

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. Combining cross-national data with an original survey experiment from Venezuela, we show 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 provide a new answer to a fundamental question about the survival of democracy: When can we reasonably expect the public to serve as a check on the authoritarian temptations of elected politicians?

[PRELIMINARY AND INCOMPLETE]

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“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 about his campaign strategy in the 2012 presidential election.¹

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, the military coup has been surpassed as the modal form of democratic breakdown by the executive takeover. 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 Erdoan in Turkey.³

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

¹ “Las 5 lneas deaccin poltica.” *El Universal*, January 22, 2011.

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

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

Table 1: Democratic breakdowns via military coups versus executive takeovers, 1973-2015

Period	Number of Democratic Breakdowns	Critical Values at 5% Significance Level ^a
	Military Coups	Executive Takeovers
1973-1979	13	[10,20]
1980-1989	16	[12,23]
1990-1999	13***	[15,27]
2000-2009	8***	[11,22]
2010-2015	5*	[5,13]

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 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.

democratic process. Yet we know little about precisely 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 Erdogan, enjoy significant and genuine popular support.⁴ Why do voters who routinely profess pro-democratic values in surveys simultaneously support anti-democratic incumbents?

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

⁴Using list experiments, Frye et al. (2016) for instance 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.

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 the incumbent's supporters value democracy for its own sake, each 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. 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!

This argument helps us answer 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 kept in check by an electorate with strong pro-democratic values.⁵

Our arguments and evidence suggest that this line of reasoning is seriously 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

⁵See [Welzel and Inglehart \(2007\)](#) for a review.

incumbent's supporters will be willing to sacrifice fair, democratic competition in favor of reelecting an incumbent who represents their interests. Voters in polarized societies become pro- or anti-Chávez, Putin, or Erdoan first and democrats only second.

In order to evaluate these intuitions empirically, we draw on both cross-national data and an original survey experiment. Our survey experiment 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 candidates whose characteristics varied along five dimensions. Three of these were chosen to generate artificial differences that would conceal that our main interest was in how respondents' choices were affected by variation in candidates' proposals about economic policies and pro- or undemocratic political reforms. Consistent with our theoretical analysis, 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 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, most of such defectors are ideological moderates. These voters can "afford" to put their concerns about the fairness of electoral

competition ahead of their economic interests and, crucially, appear to be no different from more intense partisans in their support for or understanding of democracy. Alarmingly, the large, 50% ideological distance spanned by such 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. Because our survey is representative, these estimates imply that as long as this form of electoral manipulation is effective enough to make up for those lost votes, an incumbent can engage in it in plain sight and nonetheless get away with it.

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 anti-democratic candidate when doing so goes against one’s economic interests is one of the least costly forms of opposition to authoritarianism. Nonetheless, a majority of 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.

[INCOMPLETE]

2 The Model

Consider the following electoral manipulation game between an incumbent, a challenger, and a large number of voters. Voters have preferences over policy and the fairness of electoral competition. Specifically, each voter i evaluates 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 denotes the incumbent's and the challenger's policy platform with $j = \{A, B\}$, respectively.

While voters may differ in their preferred policies, they all agree that electoral competition should be fair. Specifically, each voter suffers the disutility $-\gamma\mu^2$ when the incumbent manipulates electoral competition in his favor.⁶ The term μ reflects the level of *manipulation*, or more precisely, the excess vote share that the incumbent obtains due to manipulation. Thus $\mu = 0$ refers to fair competition; $\mu = 1$ refers to the case when the incumbent manipulates the election so much that he obtains 100% of the vote even though no voter would vote for him if the competition were fair. To focus on the most politically interesting and realistic scenarios, we assume that $0 \leq \mu \leq \frac{1}{2}$ and that a voter who is indifferent between the incumbent and the challenger votes for the challenger if $\mu > 0$ but flips a coin if $\mu = 0$. This precludes the possibility that an incumbent with no genuine support would nonetheless be able manipulate the election enough to obtain a majority of the vote and win.⁷

Meanwhile, $\gamma \geq 0$ is a *civic virtue* parameter that captures voters' sensitivity to manipulation.⁸ Thus in an electorate with civic virtue γ , a voter with the ideal point x_i obtains the payoff

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

⁶Our assumption that only the incumbent can engage in manipulation captures the most frequent real-world scenarios: Incumbents have greater access to the tools of manipulation by virtue of controlling the state bureaucracy.

⁷This can be interpreted a technological constraint on manipulation. Our analysis can easily be extended to account for scenarios when $\frac{1}{2} < \mu \leq 1$.

⁸We intentionally keep this parameter constant across voters. In order to focus on the role of polarization, we want to eliminate the possibility that the incumbent may engage in manipulation by exploiting an uneven concern about the fairness of electoral competition across the electorate.

