

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.”*

Seymour M. Lipset, *Political Man* (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 election<sup>1</sup>

## 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.<sup>2</sup> This is how the Chilean military brought down Salvador Allende’s government in 1973 and how the Egyptian military ousted 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 rise of authoritarianism under Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Vladimir Putin in Russia, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey.<sup>3</sup>

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

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

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

<sup>3</sup>Most research on democratization ignores the sharp differences between these two paths to democratic breakdown. For exceptions, see Bermeo (2016), Maeda (2010), Ulfelder (2010), and Svolik (2015). For a recent review of the research on democratic breakdowns and backsliding, see Coppedge (2017), Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), 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 <sup>a</sup>
	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.

<sup>a</sup>  $H_0$ : “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.<sup>4</sup> Why do voters who routinely profess pro-democratic values simultaneously support incumbents intent on subverting democracy?

<sup>4</sup>Using 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. On support for (single-)party candidates in Vietnam, see [Schuler and Malesky \(2017\)](#).

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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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

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<sup>5</sup>For 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 \(Forthcoming\)](#).

<sup>6</sup>See e.g. [Fearon \(2011\)](#), [Little \(2012\)](#), [Little, Tucker, and LaGatta \(2014\)](#), [Chernykh and Svulik \(2015\)](#), and [Rundlett and Svulik \(2016\)](#). For exceptions, see [Acemoglu, Robinson, and Torvik \(2013\)](#), [Egorov and Sonin \(2017\)](#), [Gehlbach and Sonin \(2014\)](#), [Gehlbach and Simpser \(2015\)](#), [Guriev and Treisman \(2015\)](#), [Little \(2017\)](#), and [Rozenas \(2016\)](#). For a model of electoral manipulation by international actors, see [Bubeck and Nikolay \(2017\)](#).

manipulation fails.<sup>7</sup>

A key challenge for modelling pre-election manipulation is the multitude of the often incremental and complementary forms that it may take: candidate and voter intimidation, media control, the abuse of state resources for campaigning, and electoral engineering, to name just a few. Our model 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 extant models of electoral malpractice, we allow for the possibility that citizens genuinely value democracy and hence free and fair elections.<sup>8</sup> 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 – either abstain or vote for the challenger instead.

This framework provides microfoundation for the process of “democratic backsliding” and 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

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<sup>7</sup>To 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 Simpser (2013).

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

answer: democracy survives when opportunistic elites are kept in check by an electorate with strong pro-democratic values.<sup>9</sup> 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, Orbán, or Erdoğan first and democrats only second.

Our framework furthermore 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](#)).<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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 are indifferent 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

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

<sup>10</sup>See [Rosenfeld \(2017\)](#) for a recent empirical reassessment of this proposition.

<sup>11</sup>For exceptions, see [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2005\)](#), [Ansell and Samuels \(2014\)](#), [Boix \(2003\)](#), and [Debs and Morrison \(2015\)](#).

credible deterrent against manipulation that polarized societies lack.<sup>12</sup>

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. We implemented this experiment in Venezuela, a prominent instance of an incumbent-driven subversion of democracy. For reasons that we discuss in detail in Section 3, Venezuela offers a fortuitous opportunity to evaluate our arguments at the level at which they are hypothesized to operate – that of the individual voter. As a part of a nationally representative survey conducted in the fall of 2016, we asked Venezuelan voters 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 to infer how respondents’ choices were shaped by variation in candidates’ proposals about economic policies and pro- or anti-democratic political reforms. Specifically, we estimate how voters’ left-right economic interests shape their willingness to trade off democratic values for policies that appeal to those interests.

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

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<sup>12</sup>While our notion of ideological centrists is both narrower and more precise than that of the “middle 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).



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, 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. 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.

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* that 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 a choice of candidates that, just like Venezuelan politics under Chávez and Maduro, effectively implies that voters pick 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 the “lifeblood” of democratic politics. 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  $\alpha$  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.<sup>13</sup> The term  $\mu$  reflects the amount of the incumbent's *manipulation*, while  $\gamma \geq 0$  is a *civic virtue* parameter that captures informed voters' sensitivity to manipulation.<sup>14</sup> Thus in an electorate with civic virtue  $\gamma$ , an informed voter with the ideal point  $x_i$  obtains the payoff

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

In contrast to informed voters, uninformed voters' electoral decisions are driven entirely by the incumbent's degree of manipulation  $\mu$ .<sup>15</sup> 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 (see the Supplementary Appendix for a summary.) Instead, we simplify our analysis by assuming that when the incumbent

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<sup>13</sup>Thus manipulation acts similar to “negative” valence in models of electoral competition with endogenous valence; see e.g. [Ashworth and de Mesquita \(2009\)](#). Our assumption that only the incumbent can engage in manipulation captures the most frequent real-world scenarios: Incumbents have disproportionate access to the tools of manipulation by virtue of controlling the state apparatus.

<sup>14</sup>We 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.

<sup>15</sup>The parameter  $\alpha$  thus may be alternatively interpreted as the probability with which any citizen fails to discern manipulation. This distinction between informed and uninformed voters is inspired by the models of special interest politics pioneered by [Baron \(1994\)](#) and [Grossman and Helpman \(1996\)](#).

