

$$x_i = \frac{x_A + x_B}{2} + \frac{\gamma\mu^2}{2(x_A - x_B)}.$$

Denote this *swing voter*'s ideal policy by $x_S(\mu)$. We see that informed voters to the right of the midpoint between the incumbent's and the challenger's platforms $\frac{x_A + x_B}{2}$ but to the left of the swing voter $x_S(\mu)$ favor the incumbent based on their policy preferences, yet are sufficiently put off by manipulation to vote for the challenger instead. The loss of informed

¹⁶Adopting a negative absolute instead of a negative quadratic distance payoff function allows us to characterize candidates' optimal platforms in closed form.

voters put off by manipulation is intentionally the only cost of manipulation to the incumbent in our setting.¹⁷ By contrast, informed voters whose ideal points are to the right of $x_S(\mu)$ tolerate the incumbent's manipulation because their distaste for it is outweighed by the ideological proximity of the incumbent's policies. Second, (1) implies that if the candidates were to propose identical platforms, all informed voters would side with the challenger for any positive amount of manipulation μ as long as the civic virtue parameter γ is nonzero.

In order to present the political intuitions behind our results in the most transparent manner, we start by examining two benchmark cases and then move to the general framework outlined above. The first benchmark case restricts attention to scenarios in which $\delta = 0$ and $\pi > 0$ in order to focus on how the electorate's degree of polarization shapes the incumbent's incentives for manipulation. The second benchmark case assumes $\delta > 0$ and $\pi = 0$ and in turn focuses on how the electorate's centrism affects incentives for manipulation. In both cases, we simplify our presentation by assuming that the candidates' platforms are exogenously fixed to be symmetric around the electorate's median. We will relax this assumption when we examine the general setting with endogenous platforms in [Section 2.4](#).

¹⁷We could easily introduce a direct cost of manipulation, but to keep our analysis as simple as possible, we focus exclusively on the indirect cost of manipulation: the defection of the incumbent's supporters to the challenger.

2.1 Benchmark I: Polarization Trumps Civic Virtue

Suppose that $\delta = 0$ and $\pi > 0$. Then the vote shares that the two candidates obtain when the incumbent manipulates at μ are

$$\begin{aligned} V_A &= (1 - \alpha) \left[(1 - \pi) \left(\frac{1}{2} - x_S(\mu) \right) + \frac{\pi}{2} \right] + \alpha \left(\frac{1 + \mu M + \epsilon}{2} \right) \quad \text{and} \\ V_B &= (1 - \alpha) \left[(1 - \pi) \left(x_S(\mu) - \left[-\frac{1}{2} \right] \right) + \frac{\pi}{2} \right] + \alpha \left(\frac{1 - \mu M - \epsilon}{2} \right) \end{aligned}$$

where V_A and V_B refer to the incumbent's and the challenger's vote share, respectively.

Because candidate platforms are fixed for now, the only strategic decision is the incumbent's optimal choice of the amount of manipulation μ , i.e. one that maximizes his probability of victory,

$$\Pr(V_A - V_B \geq 0) = \Pr(\alpha(\mu M + \epsilon) - 2(1 - \alpha)(1 - \pi)x_S(\mu) \geq 0),$$

which, given our assumptions about the distribution of ϵ , is

$$\Pr\left(\epsilon \geq \frac{2(1 - \alpha)(1 - \pi)x_S(\mu)}{\alpha} - \mu M\right) = \frac{\sigma - \left[\frac{2(1 - \alpha)(1 - \pi)x_S(\mu)}{\alpha} \right] - \mu M}{2\sigma}. \quad (2)$$

Maximizing the incumbent's probability of victory with respect to μ , we obtain

$$\mu^* = \frac{\alpha}{1 - \alpha} \times \frac{Mx_A}{\gamma(1 - \pi)}. \quad (3)$$

The expression for μ^* summarizes the key result of this benchmark scenario: the equilibrium amount of manipulation μ^* as well as the resulting probability of the incumbent's victory are increasing in the level of polarization π . This is because the more

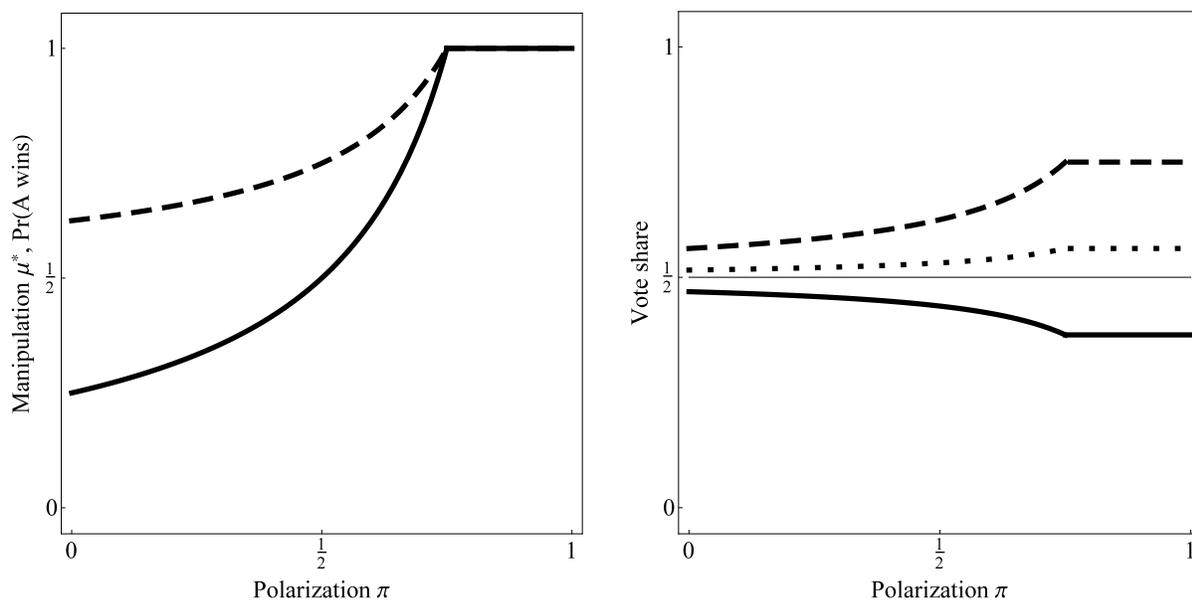


Figure 1: Equilibrium amounts of manipulation μ^* (solid) and the probability of the incumbent’s victory (dashed) as a function of polarization π (left panel); the incumbent’s vote share among informed (solid), uninformed (dashed), and all (dotted) voters as a function of polarization π (right panel)

polarized an electorate is, the greater is the fraction of the incumbent’s “core” supporters for whom it would take an extreme amount of manipulation to abandon the incumbent in favor of the challenger. Figure 1 illustrates these comparative statics.¹⁸ The left panel plots the equilibrium amount of manipulation μ^* and the corresponding probability of the incumbent’s victory as a function of polarization π . The right panel plots the resulting (expected) equilibrium share of informed, uninformed, and all votes for the incumbent as a function of polarization π . The flat discontinuities result from our assumption that $\mu \leq 1$ and the fact that the probability of the incumbent’s victory can be at most one.¹⁹ That is, there are levels of polarization π so large that the incumbent will optimally manipulate to the fullest extent, which may in turn assure his certain victory.