The above payoff structure has a number of political consequences. First, it implies that if the candidates propose different platforms, voters who are ideologically closer to the incumbent will be willing to tolerate a positive level of manipulation in exchange for the incumbent's more favorable policy. This tolerance of manipulation will be increasing in voters' own ideological extremism. Second, the primary (and intentionally the only) cost of manipulation to the incumbent is the loss of voters who are put off by it.⁹ As a result, if the two candidates were to adopt identical platforms, then the only difference between them would be in whether the incumbent engages in manipulation, and if he does, the entire electorate would vote for the challenger (for any $\gamma > 0$.)

At the beginning of the game, the two candidates simultaneously announce their policy platforms x_A and x_B , and the incumbent also chooses a level of manipulation μ . Crucially, the distribution of voters' ideal points is only imperfectly known by the candidates at this point: the candidates know that a $(1 - \pi)$ fraction of voters' ideal points x_i are distributed uniformly along the interval $(-\frac{1}{2} + \epsilon, \frac{1}{2} + \epsilon)$, with the remaining π fraction of voters' ideal points forming two equally sized mass points at the limits of the interval $(-\frac{1}{2} + \epsilon, \frac{1}{2} + \epsilon)$. The term ϵ captures an exogenous shift in voters' ideological preferences that may occur between the time when candidates announce their platforms and when the election takes place.¹⁰ The value of ϵ is not known to the candidates when they announce their platforms (and the incumbent chooses a level of manipulation.) Instead, the candidates believe that ϵ is distributed uniformly on the interval $(-\sigma, \sigma)$, where $0 < \sigma < \frac{1}{2}$.¹¹ Meanwhile, the

⁹We 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.

¹⁰There are a number of plausible microfoundations for this frequently-made assumption: candidates may have only limited information about the distribution of voters' ideal points due to imperfections in polling, new events or information may emerge between when candidates announce their platforms and the election and shift voters' policy preferences, or the composition of voters who turn out may change (due to the weather, for instance.)

¹¹This ensures that the realized median $x_m = \epsilon$ will be within the interval $(-\frac{1}{2}, \frac{1}{2})$, which simplifies the analysis below.

parameter π , $0 \leq \pi < 1$, reflects the electorate's ideological *polarization*: in an electorate with $\pi = 0$, voters' ideal points are distributed evenly; by contrast, in an electorate with π close to 1, most voters' ideal points are located at ideologically opposed poles.

The timing of moves in this extensive game with imperfect information is as follows: First, the incumbent and the challenger announce their policy platforms x_A and x_B ; the incumbent additionally chooses a level of manipulation μ . Next, the exogenous shock ϵ is realized. Finally, voters vote.

2.1 The Benchmark Scenario

In order to present the implications of our setting in the simplest possible scenario, suppose for now that the candidates' platforms are exogenously set to be symmetric around the median and that candidates are driven by only one desire: to win the election.¹² Consider the incumbent's optimal choice of manipulation μ assuming, without a loss of generality, that the incumbent's platform is to the right of the challenger's, $x_A > x_B$. For $\mu > 0$, voter i is indifferent between the incumbent and the challenger as long as

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

or equivalently if the voter's ideal policy is

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

Denote this *swing voter*'s ideal policy by $x_S(\mu)$.

Figure 1 plots the swing voter's ideal point $x_S(\mu)$ on the horizontal axis as a function of

¹²Formally, the winner of the election obtains the payoff 1, while the loser obtains the payoff 0.