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  $\epsilon$  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  $0 < \sigma < \frac{1}{2}$ .<sup>16</sup> Thus in the absence of manipulation,  $\mu = 0$ , uninformed voters split evenly (in expectation) 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 (in expectation) the vote of at most all  $\alpha$  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  $\delta$  fraction of voters’ ideal points forming a mass point at the center of this interval, and the remaining  $\pi$  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  $\delta$  thus captures the electorate’s ideological *centrism*: an electorate with  $\delta$  close to 1 has a large mass of centrist voters; an electorate with  $\delta = 0$ , by contrast, effectively lacks such voters. Meanwhile, the parameter  $\pi$  reflects the electorate’s *polarization*: in an electorate with  $\pi$  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  $\theta_j$  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  $\theta_j$  and the policy  $x$

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<sup>16</sup>There 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,  $u_j(x) = -|x - \theta_j|$ .<sup>17</sup> 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  $\mu$ . Next, voters vote, the exogenous shock  $\epsilon$  is realized, and the candidate that obtains the most votes wins and implements the policy that 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

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<sup>17</sup>Adopting 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. 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  $\mu$  as long as the civic virtue parameter  $\gamma$  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.

## 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  $\mu$  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  $\mu$ , 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  $\epsilon$ , 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  $\mu$ , we obtain

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

The expression for  $\mu^*$  summarizes the key result of this benchmark scenario: the equilibrium amount of manipulation  $\mu^*$  as well as the resulting probability of the incumbent's victory are increasing in the level of polarization  $\pi$ . 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 an extreme amount of manipulation to abandon the incumbent in favor of the challenger. Figure 1 illustrates these comparative statics.<sup>18</sup> The left panel plots the equilibrium amount of manipulation  $\mu^*$  and the corresponding probability of the incumbent's victory as a function of polarization  $\pi$ . The right panel plots the resulting (expected) equilibrium share of informed, uninformed, and all votes for the incumbent as a function of polarization  $\pi$ . The flat discontinuities result from our assumption that  $\mu \leq 1$

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

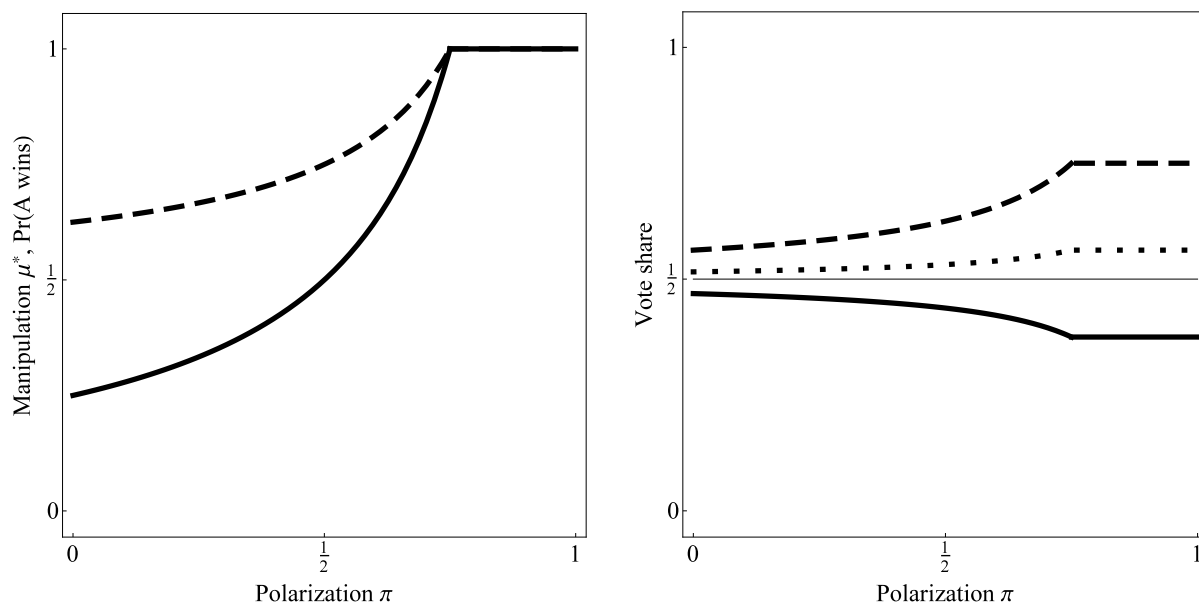


Figure 1: Left: equilibrium amounts of manipulation  $\mu^*$  (solid) and the probability of the incumbent's victory (dashed) as a function of polarization  $\pi$ ; Right: the incumbent's vote share among informed (solid), uninformed (dashed), and all (dotted) voters as a function of polarization  $\pi$

and the fact that the probability of the incumbent's victory can be at most one.<sup>19</sup> That is, there are levels of polarization  $\pi$  so large that the incumbent will optimally manipulate to the fullest extent, which in turn assures his victory.