¹⁸Parameter values: $\alpha = 1/2$, $\gamma = 1$, $\sigma = 1/4$, $M = 1/2$, $x_A = 1/4$, $x_B = -1/4$.

¹⁹The levels of π that yield these corner solutions are stated in the supplementary appendix and could be avoided by adding a direct cost of manipulation that would make $\mu > 1$ suboptimal for any parameter value.

The remaining comparative statics are also intuitive. A greater share of uninformed voters α , a more effective technology of manipulation M , and more extreme candidate platforms all result in higher equilibrium amounts of manipulation. Civic virtue γ , meanwhile, has the opposite effect on μ^* because it raises voters' sensitivity to manipulation. Note, however, that even at arbitrarily low levels of polarization π , the equilibrium amount of manipulation μ^* is positive. It is only in the limit, as α or M go to zero or as γ goes to infinity that μ^* tends to zero. This is a consequence of the fact that even when $\pi = 0$, there is a significant degree of ideological disagreement within the electorate as informed voters' ideal points are distributed uniformly along the interval $(-\frac{1}{2}, \frac{1}{2})$ – lacking a mass of ideological centrists. The second benchmark scenario examines the implications of such an ideologically centrist mass of voters.

2.2 Benchmark Case II: Centrists as a Bulwark against Manipulation

Suppose that $\delta > 0$ and $\pi = 0$. Then when the incumbent manipulates at $\mu > 0$, the two candidates obtain the vote shares

$$\begin{aligned} V_A &= (1 - \alpha) \left[(1 - \delta) \left(\frac{1}{2} - x_S(\mu) \right) \right] + \alpha \left(\frac{1 + \mu M + \epsilon}{2} \right) \quad \text{and} \\ V_B &= (1 - \alpha) \left[(1 - \delta) \left(x_S(\mu) - \left[-\frac{1}{2} \right] \right) + \delta \right] + \alpha \left(\frac{1 - \mu M - \epsilon}{2} \right). \end{aligned}$$

The key political consequence of this benchmark scenario is that as long as candidates' platforms are located symmetrically around the median, the δ fraction of informed centrist voters are indifferent between the two candidates on policy grounds and vote solely based on whether the incumbent engages in manipulation. If he does, then these voters vote for the challenger. Manipulation is now beneficial to the incumbent only if it makes up for the

loss of the δ fraction of informed centrists. A reasoning analogous to that in the preceding scenario implies that the incumbent's optimal amount of manipulation is

$$\mu^* = \frac{\alpha}{1 - \alpha} \times \frac{Mx_A}{\gamma(1 - \delta)}.$$

This amount of manipulation implies a probability of victory that is smaller than $\frac{1}{2}$ – the probability of victory that the incumbent could obtain by refraining from manipulation – as long as

$$\delta \geq \frac{1}{2} \left(1 - \sqrt{1 - \frac{2\alpha^2 M^2 x_A}{(1 - \alpha)^2 \gamma}} \right). \quad (4)$$

Put differently, a large enough mass of informed ideological centrists forestalls manipulation entirely. Paralleling the comparative statics from the previous scenario, the threshold on the right-hand side of (4) is more demanding when the share of uninformed voters α is large, the technology of manipulation M is effective, candidate platforms are extreme, and when civic virtue γ is low.

2.3 Polarization and Centrists Considered Simultaneously

The more general case that accounts for both polarization and a mass of ideological centrists, $0 \leq \delta < 1$ and $0 \leq \pi < 1$, amounts to a combination of the two benchmark scenarios considered so far. The incumbent's optimal amount of manipulation is now

$$\mu^* = \frac{\alpha}{1 - \alpha} \times \frac{Mx_A}{\gamma(1 - \delta - \pi)},$$

and ideological centrists forestall manipulation if

$$\delta \geq \frac{1 - \pi}{2\gamma} - \frac{1}{2} \sqrt{(1 - \pi)^2 - \frac{2\alpha^2 \pi^2 M^2 x_A}{(1 - \alpha)^2 \gamma}}.$$

2.4 Manipulation and Platform Choice by Policy-Motivated Candidates

The scenarios analyzed so far assume exogenously fixed and symmetric candidate platforms. Given this simplification, the only strategic decision in the model was for the incumbent to choose an amount of manipulation μ that maximizes his probability of victory. This, in fact, closely matches a frequently evoked rationale for electoral manipulation: to eliminate (Schedler 2013) or insure against (Rundlett and Svobik 2016) the uncertainty that is inherent in electoral competition (see e.g. Przeworski 1991, 13). Intuitively, the polarization of candidates' platforms has emerged as a factor that amplifies the incumbent's incentives to manipulate elections.

These simplifications raise the question of whether candidates would indeed adopt platforms that diverge from the median, if given the choice, and how the incumbent's ability to manipulate might affect the location of those platforms. In order to examine these questions, we now build on one classic microfoundation for platform divergence: the assumption of policy-motivated candidates (Calvert 1985; Wittman 1983).²⁰ Due to the complexity of this analysis, we only present here key results of an analysis that, like the first benchmark case, focuses on the role of polarization and we defer further analysis to the Supplementary Appendix.