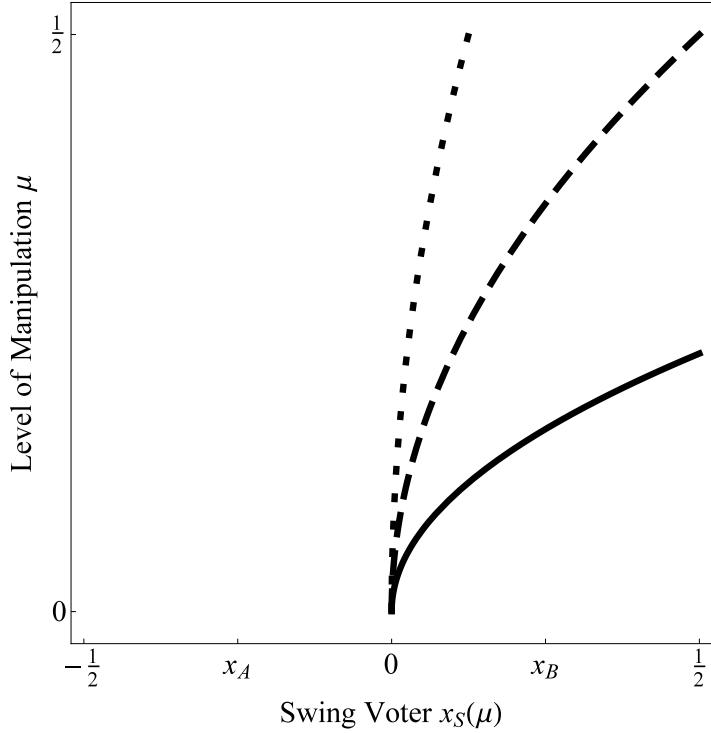


Figure 1: The swing voter's ideal point $x_S(\mu)$ (horizontal axis) as a function of manipulation μ (vertical axis) for the values of civic virtue $\gamma = \frac{1}{2}, 2$, and 10 (the dotted, dashed, and solid line, respectively)

manipulation μ (on the vertical axis).¹³ We see that when candidate platforms differ, voters whose ideal points are closer to the incumbent's platform balance this ideological proximity against their concern about election fairness. Specifically, 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. These voters therefore make up a fraction of the electorate corresponding to

$$(1 - \pi) \left[x_S(\mu) - \frac{x_A + x_B}{2} \right] = \frac{\gamma(1 - \pi)\mu^2}{2(x_A - x_B)}.$$

¹³Against convention, we plot the outcome variable $x_S(\mu)$ on the horizontal axis since ideal points are usually plotted horizontally. The parameter values are $x_A = -x_B = \frac{1}{4}$ and $\gamma = \frac{1}{2}, 1$, and 10 .

Intuitively, the amount of such “virtuous” voters is increasing in civic virtue γ and the level of manipulation μ but decreasing in polarization π and the distance between the candidates’ platforms $x_A - x_B$.

By contrast, 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. This segment of the electorate shrinks to zero for levels of manipulation that are so high that even the incumbent’s strongest partisans at the right pole defect from him; that is when $x_S(\mu) > 1/2 + \epsilon$. In order for manipulation to be beneficial to the incumbent in such cases, the incumbent would have to be able to make up for the voters driven away by manipulation by stealing a majority of the electorate’s vote – a possibility that is precluded by our assumption that $\mu \leq \frac{1}{2}$.

In turn, $x_S(\mu) \leq \frac{1}{2}$ in equilibrium, and the resulting vote shares for the two candidates are

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

where V_A and V_B refer to the incumbent’s and the challenger’s vote share, respectively.¹⁴

Manipulation is beneficial to the incumbent only when it makes up for the voters driven away by manipulation; that is when

$$V_A - V_B \geq 0 \quad \text{or equivalently when} \quad \mu - 2(1 - \pi) [x_S(\mu) - \epsilon] \geq 0.$$

Since we are treating the candidates’ platforms as exogenous for now, the incumbent’s

¹⁴Note that adding $\frac{\mu}{2}$ to V_A while subtracting from V_B results in a net μ vote share advantage for the incumbent, consistent with our earlier definition of μ .

optimal choice of μ is one that maximizes his probability of victory,

$$\Pr(V_A - V_B \geq 0) = \Pr(\mu - 2(1 - \pi)[x_S(\mu) - \epsilon] \geq 0),$$

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

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

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

$$\mu^* = \begin{cases} \frac{x_A - x_B}{2\gamma(1-\pi)} & \text{if } \pi < 1 - \frac{x_A - x_B}{\gamma}; \\ \frac{1}{2} & \text{if } \pi \geq 1 - \frac{x_A - x_B}{\gamma}. \end{cases} \quad (3)$$

The second case in (3) accounts for our assumption that $\mu \leq \frac{1}{2}$.¹⁵ Substituting $\mu = \frac{x_A - x_B}{2\gamma(1-\pi)}$ into the expression for the incumbent's probability of victory in (2) and using the assumption of symmetric platforms ($x_B = -x_A$), we see that, in equilibrium, the incumbent wins with the probability

$$\Pr\left(V_A - V_B \geq 0 | \mu = \frac{x_A - x_B}{2\gamma(1-\pi)}\right) = \begin{cases} \frac{1}{2} + \frac{x_A}{8\gamma\sigma(1-\pi)^2} & \text{if } \pi < 1 - \frac{1}{2}\sqrt{\frac{x_A}{\gamma\sigma}}; \\ 1 & \text{if } \pi \geq 1 - \frac{1}{2}\sqrt{\frac{x_A}{\gamma\sigma}}. \end{cases} \quad (4)$$

That is, there may be values of π so large that the equilibrium level of manipulation would result in the incumbent's certain victory. Since the fraction $\frac{x_A}{8\gamma\sigma(1-\pi)^2}$ is positive, manipulation always improves the incumbent's equilibrium chances of reelection.¹⁶

Expressions (3) and (4) summarize key results of our benchmark scenario: both the

¹⁵This corner solution could be avoided by adding a direct cost of manipulation that would make $\mu = \frac{1}{2}$ suboptimal for any parameter value (e.g. by assuming that this cost is $\alpha\mu^2$ with $\alpha > -\frac{\gamma}{16\sigma x_A}$.)