The remaining comparative statics are also intuitive. A greater share of uninformed voters  $\alpha$ , a more effective technology of manipulation  $M$ , and more extreme candidate platforms all result in greater equilibrium amounts of manipulation. Civic virtue  $\gamma$ , meanwhile, has the opposite effect on  $\mu^*$  because it raises voters' sensitivity to manipulation. Note, however, that even at arbitrarily low levels of polarization  $\pi$ , the equilibrium amount of manipulation  $\mu^*$  is positive. It is only in the limit, as  $\alpha$  or  $M$  go to zero or as  $\gamma$  goes to infinity that  $\mu^*$  tends to zero. This is a consequence of the fact that

<sup>19</sup>The levels of  $\pi$  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.



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  $\pi = 0$ . The key political consequence of this benchmark scenario is that as long as candidates' platforms are located symmetrically around the median, the  $\delta$  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. That is, when the incumbent manipulates at  $\mu > 0$ , the two candidates obtain the vote shares

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

Manipulation is now beneficial to the incumbent only if it makes up for the loss of the  $\delta$  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

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

Put differently, a large enough mass of *informed* centrists forestalls manipulation entirely. Paralleling the comparative statics from the previous scenario, the thresholds in (4) are more demanding when the technology of manipulation  $M$  is effective, candidate platforms are extreme, and when civic virtue  $\gamma$  is low. Somewhat counterintuitively, when the conditions in (4) fail to hold, the equilibrium amount of manipulation  $\mu^*$  is increasing in  $\delta$ .<sup>20</sup>

### 2.3 Polarization and Centrists Considered Simultaneously

The more general case that accounts for both polarization and a mass of ideological centrists, assuming  $\delta + \pi < 1$ , 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

$$\delta \geq \frac{1}{2} \left( 1 - \pi - \sqrt{(1-\pi)^2 - \frac{2\alpha^2 M^2 x_A}{(1-\alpha)^2 \gamma}} \right) \quad \text{and} \quad \alpha \leq \frac{1}{1 + \frac{M}{1-\pi} \sqrt{\frac{2x_A}{\gamma}}}.$$

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<sup>20</sup>Using parameter values from the previous section, the thresholds on  $\delta$  and  $\alpha$  in (4) are .03 and .74, respectively.

## 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  $\mu$  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. Intuitively, the distance between candidates' platforms has emerged as one factor that amplifies the incumbent's incentives to manipulate elections.

The assumption of exogenously fixed, symmetric candidate platforms raises the questions i) whether candidates would indeed adopt platforms that diverge from the median, if given the choice, and ii) 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).<sup>21</sup> 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 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,  $x_A, x_B \in [\theta_B, \theta_A]$ ,

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<sup>21</sup>This 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  $\mu$  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  $\mu^*$  is increasing in polarization  $\pi$ . 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 (i.e. when  $\mu = 0$ .) 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  $\pi$ .<sup>22</sup> The more polarized the electorate is, the closer are *both* candidates' equilibrium platforms to where the incumbent would like them to be.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup>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 benefits from shifting his own platform toward the incumbent's in order to differentiate himself on (his lack of) manipulation instead of policy.

<sup>23</sup>There is evidence for this dynamic in the Venezuelan case that we examine in the next section. After Chávez's death, the opposition began adopting some popular aspects of Chavismo, e.g. proposing to extend property titles to public housing projects. See Andrew Cawthorne, "Venezuela's opposition denies it would scrap Chavez welfare aid," Reuters, April 10, 2013, and Nicolas Casey and Patricia Torres, "Foes May Hate Hugo Chávez, but They Like His Political Playbook," *The New York Times*, January 26, 2016.

### 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.<sup>24</sup>

Venezuela is a prominent, contemporary instance of a subversion of democracy by an elected incumbent.<sup>25</sup> This case 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 1999 correspond closely to our theoretical framework. 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 little evidence of significant election-day fraud.<sup>26</sup> This accords with our theoretical focus on incumbent-driven pre-election manipulation (as opposed to

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<sup>24</sup>The survey took place in October (pilot) and December (main round) 2016.

<sup>25</sup>For 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).

<sup>26</sup>Almost 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 of powers is nearly nonexistent.” For an analysis of electoral authoritarian practices in the Venezuelan context, see Albertus (2015), Frye, Reuter, and Szakonyi (2017), and Handlin (2016).

election-day fraud by both the incumbent and the opposition.)

Second, due to these developments, major political and economic reforms were 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.

Third and paralleling our formal setting, politics in Venezuela has for more than a decade taken place between two major opposing blocks reflecting a single, primarily economic left-right axis of conflict within a highly polarized electorate. The left block consists of the incumbent government led today by Chávez's successor Nicolás Maduro and the socialist PSUV; the right block was at the time of our survey represented by the opposition alliance MUD led by Henrique Capriles.

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 1999, Venezuela 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 "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 vote for a candidate and then to give an approval rating of each candidate on a scale from 1 to 10.<sup>27</sup>

Our main interest is to infer from these candidate choices the respondents’ willingness to trade off democratic principles 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 abandonment 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

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<sup>27</sup>The 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 design and analysis is rarely based on an explicit theoretical framework, as in our case.