The assumption of policy-motivated candidates implies that, as long as the incumbent and the challenger adopt platforms that fall between their ideal policies, $x_A, x_B \in [\theta_B, \theta_A]$,

²⁰This rationale corresponds well to our motivating cases. The political trajectories of both Chávez and Erdoğan show evidence of a genuine belief in the political ideologies that would inform their platforms as candidates, including serving prison sentences for acting on those beliefs (for staging a military coup inspired by a leftist revolutionary ideology in Chávez's case; for reciting an Islamic poem in public in Erdoğan's case.)

their respective payoffs are

$$\begin{aligned}
U_A(x_A, x_B, \mu) &= -\Pr(V_A - V_B \geq 0)(\theta_A - x_A) - \Pr(V_A - V_B < 0)(\theta_A - x_B) \quad \text{and} \\
U_B(x_A, x_B, \mu) &= -\Pr(V_A - V_B \geq 0)(x_A - \theta_B) - \Pr(V_A - V_B < 0)(x_B - \theta_B).
\end{aligned}$$

Maximizing the incumbent's payoff with respect to μ and both candidates' payoff with respect to their own platforms x_A and x_B results in three equations about three unknowns, the unique solutions to which are

$$\mu^* = \left(\frac{\alpha}{1 - \alpha} \right)^2 \frac{\sigma M}{2\gamma(1 - \pi)^2}, \quad x_A^* = \left(\frac{\alpha}{1 - \alpha} \right) \frac{\mu^* M + \sigma}{2(1 - \pi)}, \quad \text{and} \quad x_B^* = \left(\frac{\alpha}{1 - \alpha} \right) \frac{\mu^* M - \sigma}{2(1 - \pi)}. \quad (5)$$

We see that, as in our benchmark scenario, the equilibrium amount of manipulation μ^* is increasing in polarization π . But additionally, polarization results in equilibrium platforms that are closer to the incumbent's than to the challenger's ideal point. As a benchmark, compare the equilibrium platforms in (5) to those that would obtain in the absence of manipulation. When the incumbent manipulates, both candidates' equilibrium platforms shift to the right – that is, closer to the incumbent's ideal point – and the amount of this shift is increasing in polarization π .

This platform shift obtains because manipulation now relates to the candidates' optimal policy choice via two channels. The first is direct: the incumbent uses manipulation to compensate for the voters that he loses as a result of adopting a platform that diverges from the median toward his favorite policy. The second channel is indirect: once the incumbent diverges from the median toward his favorite policy, the challenger is compelled to shift his own platform toward the incumbent's, in order to draw voters' attention away from the differences between their platforms and instead to the incumbent's manipulation. The more polarized the electorate is, the closer are *both* candidates'

equilibrium platforms to where the incumbent would like them to be.

3 Empirical Analysis

We now empirically assess our theoretical framework’s predictions about the relationship between political polarization, the voters’ willingness to tolerate undemocratic behavior by elected politicians, and the subversion of democracy by incumbents. We start by examining a key mechanism in our benchmark model: that voters are willing to trade off democratic principles for their partisan interests and that their willingness to do so is increasing in the intensity of their partisanship. In order to examine this mechanism at the level at which it is hypothesized to operate – that of the individual voter – we designed a candidate-choice experiment that we embedded in a nationally representative survey of Venezuelan voters in the fall of 2016.²¹

Venezuela is one of the most prominent contemporary instances of subversion of democracy by incumbents. Venezuela also represents a confluence of several favorable conditions for evaluating our propositions about the role of political polarization in this process. First, key aspects of Venezuela’s political devolution since Hugo Chávez’s ascent to the presidency in 1998 correspond closely to our theoretical framework.²² While Chávez and his successor Nicolás Maduro have taken advantage of a wide “menu of manipulation” (Schedler 2002), virtually all such manipulation takes place before elections and until the summer of 2017, there was no evidence of significant election-day fraud.²³ This is unique in

²¹The survey took place in October (pilot) and December (main round) 2016.

²²For a review and analysis of these developments, see McCoy and Myers (2004), Lupu (2010), Corrales and Penfold (2015), Haggard and Kaufman (2016, Chapter 8), and Hawkins (2016); for an analysis of the breakdown of the party system in Venezuela that facilitated Chávez’s rise, see Coppedge (1994) and Lupu (2016, Chapter 5).

²³Almost every year between 2009 and 2016, Freedom House’s annual report on Venezuela included a variation of the following statement: “While the act of voting [in Venezuela] is relatively free and the count is fair, the political opposition is forced to operate under extremely difficult conditions, and the separation

the context of democratic backsliding and fortuitous for our theoretical focus on incumbent-driven pre-election manipulation (as opposed to election-day fraud by both the incumbent and the opposition.)

Second, political conflict in Venezuela takes place between two major opposing blocks, consisting of the incumbent government led today by Chávez's successor Maduro with the socialist PSUV and the opposition alliance MUD represented by Henrique Capriles. Paralleling our formal setting, the two blocks reflect a single, primarily economic left-right axis of conflict within a highly polarized electorate.

Third, due to these developments, major political and economic reforms are on the political agenda in Venezuela in the fall of 2016. This was opportune in terms of research-design, as it allowed us to credibly ask survey respondents about scenarios in which competing candidates advocate fundamental democratic or anti-democratic reforms as well as sharp shifts in economic policy. At the same time, repression of the opposition in Venezuela had not gone so far as for us to witness reluctance by respondents to sincerely state their political views.

Finally, Venezuela's political trajectory over the past two decades contradicts established wisdom about the role of democratic experience, income, and democratic culture in the study of democratic survival: Until Chávez's ascent to power in 1998, it was one of the longest-lived democracies in Latin America (becoming democratic after the fall of Pérez Jiménez's military dictatorship in 1958); with a GDP per capita around \$13,000 before the fall of oil prices following the recession of 2008-9, it was one of the richest democracies in Latin America (and in fact the richest democracy to ever break down); and even in 2016, it exhibited some of the highest levels of public support for democracy in Latin America (with more than 80% of Venezuelans agreeing with the statement

of powers is nearly nonexistent."

“Democracy may have problems but it is the best system of government.”)

The candidate-choice experiment was introduced by the following statement: “In elections, one must often choose among imperfect candidates. Suppose that in the next presidential election you will have to choose between the following two candidates. This is the first time that either candidate is participating in national politics.” Each respondent was then presented with a choice between two candidates with five randomized attributes each: age, number and gender of children, economic policy, proposed reforms to the electoral system, and favorite sport. After seeing these attributes, respondents were first asked to choose the candidate for whom they would vote and then to give an approval rating of each candidate on a scale from 1 to 10.²⁴

Our main interest was to infer from respondents’ support for candidates their willingness to trade off their democratic values – via the nature of the candidate’s proposed reform to the electoral system – for policies that appeal to their economic interests. The candidates’ proposed reforms to the electoral system dealt with either the composition of the Supreme Court and the Electoral Commission (no reforms, the nomination of new, impartial members, or the nomination of more Chavistas) or the updating of the electoral register (to include all voters with the right to vote or to exclude those without a proper or complete address). The candidates’ economic policy platforms concerned either the operation of social welfare programs known as “Bolivarian missions” (their closing or expansion), price controls (their abandoning or expansion), or the national oil company (its privatization or not.) In order not to prime or frame these platforms as democratic/undemocratic, left/right, or pro-government/pro-opposition, we intentionally avoided using any such labels.