¹⁶When the incumbent refrains from manipulation and the candidates' platforms are symmetric around the median $x_M = \epsilon$, the incumbent's probability of reelection is $\frac{1}{2}$.

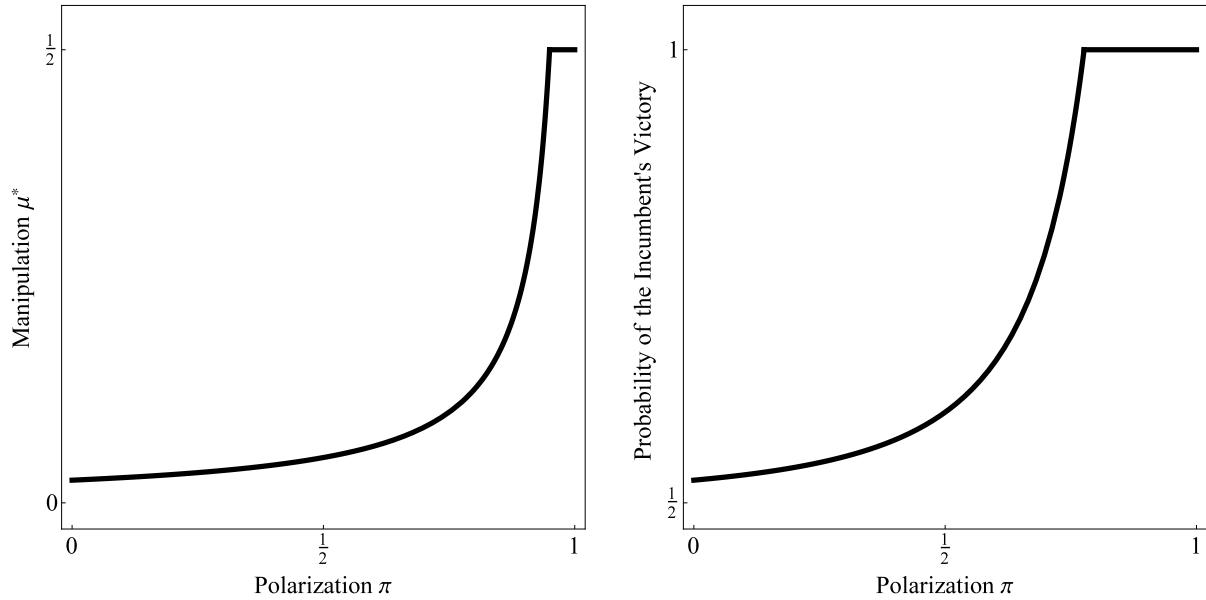


Figure 2: Equilibrium levels of manipulation μ^* and the probability of the incumbent’s victory as a function of polarization π

equilibrium level of manipulation μ^* and the probability of the incumbent’s victory are increasing in polarization π . This is because the more polarized an electorate is, the greater is the fraction of the incumbent’s “core” supporters for whom it would take extreme levels of manipulation to abandon the incumbent in favor of the challenger. Figure 2 summarizes these comparative statics by plotting the equilibrium level of manipulation μ^* (left) and the corresponding probability of the incumbent’s victory (right) as a function of polarization π .

The remaining comparative statics are also intuitive. The distance between the two candidates’ platforms ($x_A - x_B$, which reduces to $2x_A$ under the assumption of symmetric platforms) results in more manipulation. This is because the further apart the candidates’ platforms are, the stronger is the preference for one candidate over the other by voters located at the ideological poles; this allows the incumbent to manipulate more without large defections by his supporters to the challenger. Put differently, greater polarization of candidate platforms results in greater equilibrium levels of manipulation – and this effect is

distinct from that of the polarization of the electorate captured via π . Civic virtue γ , meanwhile, has the opposite effect on μ^* because it raises voters' sensitivity to manipulation and thus counteracts the effect of both types of polarization.