Table 2: The Candidate Choice Experiment: Across-Subject Treatment Assignments

<b>Treatment Condition</b> <b>C1 v. C2</b>	<b>Percent Voting for C2</b> <b>(95% C.I.)</b>
T1: $LD^+$ v. $RD^+$	37.46 (31.85, 43.41)
T2: $LD^-$ v. $RD^+$	53.52 (47.54, 59.41)
T3: $RD^-$ v. $RD^+$	63.64 (57.20, 69.64)

*Note:* 95% confidence intervals in parentheses are based on the binomial test for proportions.

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 is also proposing a favorable economic policy.)

Due to space constraints, we focus in the remainder of our analysis 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.) We present an analysis of the remaining platforms in the Supplementary Appendix.

### 3.1 Across-Subject Treatment Assignments

All respondents were initially randomly assigned to one of three treatment conditions (T1-T3), corresponding to three distinct candidate-choice scenarios. These are summarized in the first column of Table 2. In all three conditions, candidate 2 (C2) adopts a rightist economic policy and a more democratic institutional position ( $RD^+$ ), while candidate 1's



(C1) economic and institutional positions differ: C1 adopts  $LD^+$  in T1,  $LD^-$  in T2, and  $RD^-$  in T3. The purpose of these specific platform combinations is to examine trade-offs between democratic principles and economic policy interests among a subset of voters who in the real-world face the greatest cost for supporting pro-democratic institutional reforms – those on the left. Voters on the right, meanwhile, may support pro-democratic reforms for purely instrumental reasons as such policies would make it easier for their favored real-world candidate to replace the current, leftist incumbent government.

Consider the comparison of T1 and T2. The only difference between T1 and T2 is that C1 adopts a less democratic position ( $D^-$ ) in T2. Because both candidates adopt the more democratic position ( $D^+$ ) in T1 and the only difference between the candidates is in their economic platforms, we can treat T1 as a benchmark against which we will compare C1's adoption of  $D^-$  in T2. This comparison answers the question: *What fraction of leftist respondents are willing to defect from their favored policy to punish undemocratic behavior by a leftist candidate?* Consistent with our theoretical expectations, C1's adoption of  $D^-$  results in a 16.07% decline in that candidate's vote share. This decline is statistically significant at the .01 level (with a  $p$ -value of  $17.22 \times 10^{-5}$  using a binomial test for equal proportions.) This decline is also significant politically: C1's adoption of  $D^-$  likely results in his electoral defeat, an outcome he could avoid by playing fair.

Compare now T2 and T3. In T3, C1 adopts a rightist economic platform and the less democratic position. That is, the only difference between T2 and T3 is in C1's economic position. In turn, we can treat T3 as a benchmark against which we will compare C1's adoption of  $L$  in T2. This comparison answers the question: *What fraction of leftist respondents who would support a more democratic candidate when the only choice is between two rightists are willing to switch to the less democratic candidate, if that candidate adopts their favored policy?* We see that C1's switch from a rightist to a leftist economic

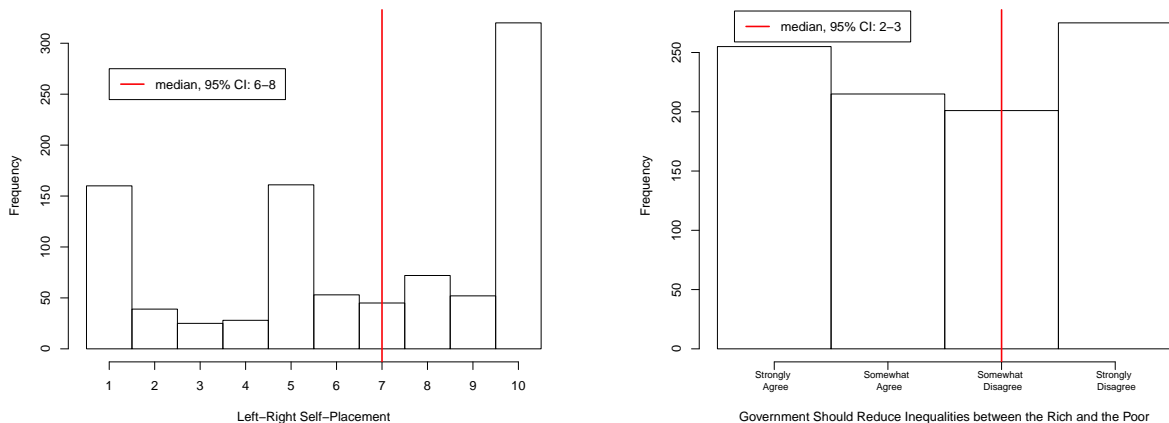


Figure 2: Left: a 10-point left-right self-placement scale; right: a scale based on attitudes toward economic inequality

platform results in an approximately 10% increase in C1’s vote share – holding C1’s  $D^-$  position constant. This decline is statistically significant at the .05 level (with a  $p$ -value of .02 using a binomial test for equal proportions.)