²⁴The candidate-choice experiment belongs to a broader category of survey-experimental techniques known as conjoint experiments (Hensher, Rose, and Greene 2015). While their use along with methodological research on the prerequisites for proper causal identification has recently grown (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2015a,b), their applications have been predominantly atheoretical.

The three politically irrelevant attributes – the candidates’ age, children, and favorite sport – were introduced to add realism to candidates’ profiles and – primarily – to generate artificial differences between candidates that would allow respondents to conceal a potentially sensitive reason for their choices (e.g. voting for a candidate who proposes an undemocratic electoral reform only because he offers a favorable economic policy.)²⁵

In the remainder of our analysis, we focus on scenarios in which the candidates’ economic proposals concerned either the expansion or the closing of Bolivarian missions (we label these policies L and R for left and right, respectively), and where proposed reforms of the electoral administration included the nomination of new impartial members to the Supreme Court and the Electoral Commission or no reforms to these institutions (we label these proposals D^+ and D^- for more or less democratic, respectively.) Each respondent was first presented with the LD^+ v. RD^+ scenario, which we treat as a control, and was then, at random, asked to consider either the LD^- v. RD^+ or the LD^+ v. RD^- scenario.²⁶ The outcome that we focus on here is the respondents’ votes; see the appendix for an analysis that accounts for abstentions and voters’ ratings of candidates (rather than votes.)

As a first step, consider the simple comparison between the control scenario LD^+ v. RD^+ and the two treatment scenarios, LD^- v. RD^+ and LD^+ v. RD^- . Our model implies that i) the adoption of an undemocratic platform by either candidate should result in a decrease in support for that candidate, but ii) that this decrease should be driven primarily by ideological moderates as these are the least willing to trade off democratic values for their partisan interests. An overall comparison of the three scenarios supports both parts of this proposition. First, the average support for the rightist candidate in the control scenario is approximately 42%; it increases by 17% and declines by

²⁵These attributes were randomized only across combinations that generated differences across the two candidate profiles.

²⁶The candidate-choice experiment included both within-subject assignment of candidate pairs (as in this case) and across-subject assignments (see the discussion below and in the appendix.)

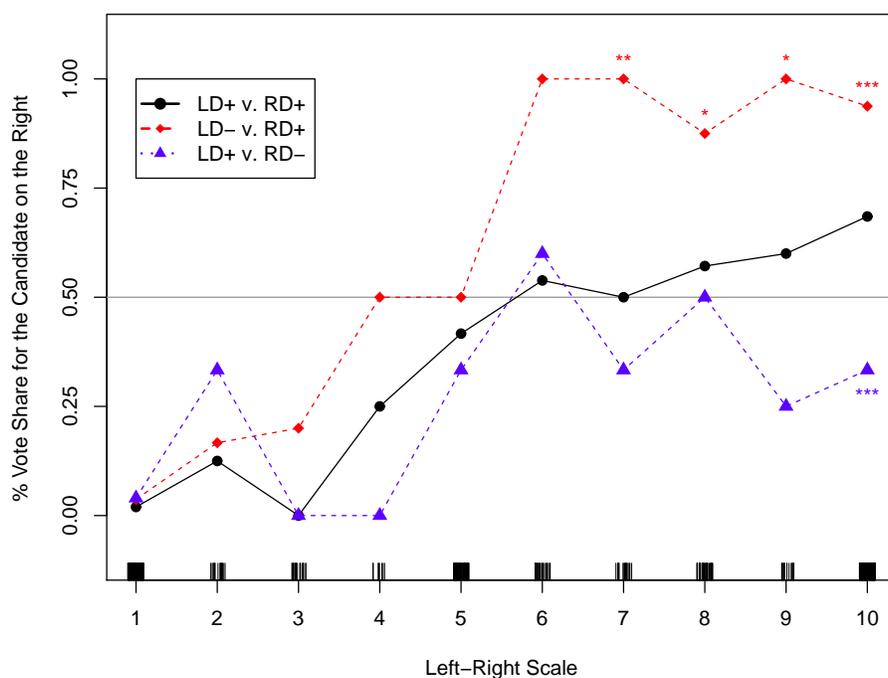


Figure 2: Percentage of respondents voting for the candidate on the right by the respondent’s economic left-right self-placement on a 10-point scale. Asterisks denote significance levels (*10%, **5%, ***1%) for the difference in means between the treatment and control scenarios

13% when the leftist and rightist candidate adopts an undemocratic platform, respectively. Both effects are not only statistically but also politically significant:²⁷ as long as the undemocratic platform would generate less than 9% in an unfair vote share, the candidate proposing this platform would ultimately be defeated.

Furthermore, Figure 2 provides preliminary support for our claim that the intensity of voters’ partisan preferences is associated with an increasing willingness to trade off democratic values for their partisan interests. For each of the three treatment scenarios, Figure 2 plots the average vote share for the rightist candidate by each of the ten levels of the economic left-right scale on which we asked our respondents to locate themselves. We

²⁷The two effects are significant at the 1% level. While the increase in support for the more democratic candidate is larger in the LD^- v. RD^+ than in the LD^+ v. RD^- scenario, the two magnitudes are not statistically distinguishable from each other, suggesting a comparable effect for the two treatments.

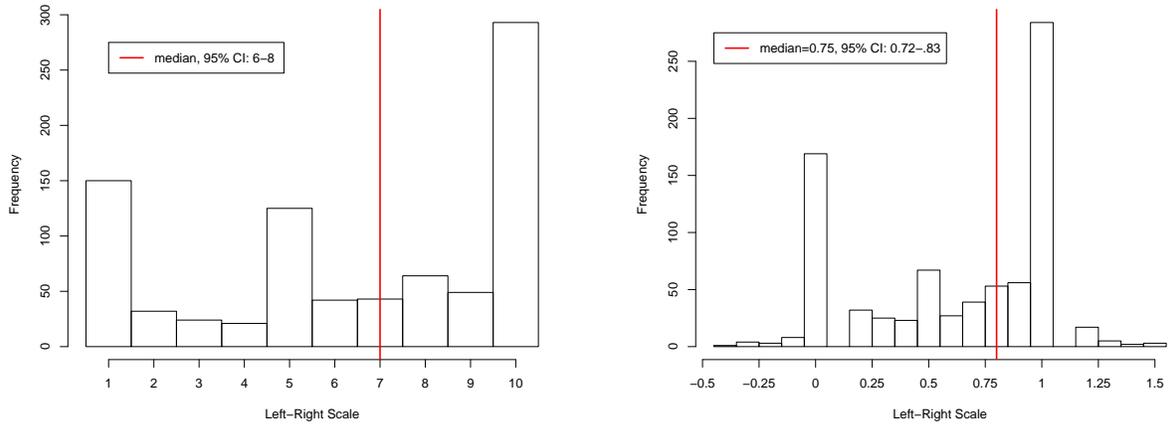


Figure 3: The left-right distribution of voters: on the original 1-10 scale (left), the consistent, anchored, and normalized scale on which 0 corresponds to each voters’ placement of Hugo Chávez and 1 of Henrique Capriles (right)

see that some of the largest differences between the control scenario and the two treatments occur above the value 6; by contrast, some of the smallest differences occur below the value 3. The former contains both ideological moderates (especially for values 6-8, at which voters in the control scenario are close to indifferent between the leftist and the rightist candidate) and a mix of moderate and extreme rightists (for values 9-10). Meanwhile, the latter region (below the value 3) contains the most extreme leftist voters. Especially voters on the left appear to be willing to trade off democratic principles for a candidate who caters to their economic interests.