2.2 The Middle Class as a Bulwark against Manipulation

The above benchmark scenario yields one puzzling result: Even at arbitrarily low levels of polarization π , the equilibrium level of manipulation μ^* is positive. It is only in the limit, as γ goes to infinity, that μ^* drops to zero. This is a consequence of the fact that even when $\pi = 0$ (and hence there is no mass of voters at the ideological poles), there is a significant degree of ideological disagreement among the electorate as the voters' ideal points are distributed uniformly along the interval $(-\frac{1}{2} + \epsilon, \frac{1}{2} + \epsilon)$, with no mass of ideological centrists. We now examine the implications of the existence of such an ideologically centrist mass of voters for the incumbent's optimal choice of manipulation.

Consider a scenario in which, instead of being located at the ideological extremes, a mass of voters is located at the ideological center. More specifically, suppose that a $(1 - \delta)$ fraction of voters' ideal points are distributed uniformly along the interval $(-\frac{1}{2} + \epsilon, \frac{1}{2} + \epsilon)$, while the remaining δ fraction forms a mass point at $x_i = \epsilon$, with $0 \leq \delta \leq 1$. The parameter δ thus captures the electorate's ideological *centrism*: an electorate with δ close to 1 is one with a large mass of centrist voters; an electorate with $\delta = 0$, by contrast, effectively lacks such voters.

The key political consequence of this alternative scenario is that, as long as candidates' platforms are located symmetrically around the median $x_i = \epsilon$, the δ fraction of 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, these voters vote for the

challenger. For any $\mu > 0$, therefore, the vote shares of the two candidates are

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

Manipulation will now be beneficial to the incumbent only if it makes up for the loss of the δ fraction of centrist voters. A reasoning analogous to that in our benchmark scenario (see the appendix for details) implies that when the incumbent employs the optimal amount of manipulation, which is $\frac{x_A - x_B}{2\gamma(1-\delta)}$, his probability of victory is

$$\Pr \left(V_A - V_B \geq 0 \mid \mu = \frac{x_A}{\gamma(1-\delta)} \right) = \frac{1}{2} + \frac{x_A - 2\gamma\delta(1-\delta)}{8\gamma\sigma(1-\delta)^2}.$$

This probability is smaller than $\frac{1}{2}$ – the probability of victory that the incumbent could obtain by refraining from manipulation – as long as $x_A - 2\gamma\delta(1-\delta) \leq 0$, or equivalently, when

$$\delta \geq \frac{1}{2} - \sqrt{\frac{1}{4} - \frac{x_A}{2\gamma}}. \quad (5)$$

Put differently, a large enough mass of ideological centrists forestalls manipulation entirely. Paralleling the comparative statics from our benchmark scenario, the threshold on the right-hand side of (5) is more demanding when candidate platforms are polarized (as captured by $2x_A$) and when civic virtue γ is low.

2.3 Endogenous Platform Choice by Policy-Motivated Candidates

In both of the scenarios examined so far, the polarization of candidates' platforms has emerged as a factor that amplifies the incumbent's incentives to manipulate elections. To simplify our analysis, we have treated candidates' platforms as exogenous, and at times, limited attention to the even narrower case of platforms that are positioned symmetrically around the median. This raises the question of why candidates would ever adopt platforms that diverge from the median and whether the incumbent's ability to manipulate might affect the location and divergence of platforms. In order to examine these questions, we now incorporate into our benchmark scenario one classic microfoundation for platform divergence: the assumption of policy-motivated candidates (Calvert 1985; Wittman 1983).¹⁷

Suppose therefore that instead of being an end in itself, an electoral victory is only an instrument for each candidate to implement a policy close to the one that he favors. We denote candidate j 's ideal policy by θ_j and assume that his payoff from policy x implemented by the winner of the election is decreasing in the absolute distance between x and θ_j , $u_j = -|x - \theta_j|$.¹⁸ Without a loss of generality, we let the incumbent's favorite policy be to the right of the expected median voter and the challenger's to her left, $\theta_B < 0 < \theta_A$. In turn, as long as the incumbent and the challenger adopt platforms that are between these ideal policies, $x_A, x_B \in [\theta_B, \theta_A]$, their respective payoffs are

$$U_A(x_A, x_B, \mu) = -\Pr(V_A - V_B \geq 0)(\theta_A - x_A) - \Pr(V_A - V_B < 0)(\theta_A - x_B) \quad \text{and}$$

$$U_B(x_A, x_B, \mu) = -\Pr(V_A - V_B \geq 0)(x_A - \theta_B) - \Pr(V_A - V_B < 0)(x_B - \theta_B).$$

¹⁷This rationale corresponds well to the characteristics of candidates in our motivating cases: in Venezuela, Russia, and Turkey, among other cases, the political trajectories of Chávez, Putin, and Erdogan suggest a genuine belief in the political ideologies that would inform their platforms as candidates.

¹⁸Adopting a negative absolute instead of the more standard negative quadratic distance payoff function allows us to characterize candidates' optimal platforms in closed form.