Jointly, the T1-T2 and T2-T3 comparisons provide an initial support for core elements of our theory. The first comparison implies that voters indeed value democracy (i.e.  $\delta$  is positive): a significant fraction of our respondents are willing to defect from their policy-wise preferred candidate to punish his undemocratic behavior. The second comparison implies that voters indeed value economic policy (i.e.  $\delta$  is finite): voters are willing to vote for a less democratic candidate if that candidate delivers on policy. In sum and consistent with our theoretical framework, voters are willing to make trade-offs between democratic values and policies and they do so in both directions: in favor of democracy at the expense of policy, and the other way around.

A key limitation of the above comparisons is that they are aggregate and thus do not allow us to examine another implication of our theoretical model: that voters’ willingness to trade off democratic values for their partisan interests is increasing in the intensity of

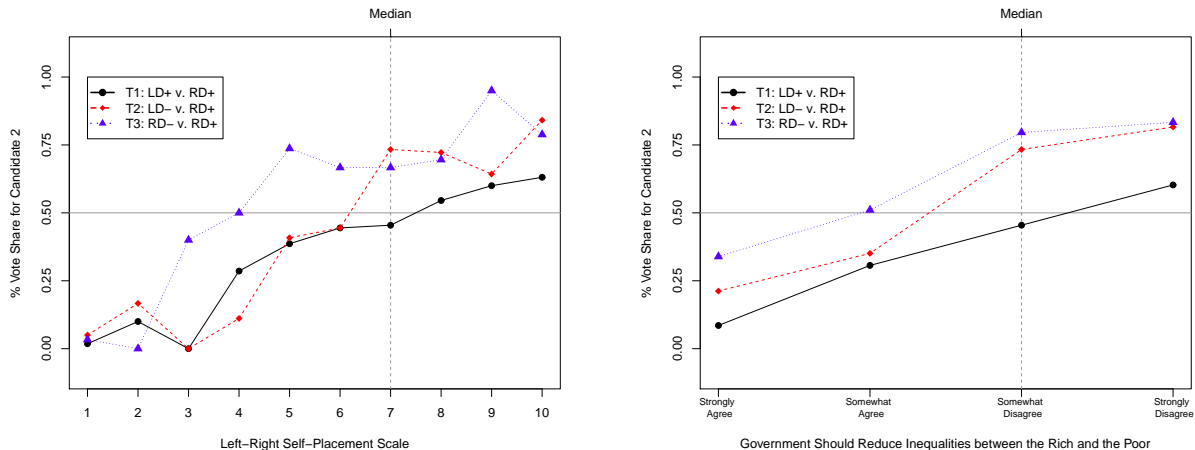


Figure 3: Fraction of respondents voting for candidate 2 by the 10-point left-right self-placement scale (left) and attitudes toward economic inequality (right)

their policy preferences. Specifically, our model implies that it should be policy *moderates* who defect from their policy-wise preferred candidate to punish his undemocratic behavior in the T1-T2 comparison, and that it should be policy *extremists* who switch to a less democratic candidate in exchange for a favorable policy in the T2-T3 comparison. In order to examine these predictions, we employ two indicators of left-right economic preferences: a 10-point left-right self-placement scale and attitudes toward economic inequality.<sup>28</sup> Figure 2 plots the distribution of these indicators. A notable feature of both histograms is a significant left-right polarization of the Venezuelan electorate.

Figure 3 plots C2’s average vote share by each measure of left-right preferences in the three treatment conditions. Consider first the comparison of T1 (circles, solid line) and T2 (diamonds, dashed line.) We see that for both left-right indicators, some of the largest differences in C2’s vote share between the two treatment conditions occur around the

<sup>28</sup>The left-right self-placement scale is based on the question: “In politics, we often speak of the left and the right. On a scale where 1 denotes the left and 10 denotes the right, where would you place yourself?” The inequality measure is based on the question: “Some say that the government should reduce inequalities between the rich and the poor. Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree?” See the Supplementary Appendix for further details.

median (with another large difference at the right extreme.)<sup>29</sup> This is consistent with our expectation that only moderate leftists will be willing to defect from their policy-wise preferred candidate to punish his undemocratic behavior; those on the far left stick with their policy-wise preferred candidate regardless of his democracy position.<sup>30</sup>

Compare now T3 (triangles, dotted line) and T2 (diamonds, dashed line.) The largest differences in C2’s vote share between the two treatment conditions occur primarily to the left of the median and this is the case for both left-right indicators.<sup>31</sup> This is consistent with our expectation that it is respondents with strong economic preferences – those on the far left – who will be willing to trade off democratic reforms for a candidate who delivers their preferred policy.<sup>32</sup>

### 3.1.1 Within-Subject Treatment Assignments

After seeing one of the three treatment conditions discussed so far, each respondent was asked “And now suppose that candidate 1 would change his position on [ISSUE] and instead propose to [POSITION]. Which candidate would you vote for now?” The main rationale behind such within-subject treatment assignment was to mimic the process of subversion of democracy by incumbents and to examine how voters respond to a candidate who initially proposes a more democratic platform but then shifts to a less democratic

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<sup>29</sup>Only categories 10 on the left-right self-placement scale and categories “somewhat disagree” and “strongly disagree” on the inequality scale are statistically significant at conventional levels; similar patterns obtain for approval ratings. See the Supplementary Appendix for details.