The comparisons portrayed in Figure 2 have a number of limitations. First, their validity is conditional on the precision of the economic left-right scale along which respondents in our experiments have located themselves. In order to improve this precision, we take advantage of anchoring questions that asked each respondent to locate Hugo Chávez, Nicolás Maduro, Henrique Capriles, as well as one abstract leftist and one abstract rightist candidate on a ten-point left-right scale before locating themselves. We then excluded any respondents who exhibited inconsistent ideological perceptions of these

candidates (e.g. locating Chávez to the right of Capriles), anchored the left-right scale so that the values 0 and 1 correspond to each voter's placement of Hugo Chávez and Henrique Capriles, respectively, and then normalized the distance between the two points to one. Figure 3 compares the original distribution (left) with the consistent, anchored, and normalized distribution (right) of the respondents' left-right self-placement. While both histograms exhibit similar structural features (e.g. a significant degree of left-right polarization), the anchored and normalized version corrects for the arbitrariness that comes with asking respondents to locate themselves along an abstract scale with many values. It also highlights that a significant number of respondents place themselves on this scale by identifying their own left-right position with that of Chávez or Capriles or by placing themselves equidistantly between the two. The downside of this adjustment is that our anchored and normalized scale contains as many as 55 distinct values, rendering comparisons of average support across individual categories difficult due to the small number of respondents in each category.

A further limitation of the comparisons in Figure 2 arises out of the fact that the average support for any candidate is naturally bound to be between 0 and 1. In turn, the small differences between the three scenarios at the left end of the left-right scale in Figure 2 may be an artifact of the candidate support averages in this region being close to 0 and therefore hard to compare with the large differences observed at the right end of the scale, where the average levels of support for the rightist candidate in the control scenario allow for a significant amount of departure in either direction.

Finally, the comparisons in Figure 2 provide only limited clues about the key quantity of interest in our theoretical analysis: the rate at which voters are willing to trade off their commitment to democracy for their partisan interests.

In order to account for these limitations, we take advantage of a close correspondence

between our theoretical model, the candidate-choice experiment, and the random utility model of discrete choice. Recall from Section 2 that voter i votes for candidate j even if j manipulates the election as long as $u_i(x_j, \mu_j) \geq u_i(x_{\sim j})$ or equivalently as long as

$$2(x_j - x_{\sim j})x_i - (x_j^2 - x_{\sim j}^2) - \gamma\mu_j^2 \geq 0.$$

Above, we continue to assume that at most one candidate (denoted by j above) engages in manipulation, but since the identity of the candidate that manipulates is randomly assigned in the candidate-choice experiment, we will no longer refer to one candidate as the incumbent and the other the challenger but instead let j refer to the economic platform of the less democratic candidate, $j = \{L, R\}$. Treating $u_i(x_j, \mu)$ and $u_i(x_{\sim j})$ as the deterministic components of the voter i 's payoff and adding to each an error term that is independently drawn from type 1 extreme value distribution, we obtain the following logit formulation for voter i 's probability of voting for the candidate on the right:²⁸

$$\Pr(i \text{ votes for } R | x_i, \tau_1, \tau_2) = \text{logit}^{-1}(\beta_0 + \beta_1\tau_L + \beta_R\tau_2 + \beta_3x_i), \quad (6)$$

In (6), the control scenario LD^+ v. RD^+ serves as the baseline, the two treatments LD^- v. RD^+ and LD^+ v. RD^- correspond to the dummies τ_L and τ_R , respectively, and x_i respondent i 's ideal point on the left-right scale. In turn, $\beta_0 = -(x_R^2 - x_L^2)$, $\beta_1 = \gamma\mu_L^2$, $\beta_2 = -\gamma\mu_R^2$, and $\beta_3 = 2(x_R - x_L)$.

Estimates of these logit parameters, which are presented in Table 2, allow us to identify key parameters from our benchmark model. The swing voter $x_S(\mu)$ is (by definition) indifferent between the two candidates. In the control condition (when $\tau_1 = \tau_2 = 0$)

²⁸See e.g. [Cameron and Trivedi \(2005, 476-478, 486-487\)](#).

Table 2: Estimation results for a logit model of the candidate-choice experiment

| Logit | Coef. | S.E. | 95% C.I. |
|---|--------------|-------------|------------------|
| β_0 (<i>intercept</i>) | -1.367*** | 0.210 | (-1.791, -0.967) |
| β_1 (<i>LD⁻ v. RD⁺</i>) | 0.871*** | 0.262 | (0.363, 1.391) |
| β_2 (<i>LD⁺ v. RD⁻</i>) | -0.682*** | 0.258 | (-1.196, -0.182) |
| β_3 (<i>i's left-right position</i>) | 1.770*** | 0.247 | (1.297, 2.266) |
| <i>N</i> | 459 | | |
| <i>Log-likelihood</i> | -268.883 | | |

Note: The dependent variable is a vote for the candidate on the right.

Significance levels: *10%, **5%, ***1%.

therefore, the swing voter's ideal point $x_S(0)$ satisfies

$$\beta_0 + \beta_3 x_S(0) = 0 \quad \text{or equivalently} \quad x_S(0) = -\frac{\beta_0}{\beta_3}.$$

Meanwhile, the parameters β_1 and β_2 associated with the two treatment conditions correspond to two separate estimates of the disutility $\gamma\mu_j^2$ that voters experience when candidate j manipulates. This “manipulation penalty” is therefore

$$\gamma\mu_L^2 = \beta_1 \quad \text{and} \quad \gamma\mu_R^2 = -\beta_2,$$

when candidate L and R manipulates, respectively.