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

$$\mu^* = \frac{\sigma}{\gamma(1-\pi)}, \quad x_A^* = \sigma \left[\frac{1}{2\gamma(1-\pi)^2} + 1 \right], \quad \text{and} \quad x_B^* = \sigma \left[\frac{1}{2\gamma(1-\pi)^2} - 1 \right]. \quad (6)$$

We see that, as in our benchmark scenario, the equilibrium level of manipulation μ^* is increasing in polarization π . But additionally, polarization results in equilibrium platforms that are closer to the incumbent's ideal point. As a benchmark, compare the equilibrium platforms in (6) to those that would obtain in the absence of manipulation, $\hat{x}_A = -\sigma$ and $\hat{x}_B = \sigma$.¹⁹ 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 (and decreasing in civic virtue γ .)

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 the voter's 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.

¹⁹This can be seen by either explicitly solving for equilibrium platforms in the absence of manipulation or by taking the limit of the results in (6) as $\gamma \rightarrow \infty$.

3 Candidate Choice Experiment

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 evaluate this mechanism, we embedded the following candidate choice experiment into a nationally representative survey of Venezuelan voters.²⁰ The experiment was introduced by the 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: age, number and gender of children, economic policy, reforms to the electoral system, and favorite sport. After seeing these attributes, respondents were first asked to choose the candidate whom they would vote for and then to give an approval rating to each candidate on the scale from 1 to 10.

Our main interest was to infer from respondents’ candidate choices 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 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

²⁰The survey took place in October (the pilot) and December (the main round) 2016.

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.

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.)²¹

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.²² The outcome that we focus on here are 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

²¹These attributes were randomized only across combinations that generated differences across the two candidate profiles.

²²The 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.)

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 the first part of this proposition. The average support for the rightist candidate in the control scenario is approximately 42%; it increases by 17% and declines by 13% when the leftist and rightist candidate adopts an undemocratic platform, respectively. Both effects are not only statistically but also politically significant:²³ 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.

Figure 3 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 3 plots the average vote share for the rightist candidate by each of the ten levels of the left-right scale on which we asked our respondents to locate themselves. We 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.

²³The 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.

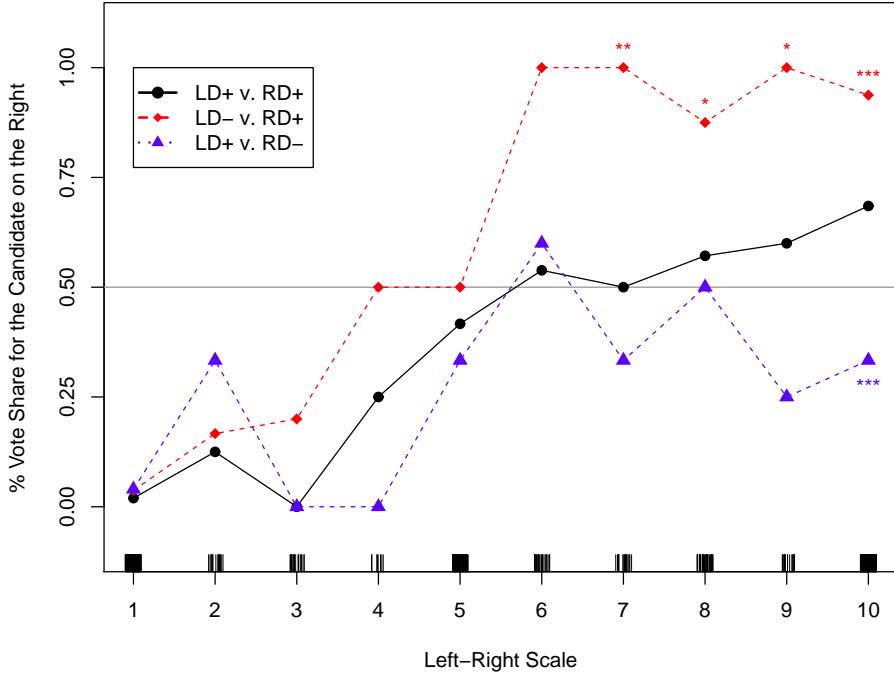


Figure 3: Percentage of respondents voting for the candidate on the right by the respondent's left-right self-placement on a 10-point scale. Asterisks denote significance levels (*10%, **5%, ***1%) for the difference in means between the treatment and control scenarios

The comparisons portrayed in Figure 3 have a number of limitations. First, their validity is conditional on the precision of the left-right scale along which respondents in our experiments have located themselves. In order to improve this precision, we included in our survey experiment 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 the 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 4 compares the original distribution (left) with the consistent, anchored, and normalized