<sup>30</sup>As we suggested earlier, those on the right have an instrumental reason for voting for  $D^+$  candidates. We therefore focus in our interpretation on voters around and to the left of the electoral median.

<sup>31</sup>Only category 5 on left-right self-placement scale is statistically significant at conventional levels; higher levels of statistical significance obtain for approval ratings. See the Supplementary Appendix for details.

<sup>32</sup>When we examine abstentions in the Supplementary Appendix, we find that abstention rates, which are only significant in T3, are decreasing along the left-right scale. That is, many strong leftists would rather abstain than vote in an election in which they have to choose between two rightist candidates. This may account for the lack of differences in C2’s vote share between T3 and T2 at the far left of the 10-point self-placement scale.

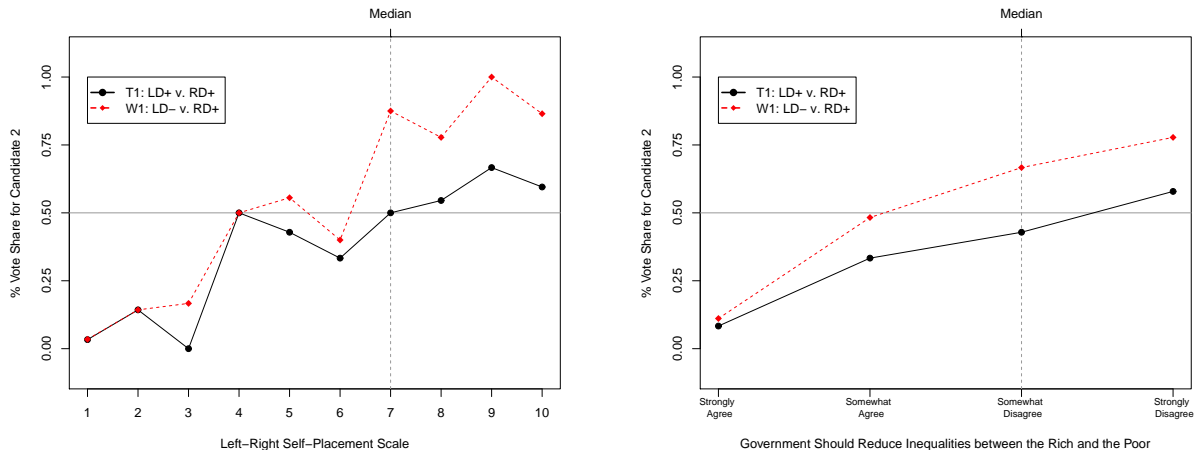


Figure 4: Within-subject analysis: Fraction of respondents voting for candidate 2 by the 10-point left-right self-placement scale (left) and attitudes toward economic inequality (right)

one.<sup>33</sup> Due to space constraints, we focus here on the subset of respondents who were initially presented with the  $LD^+$  v.  $RD^+$  scenario, which we now treat as a control, and were next asked to consider a shift to the  $LD^-$  v.  $RD^+$  scenario. This shift mirrors most closely the process of democratic backsliding in Venezuela. In the Supplementary Appendix, we analyze the remaining platform shifts within our survey experiment, the effects of which are consistent with our theoretical expectations.

Both the overall and conditional comparisons parallel those from the earlier, across-subject analysis. Overall a shift from the  $LD^+$  v.  $RD^+$  to the  $LD^-$  v.  $RD^+$  scenario results in a 14% decline in the less democratic candidate’s vote share (with a  $p$ -value of 0.03.) When conditioned on our two measures of left-right preferences, we see that – as earlier – the largest shifts in C2’s vote share occur around the median. This is consistent with our theoretical model, which implies that i) the adoption of an undemocratic platform 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

<sup>33</sup>Another potential benefit of a within-subject analysis is greater statistical precision as respondents are compared to themselves, holding other potential sources of variation constant. See Gerber and Green (2012, 273-276) for a discussion potential pitfalls of within-subject designs.

least willing to trade off democratic values for their policy interests.

### 3.2 Model-based Estimates

An attractive feature of our candidate-choice experiment is its close correspondence to our theoretical framework: this allows us to estimate key parameters from our model, including the civic virtue parameter  $\gamma$ . As we shall see, these theoretically-informed parameters effectively summarize the empirical variation discussed so far.

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

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

Treating  $u_i(x_j, \mu_j)$  and  $u_i(x_{\sim j})$  as the deterministic components of 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:<sup>34</sup>

$$\Pr(i \text{ votes for C2} | x_i, \tau_L) = \text{logit}^{-1}(\beta_0 + \beta_1\tau_L + \beta_2x_i). \quad (6)$$

In (6), the T1 control scenario  $LD^+$  v.  $RD^+$  serves as the baseline, the dummy  $\tau_L$  denotes the T2 scenario  $LD^-$  v.  $RD^+$ , and  $x_i$  is respondent  $i$ 's ideal point on a left-right scale.

Normalizing  $\mu_j$  to 1 when  $L$  adopts the  $D^-$  platform, we have  $\beta_0 = -(x_R^2 - x_L^2)$ ,  $\beta_1 = \gamma$ , and  $\beta_2 = 2(x_R - x_L)$ .