The two treatment conditions also yield two swing voter ideal point estimates, $x_S(\mu_L)$ and $x_S(\mu_R)$. Just as in the case of the swing voter $x_S(\mu)$ associated with the control condition, $x_S(\mu_L)$ and $x_S(\mu_R)$ correspond to the ideal points of voters who are indifferent between the two candidates in the treatment conditions LD^- v. RD^+ and LD^+ v. RD^- ,

Table 3: Estimates of model parameters

| Model Parameters | Mean | S.E. | 95% C.I. |
|------------------|-------|-------|----------------|
| $x_S(0)$ | 0.776 | 0.086 | (0.614, 0.955) |
| $x_S(\mu_L)$ | 0.277 | 0.129 | (0.010, 0.521) |
| $x_S(\mu_R)$ | 1.168 | 0.142 | (0.916, 1.476) |
| $\gamma\mu_L^2$ | 0.870 | 0.262 | (0.358, 1.385) |
| $\gamma\mu_R^2$ | 0.683 | 0.257 | (0.177, 1.190) |
| x_L | 0.333 | 0.119 | (0.122, 0.588) |
| x_R | 1.218 | 0.092 | (1.025, 1.388) |

Note: Standard errors and confidence intervals obtained via simulation.

respectively,

$$x_S(\mu_L) = -\frac{\beta_0 + \beta_1}{\beta_3} \quad \text{and} \quad x_S(\mu_R) = -\frac{\beta_0 + \beta_2}{\beta_3}.$$

Finally, note that the expressions for β_0 and β_3 constitute a set of two equations about two unknowns that solves for the left-right location of the two candidates' policy proposals

$$x_L = -\frac{\beta_0}{\beta_3} - \frac{\beta_3}{4} \quad \text{and} \quad x_R = -\frac{\beta_0}{\beta_3} + \frac{\beta_3}{4}.$$

Estimates of these model parameters are presented in Table 3 and Figure 4. We see that when the only difference in the candidates' platforms concerns their left-right economic policies (this is the control scenario LD^+ v. RD^+), the swing voter's ideal point is located at $x_S(0) = 0.776$. This implies a narrow victory for the leftist candidate since the (experimental) electorate's median is $x_M = 0.75$. The adoption of an undemocratic platform by either candidate shifts the swing voter in the direction predicted by our model. When the leftist candidate's platform becomes less democratic, LD^- v. RD^+ , the swing voter shifts left to $x_S(\mu_L) = 0.277$, implying the defection from the leftist candidate of all voters with ideal points between $x_S(0)$ and $x_S(\mu_L)$. Analogously, when it is the rightist

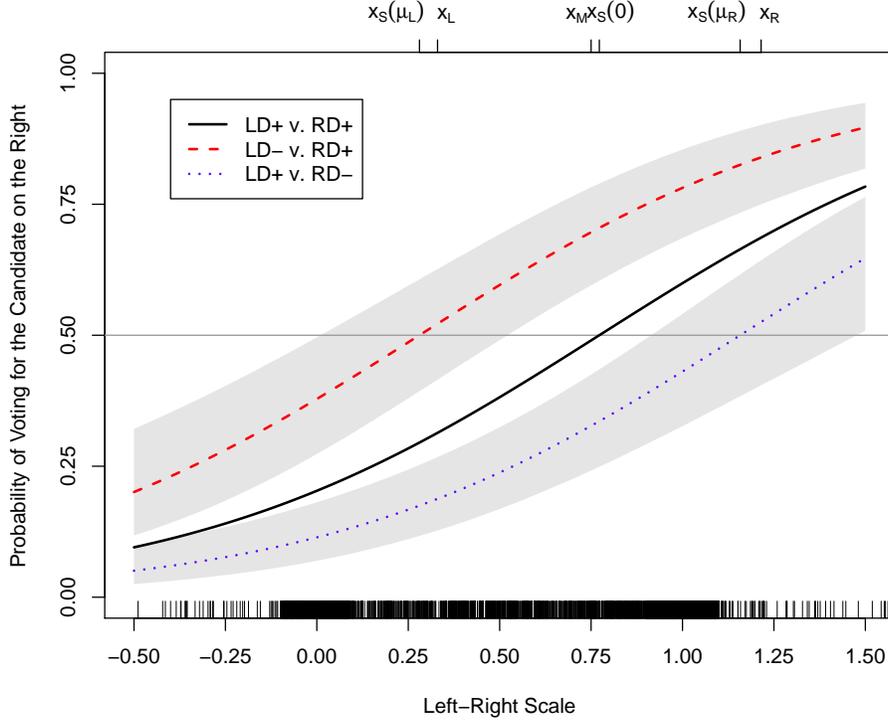


Figure 4: The probability of voting for the candidate on the right as a function of voters' left-right position in the candidate-choice experiment

candidate who becomes less democratic, LD^+ v. RD^- , the swing voter shifts rightward to $x_S(\mu_R) = 1.168$.

In both cases, these shifts are not only statistically but also politically significant: the adoption of an undemocratic platform by either candidate amounts to a shift in the swing voter corresponding to about a half of the ideological distance between Hugo Chávez (0 on our left-right scale) and Henrique Capriles (1 on our left-right scale)! Furthermore, if manipulation were inconsequential – that is, if it did not yield any unfair advantage to the incumbent – these shifts would result in an electoral defeat for the less democratic candidate: when the leftist candidate's platform becomes less democratic, the swing voter $x_S(\mu_L)$ shifts to the left of the electorate's median x_M , implying a defeat for the leftist candidate. The converse holds true when the rightist candidate's platform is less

democratic.

The estimated manipulation penalties causing these shifts are both positive, $\gamma\mu_L^2 = 0.870$ and $\gamma\mu_R^2 = 0.683$, and statistically different from zero. This implies that voters indeed value democracy for its own sake – a key assumption in our theoretical analysis. Furthermore, while the estimate of $\gamma\mu_L^2$ is greater than that of $\gamma\mu_R^2$, the two manipulation penalties are statistically indistinguishable from each other, suggesting a comparable sensitivity to undemocratic platforms among voters to the left and right of the swing voter $x_S(0)$.²⁹ This is evident in Figure 4: the swing voter $x_S(0)$, who was (by definition) indifferent between the two candidates in the control condition, votes for the more democratic candidate in either of the two treatment conditions with a greater than 70% probability.

But as our theoretical analysis emphasized, a commitment to democracy alone does not guarantee that each voter is going to vote for the candidate with the more democratic platform. The more extreme voters' partisan positions are, the more likely it is that their policy preferences will override their concern about democracy. Figure 5 highlights this dynamic. The vertical axis plots the estimated probability of voting for the more democratic candidate for the two treatment conditions LD^- v. RD^+ and LD^+ v. RD^- . The swing voter shifts associated with the two treatment conditions allow us to separate those voters whose policy preferences trump their commitment to democracy from those for whom the opposite holds. Specifically, we see that when the leftist candidate adopts the less democratic platform, voters to the left of $x_S(\mu_L)$ stick with him in spite of that – in effect, these voters are leftists first and democrats only second. By contrast, voters between $x_S(\mu_L)$ and $x_S(0)$ are sufficiently put off by the undemocratic platform proposed by their policy-wise preferred candidate to defect from him and vote for the more democratic –

²⁹See the Supplementary Appendix for a further analysis of this result when the effect of each treatment condition is estimated separately.