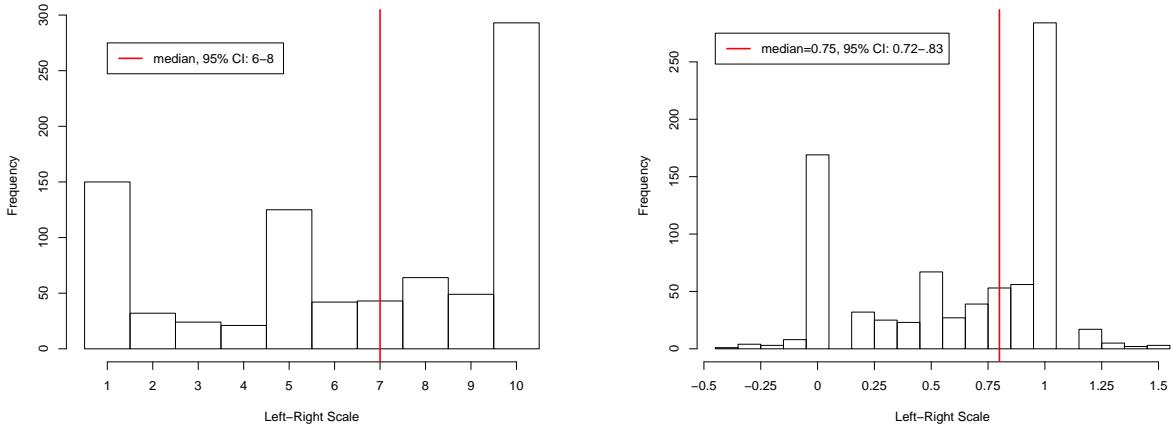


Figure 4: The left-right distribution of voters: on the original 1-10 scale (left), the consistent, anchored, and normalized scale on which 0 corresponds to each voters’ placement of Hugo Chávez and 1 to Henrique Capriles (right)

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 3 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 3 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 3 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 the fact that our candidate choice experiment naturally translates into 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 abandon the description of one candidate as the incumbent and the other the challenger. Treating the payoffs $u_i(x_j, \mu)$ 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 classic logit model,²⁴

$$\Pr(i \text{ votes for } j|x_i) = \text{logit}^{-1}(\beta_0 + \beta_1 x_i),$$

where the voter i 's ideal point x_i is the only covariate, $\beta_0 = -(x_j^2 - x_{\sim j}^2) - \gamma\mu_j^2$, and $\beta_1 = 2(x_j - x_{\sim j})$.

In order to estimate this logit model using the candidate choice experiment, we take the control scenario LD^+ v. RD^+ as the baseline and denote the two treatments LD^- v. RD^+

²⁴See 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</i> ⁻ v. <i>RD</i> ⁺)	0.871***	0.262	(0.363, 1.391)
β_2 (<i>LD</i> ⁺ v. <i>RD</i> ⁻)	-0.682***	0.258	(-1.196, -0.182)
β_3 (<i>left-right scale</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%.

and *LD*⁺ v. *RD*⁻ with dummies τ_1 and τ_2 , respectively. This yields the following formulation for voter i 's probability of voting for the candidate on the right:

$$\Pr(i \text{ votes for } R|x_i, \tau_1, \tau_2) = \text{logit}^{-1}(\beta_0 + \beta_1\tau_1 + \beta_2\tau_2 + \beta_3x_i), \quad (7)$$

with $\beta_0 = -(x_R^2 - x_L^2)$, $\beta_1 = \gamma\mu_L^2$, $\beta_2 = -\gamma\mu_R^2$, 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 $\tau_1 = \tau_2 = 0$) therefore, the swing voter's ideal point $x_S(0)$ satisfies

$$\beta_0 + \beta_3x_S(0) = 0 \quad \text{or equivalently} \quad x_S(0) = -\frac{\beta_0}{\beta_3}.$$

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

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.

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^- , 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