Estimates of these logit parameters, which are presented in the top part of Table 3, allow us to identify key parameters from our benchmark model. The coefficient  $\beta_1$

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<sup>34</sup>See e.g. [Cameron and Trivedi \(2005, 476-478, 486-487\)](#).

Table 3: Estimation results for a logit model of the candidate-choice experiment

<b>Logit</b>	<b>Coef.</b>	<b>S.E.</b>	<b>95% C.I.</b>
$\beta_0$ ( <i>intercept</i> )	-3.223***	0.303	(-3.842, -2.651)
$\beta_1$ ( <i>LD<sup>-</sup> v. RD<sup>+</sup></i> )	0.643***	0.208	(0.237, 1.054)
$\beta_2$ ( <i>i's left-right position</i> )	0.413***	0.036	(0.344, 0.487)
<b>Model Parameters</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>S.E.</b>	<b>95% C.I.</b>
$\gamma$	0.640	0.211	(0.228, 1.054)
$x_L$	7.701	0.368	(6.995, 8.433)
$x_R$	7.908	0.365	(7.208, 8.633)
$x_S(0)$	7.805	0.366	(7.102, 8.533)
$x_S(\mu)$	6.247	0.36	(5.527, 6.932)
$N$	551		
<i>Log-likelihood</i>	-281.589		

Note: The dependent variable is a vote for the candidate on the right. Standard errors and confidence intervals for model parameters obtained via simulation.

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

estimates of the civic virtue parameter  $\gamma$ ,  $\gamma = \beta_1$ . The expressions for  $\beta_0$  and  $\beta_2$  constitute a set of two equations about two unknowns that solves for the left-right location of the two candidates' policy proposals

$$x_L = -\frac{\beta_0}{\beta_2} - \frac{\beta_2}{4} \quad \text{and} \quad x_R = -\frac{\beta_0}{\beta_2} + \frac{\beta_2}{4}.$$

The swing voter  $x_S(\mu)$  is (by definition) indifferent between the two candidates. In the control condition (when  $\tau_L = 0$ ) therefore, the swing voter's ideal point  $x_S(0)$  satisfies

$$\beta_0 + \beta_2 x_S(0) = 0 \quad \text{or equivalently} \quad x_S(0) = -\frac{\beta_0}{\beta_2}.$$

The *LD<sup>-</sup> v. RD<sup>+</sup>* scenario, meanwhile, yields an estimate of  $x_S(\mu_L)$ , which corresponds to

the ideal points of voters who are indifferent between the two candidates in T2,

$$x_S(\mu_L) = -\frac{\beta_0 + \beta_1}{\beta_2}.$$

Estimates of these model parameters are presented in the bottom part of Table 3 and portrayed in Figure 5.<sup>35</sup> We see that when the only difference in the candidates' platforms concerns their left-right economic policies (this is the T1 control scenario  $LD^+$  v.  $RD^+$ ), the swing voter's ideal point is located at  $x_S(0) = 7.805$ . This implies a narrow victory for the leftist candidate since the (experimental) electorate's median is  $x_M = 7$ . Consistent with our theoretical framework, the adoption of an undemocratic platform by the leftist candidate shifts the swing voter to  $x_S(\mu) = 6.247$ , to the left of the electorate's median  $x_M$ . The estimated civic virtue parameter causing this shift is positive,  $\gamma = 0.64$ , and statistically different from zero. This implies that voters indeed value democracy for its own sake – a key assumption in our theoretical analysis. Furthermore, this shift is politically significant: it entails the defection from the leftist candidate of voters with ideal points between  $x_S(0)$  and  $x_S(\mu_L)$  – approximately 5% of the electorate – and an electoral defeat for the less democratic candidate, assuming that manipulation does not make up for that loss of voters.

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' left-right preferences positions are, the more likely it is that those preferences will override their concern about democracy. The voter shift associated with the difference between the T1 and T2 treatment conditions allow us to separate those voters whose policy preferences trump their commitment to democracy from

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<sup>35</sup>Estimates using a scale based on attitudes toward economic inequality are presented in the Supplementary Appendix.