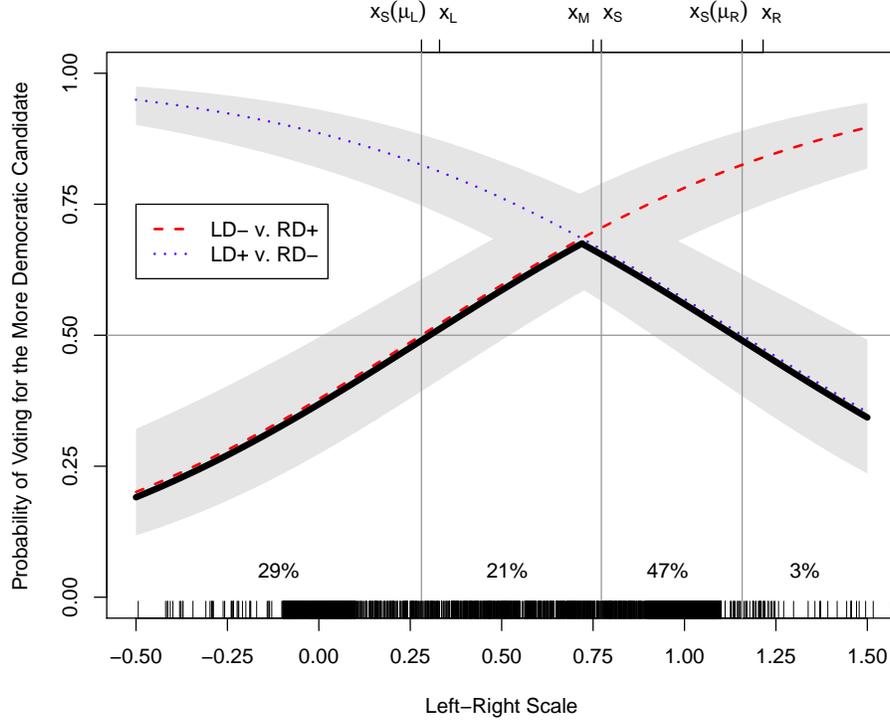


Figure 5: The probability of voting for the more democratic candidate as a function of voters' left-right position in the candidate-choice experiment. The contour highlighted in black measures effective support for democracy

albeit policy-wise more distant – candidate. These voters are democrats first and leftists only second. Finally, voters to the right of $x_S(0)$ do not change their vote at all: they favor the rightist candidate based on his policies alone and the adoption of an undemocratic platform by the leftist candidate only strengthens their resolve to vote against him. An analogous partition obtains when it is the rightist candidate who adopts the less democratic platform.

These results corroborate our theoretical claims about the crucial, pro-democratic role played by ideological moderates. Voters who are close to being indifferent between the two candidates on policy grounds – i.e. those close to the control condition swing voter $x_S(0)$ – vote for the more democratic candidate regardless of that candidate's partisanship. But as we move away from $x_S(0)$, partisanship plays an increasing role, and it dominates concerns

over democracy for voters whose left-right preferences lie outside the interval $[x_S(\mu_L), x_S(\mu_R)]$.

This is why polarized democracies are vulnerable to subversion by elected politicians – in spite of potentially strong overall support for democracy among their electorate. At the bottom of Figure 5, we list the actual distribution of our respondents in the four politically salient regions of each plot. We see that about 32% of our respondents are partisans first and democrats only second. Crucially, the vast majority of these extreme partisans – 29% of the 32% – are on the left. This implies that if an election were to present Venezuelan voters with the LD^- v. RD^+ scenario from our candidate-choice experiment, the leftist candidate could adopt the undemocratic platform and nonetheless win – as long as a his control over the Electoral Commission and the Supreme Court would be effective enough to make up for the 21% of voters who would defect to the rightist candidate. Such a defection would serve as a much stronger check on undemocratic behavior by the rightist candidate, whose manipulation technology would have to make up for the defection of as many as 47% of voters. Because our survey is representative, this implies that the Venezuelan electorate is particularly vulnerable to the subversion by a leftist – consistent with Venezuelan political development since Hugo Chávez’s election to the presidency in 1998.

3.1 Support for Democracy or Cheap Talk?

Our finding that a significant fraction of ordinary Venezuelans are willing to trade off democratic principles for their partisan interests points to a number of limitations of conventional measures of support for democracy. The prevailing approach measures support for democracy via direct questions, as in “Democracy may have problems but it is

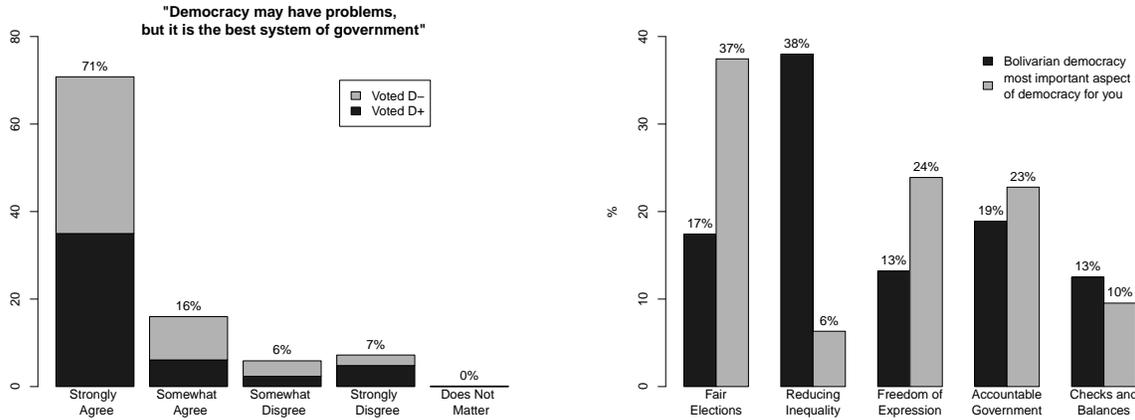


Figure 6: Support for democracy as measured by agreement with the statement “Democracy may have problems but it is the best system of government ” versus voting for the more democratic candidate in the candidate-choice experiment (left); the most important aspect of “Bolivarian democracy” versus the most important aspect of democracy for the respondent (right)

the best system of government; do you agree?”³⁰ This approach, by design, precludes any measurement of the respondents’ willingness to trade off democratic principles for other, competing ends. Equally concerning is the vulnerability of direct questions to the social desirability bias: citizens in most democracies have been taught that the only politically correct answer to the above question is some form of “I agree” (Schedler and Sarsfield 2007).