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

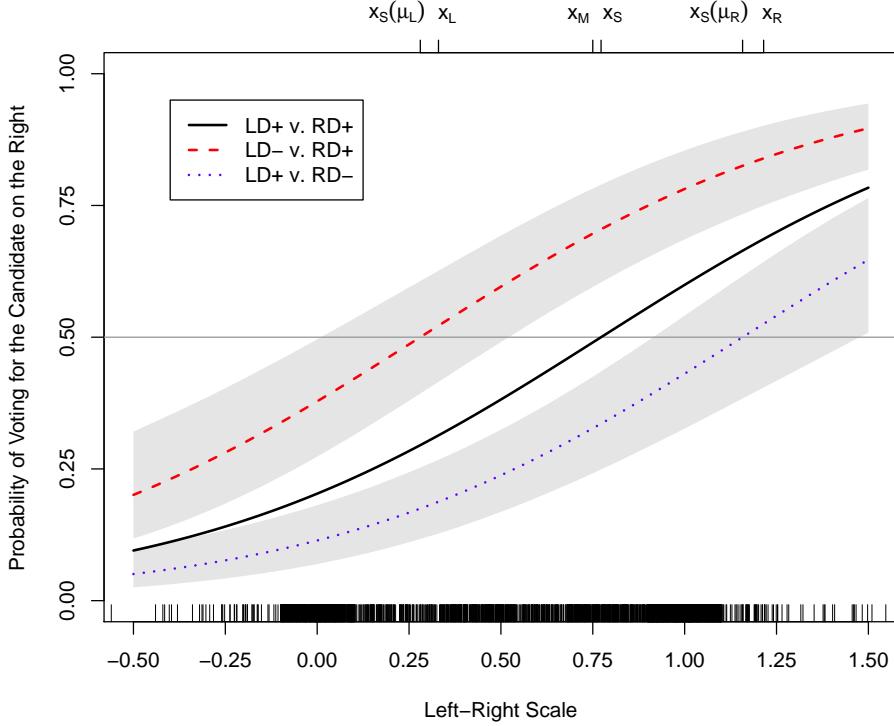


Figure 5: The probability of voting for the candidate on the right as a function of voters' left-right position in the candidate choice experiment

Estimates of these model parameters are presented in Table 3 and Figure 5. 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 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 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 $x_S(0)$.²⁵ This is evident in Figure 5: 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. The left panel in Figure 6 highlights this dynamic. The vertical axis plots the estimated probability of voting for the

²⁵See the appendix for a further analysis of this result when the effect of each treatment condition is estimated separately.

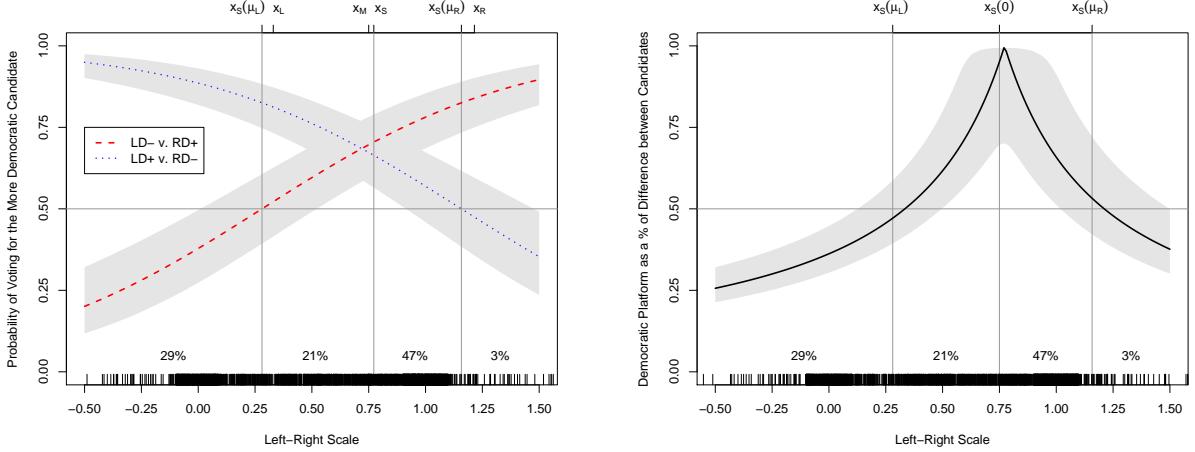


Figure 6: The probability of voting for the more democratic candidate (left) and the relative magnitude of commitment to democracy in voters' vote choice (right)

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 – albeit policy-wise more distant – candidate. These voters by contrast 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 any concerns over democracy for voters whose left-right preferences lie outside the interval $[x_S(\mu_L), x_S(\mu_R)]$. This can be seen in both the left and, more directly, the right panel in Figure 6. The latter uses our estimates of the model parameters to plot the voters’ payoff from the difference in the candidates’ democratic platforms as a percentage of the overall difference in the candidates’ positions.²⁶ As we can see, the relative weight that concerns over democracy have in voters’ perception of the candidates declines as we move away from the control condition swing voter $x_S(0)$.

This is why polarized democracies are vulnerable to subversion by elected politicians – in spite of a potentially strong overall support for democracy among their electorate. At the bottom of both plots in Figure 6, 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 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

²⁶That is, $\gamma\mu_j^2/|u_i(x_j, \mu_j) - u_i(x_{\sim j})|$.

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 1999.

[INCOMPLETE]

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