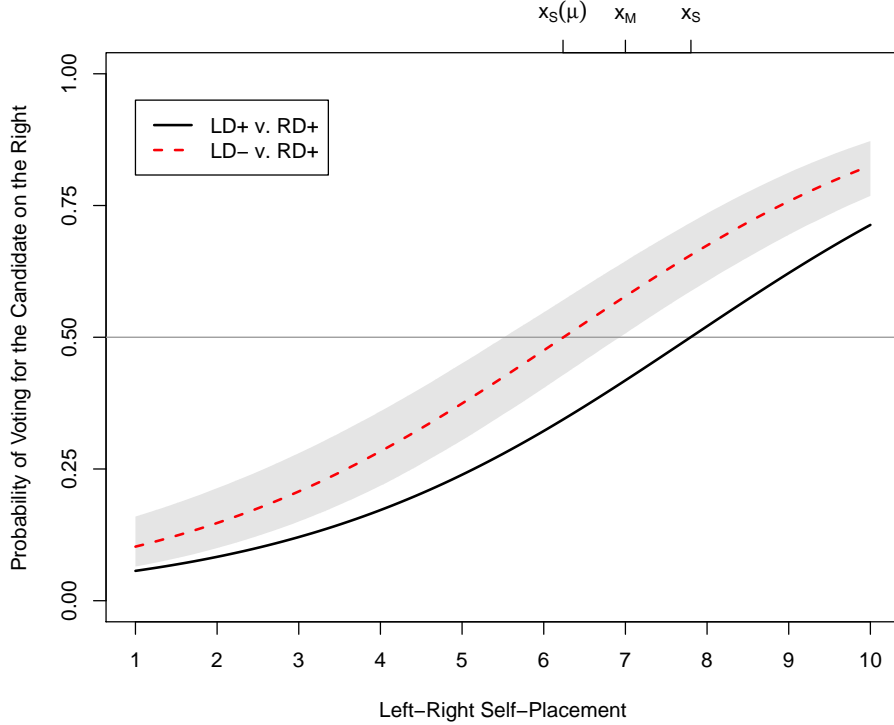


Figure 5: The probability of voting for the candidate on the right as a function of voters' left-right self-placement

those for whom the opposite holds. Specifically, we see in Figure 5 that when the leftist candidate adopts the less democratic platform, voters to the left of  $x_S(\mu)$  nonetheless stick with him – in effect, these voters are leftists first and democrats only second. By contrast, voters between  $x_S(\mu)$  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 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.

These results corroborate our theoretical claims about the crucial, pro-democratic role

played by ideological moderates and illustrate why polarized democracies are vulnerable to subversion by elected politicians – in spite of potentially strong overall support for democracy among their electorates. In our representative sample, close to 90% of those to the left of the control condition swing voter  $x_S(0)$  are partisans first and democrats only second. 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 5% of voters who would defect to the rightist candidate. Because our sample is representative, this implies that the Venezuelan electorate is particularly vulnerable to the subversion by a leftist – which consistent with Venezuelan political development since Hugo Chávez’s election to the presidency in 1998.

### 3.3 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 the best system of government; do you agree?”<sup>36</sup> This approach alone, 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”

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<sup>36</sup>Questions 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).

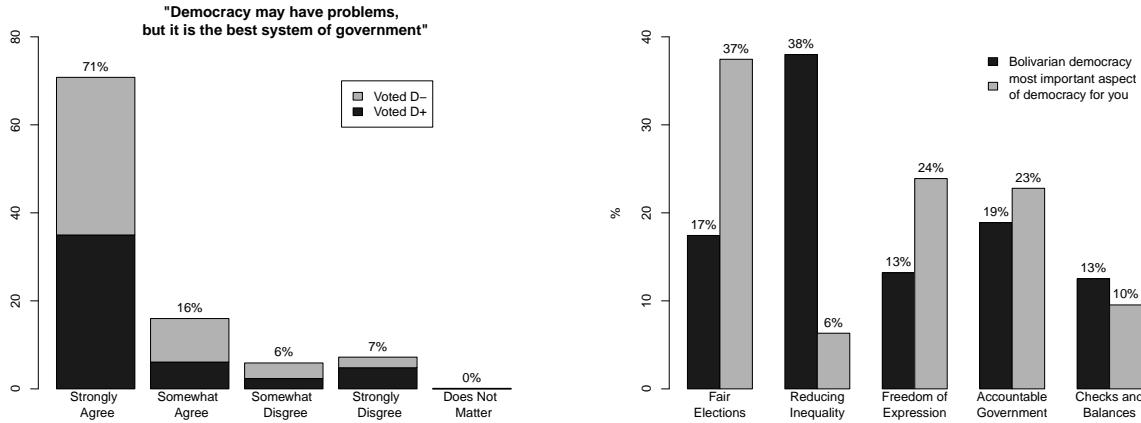


Figure 6: Left: Support for democracy as measured by agreement with the statement “Democracy may have problems but it is the best system of government ” versus voting for the more democratic candidate in the candidate-choice experiment; Right: the most important aspect of “Bolivarian democracy” versus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

(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 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 more than half of the same respondents (52%) 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 her 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 support 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.<sup>37</sup>

A potential objection to the above conclusion is that ordinary Venezuelans may have a poor or simply different understanding of democracy than is 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.”<sup>38</sup> The right panel in Figure 6 plots the distribution of the five possible answers to 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

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<sup>37</sup>This 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, 87% 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?”

<sup>38</sup>The 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,” “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?”

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, revealed-preference 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.

## 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.<sup>39</sup> In studies of electoral malpractice, this frequently entails protest, rebellion, or even outright civil war.<sup>40</sup> 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

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<sup>39</sup>See e.g. [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2005\)](#), [Boix \(2003\)](#), [Fearon \(2011\)](#), and [Przeworski, Rivero, and Xi \(2015\)](#).

<sup>40</sup>For a formal treatment, see [Chernykh and Svolik \(2015\)](#), [Egorov and Sonin \(2017\)](#), [Little \(2012\)](#); for empirical research with a similar emphasis, see [Brancati \(2016\)](#), [Bunce and Wolchik \(2011\)](#), and [Robertson \(2011\)](#).

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.

Our 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 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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