As a part of our survey, we asked several standard, direct questions about support for democracy and authoritarian alternatives. A comparison of respondents’ answers to these questions and their choices in the candidate-choice experiment raises serious doubts about the behavioral relevance of the former. The left panel in Figure 6 plots the distribution of such conventionally measured support for democracy for the theoretically most interesting subset of respondents: those for whom supporting the more democratic candidate implies

³⁰Questions about support for democracy are sometimes accompanied by questions about support for authoritarian alternatives and an analysis of the consistency of answers to both types of questions; see e.g. Inglehart (2003) and Norris (2011).

voting against their economic interests. We can see that 87% of these respondents either “strongly” or “somewhat” agree with the statement “Democracy may have problems but it is the best system of government.” Yet 52% of the same respondents are nonetheless willing to vote for the *less* democratic candidate in our candidate-choice experiment when doing so is aligned with their economic interests. Furthermore, there is no statistically significant correlation between the intensity of a respondent’s directly measured support for democracy and his vote for the more democratic candidate in the candidate-choice experiment. Even the strongest form of directly measured support for democracy – the answer “Strongly Agree” in Figure 6 – is no better at predicting the vote for the more democratic candidate than the flip of a coin! In sum, conventional measures of support for democracy appear to be behaviorally irrelevant and thus potentially misleading as indicators of voters’ willingness to resist the authoritarian tendencies of elected politicians.³¹

A potential objection to the above conclusion is that ordinary Venezuelans may have a poor or simply different understanding of democracy than implied by its classic liberal conception. After all, by the time of our study, Venezuelans have experienced more than 15 years of “Bolivarian democracy,” Hugo Chávez’s alternative to liberal democracy that emphasizes direct citizen participation and aims to eliminate social inequalities. In order to investigate this possibility, we asked our respondents both about what “they think Bolivarian democracy means” and about the “aspects of democracy most important for them.”³² The right panel in Figure 6 plots the distribution of the five possible answers to

³¹This is particularly alarming in light of the fact that Venezuelans exhibit some of the highest (conventionally measured) levels of support for democracy in Latin America (Canache 2012). Consistently with this research, 86% of our respondents agreed with the statement “Democracy may have problems but it is the best system of government” and 86% disagreed with the statement “Today, our country is going through difficult times. Would it be justified for the president to close the National Assembly and govern alone?”

³²The exact phrasing of the two questions was “Which of the following statements would you say best captures the idea of Bolivarian democracy promoted by former president Hugo Chávez?” Available answers included “fair elections,” “that the government should reduce inequalities between the rich and the poor,”

both questions. The plurality of respondents (38%) correctly identify “reducing inequality” as the best description of “Bolivarian democracy.” Yet when it comes to the aspect of democracy most important for them, more than 70% of Venezuelans answer with a core component of liberal democracy (fair elections, freedom of expression, or check and balances) and another 23% stress accountable government. Only 6% cite reducing inequality. In other words, the vast majority of Venezuelans subscribe to the same conception of democracy that most political scientists do – consistent with a similar analysis conducted by [Canache \(2012\)](#) using data from almost a decade ago.

We can therefore interpret our candidate-choice experiment as an indirect technique that measures support for democracy by probing its robustness to competing political ends and avoids the social desirability bias by allowing respondents to conceal politically incorrect reasons for their choices. The contour that traces the lower of the two curves in [Figure 5](#) (highlighted in black) can be thought of as a measure of *effective support for democracy*: the percentage of Venezuelans willing to vote for the more democratic candidate even when doing so goes against their economic interests. The slope of this contour can in turn be taken as a key component for measuring what we term the *elasticity of support for democracy*: the percentage decline in the vote share of the more democratic candidate associated with one percent shift away from the swing voter.³³ The steeper this contour, the more vulnerable a society is to partisan polarization.

“freedom of expression for all,” “that the government should operate without corruption,” “that the President of the Republic, the National Assembly, and the judiciary should check each other.” The next question read: “And which of these is the most important aspect of democracy for you?”

³³A related quantity that is particularly informative is the fraction of the electorate for which “democrats first” outnumber “partisans first,” which is 68% in our case.

4 Conclusion

Beginning with [Przeworski \(1991\)](#), a growing literature approaches questions about democratic survival by studying the conditions under which democracy becomes “self-enforcing.” The latter obtains when key actors prefer the outcome of free and fair elections to some alternative, typically more costly and often violent means of resolving political conflicts.³⁴ In studies of electoral malpractice, this often entails protest, rebellion, or even outright civil war.³⁵ Yet when the primary manner by which democracies break down is their gradual subversion by elected incumbents, voters have at their disposal a relatively costless and more fundamental instrument of democratic self-defense: they can punish an incumbent with authoritarian tendencies by simply voting for a challenger.

According to our analysis, therefore, democracy becomes self-enforcing when incumbents anticipate that – were they to behave undemocratically – their own supporters would punish them by voting for a competitor. Our focus on the intensity of political conflict clarifies why this deterrent fails in polarized societies and why societies with a large mass of centrist voters benefit from precisely the kind of credible deterrent against undemocratic behavior that polarized ones lack. This conception of the role of ordinary people in democratic survival thus stands in stark contrast to much of recent research, in which the main axis of political conflict is between opportunistic or even anti-democratic elites and pro-democratic masses. By contrast, we emphasize that electoral competition often confronts voters with a choice between democratic values and partisan interests, and that a significant fraction of a polarized electorate may be willing to sacrifice the former in favor of the latter. In line with classic research on the role of societal cleavages in

³⁴See e.g. [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2005\)](#), [Boix \(2003\)](#), [Fearon \(2011\)](#), [Przeworski, Rivero, and Xi \(2015\)](#), and [Weingast \(1997\)](#).

³⁵For a formal treatment, see [Chernykh and Svoboda \(2015\)](#), [Cox \(2009\)](#), [Egorov and Sonin \(2017\)](#), [Little \(2012\)](#), [Londregan and Vindigni \(2008\)](#); for empirical research with a similar emphasis, see [Brancati \(2016\)](#), [Bunce and Wolchik \(2011\)](#), and [Robertson \(2011\)](#).

democratic stability (Lipset 1959, 83-96), our arguments imply that elites with authoritarian ambitions succeed in subverting democracy only when given that opportunity by a factious public.

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