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

Milan W. Svolik*

Department of Political Science, Yale University, New Haven, CT 06520, USA; milan.svolik@yale.edu

ABSTRACT

We propose an explanation for the most prevalent form of democratic breakdown after the Cold War: the subversion of democracy by incumbents. In both democratization research and democracy promotion practice, the public is assumed to serve as a check on incumbents' temptations to subvert democracy. We explain why this check fails in polarized societies. When polarization is high, 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. 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 support for democracy and provide an answer to a fundamental question about its survival: When can we expect the public to serve as a check on the authoritarian temptations of elected politicians?

Keywords: Democratic backsliding; support for democracy; polarization; Venezuela

> *"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* (1960, p. 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[1]

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 Mohamed Morsi in 2013. But as Table 1 shows, beginning in the 1990s, democracies have become two to three times as likely to succumb to a second form of democratic breakdown: the executive takeover. Executive takeovers typically entail the gradual subversion of democracy by initially democratically elected incumbents, as illustrated by the rise of authoritarianism under Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Vladimir Putin in Russia, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey.[3]

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

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[1]"Las 5 líneas de acción política." *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 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 Waldner and Lust (2018).

Table 1: Democratic breakdowns via military coups versus executive takeovers, 1973–2018.

Period	Military coups	Executive takeovers
1973–1979	11	16
1980–1989	14	16
1990–1999	12	24**
2000–2009	4	16***
2010–2018	5	16**

Significance levels *10%, **5%, and ***1% refer to a one-sided exact binomial test of the null hypothesis that coups and takeovers are equally likely.

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

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 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

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[4]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 popular support for (single) party candidates in Vietnam, see Schuler and Malesky (2017).

greater the number of the incumbent's supporters who resolve this dilemma by nonetheless voting for the incumbent — effectively tolerating his undemocratic behavior and allowing him to gain an unfair electoral advantage. Put differently, political polarization presents incumbents with a structural opportunity to subvert democracy: they can manipulate the democratic process in their favor and get away with it!

We develop the microfoundations for this argument with the help of a formal model that departs from existing research on democratization and electoral authoritarianism in several, key ways.[5] In order to capture the process of subversion of democracy by incumbents, we focus on pre-election manipulation rather than election-day fraud. Existing models of electoral malpractice focus primarily on the latter.[6] Yet when incumbents subvert democracy, they do so primarily by pre-election manipulation, with election-day fraud typically serving as a measure of last resort — deployed only after pre-election manipulation fails.[7]

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 election takes place. Such "informed" voters can in turn take the incumbent's manipulation into account when deciding how to vote. Furthermore and 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.[8] Together, these theoretical assumptions imply that an incumbent contemplating pre-election manipulation must weigh

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[5]For related research on electoral authoritarianism, see Blaydes (2010), Gandhi and Lust-Okar (2009), Knutsen *et al.* (2017), Magaloni (2006), Levitsky and Way (2010), Miller (2013), Schedler (2013), and Singer (2018).

[6]See, e.g., Fearon (2011), Little (2012), Little *et al.* (2014), Chernykh and Svolik (2015), and Rundlett and Svolik (2016). For exceptions, see Acemoglu *et al.* (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 Marinov (2017).

[7]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 the varieties of electoral malpractice, see especially Schedler (2002) and Simpser (2013).

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

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 a challenger instead.

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

In order to evaluate this framework empirically, we designed a survey experiment that examines a key mechanism in our theoretical model: that even pro-democratically minded voters are willing to trade off democratic principles for their partisan interests when confronted with a choice that pits the two against each other. As a part of a nationally representative survey conducted in Venezuela in the fall of 2016, we asked 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 examine how voters' left–right economic interests shape their willingness to trade off democratic values for policies that appeal to those interests.

Venezuela is a prominent instance of an incumbent-driven subversion of democracy and, for reasons that we discuss in detail later, provides an opportunity to evaluate our arguments at the level at which they are hypothesized to operate — that of the individual voter. Consistent with our theoretical predictions, we find that (i) voters indeed value democracy for its own sake, but that (ii) they are willing to settle for undemocratic institutions when these

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

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.

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 structurally identify key parameters from our model. Our structural analysis reveals that the above patterns can be effectively summarized by a single, theoretically meaningful parameter: the weight that voters place on democracy relative to economic policy. We estimate this weight to be about two-thirds of the value that voters place on economic policy.

These findings are both statistically and politically significant: Our estimates imply, for instance, that a candidate who proposes to maintain the heavily partisan composition of the Venezuelan Electoral Commission and Supreme Court instead of reforming these institutions to be politically impartial incurs an electoral penalty large enough to bring about his defeat. 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. Strong partisans, meanwhile, stick with their preferred candidate even if he adopts an undemocratic platform and are effectively trading-off democratic principles for their economic 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. 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 asks that a significant fraction of the electorate pick between a candidate that is democratic and one that

espouses their economic interests, one-half of respondents chose the latter. Alarmingly, 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 measures are subject to social desirability bias and, by design, fail to capture voters' willingness to trade off democratic values for partisan interests. Such trade-offs, we argue throughout, are precisely what is at stake in democratic backsliding.

The Model

Consider the following electoral manipulation game between an incumbent, a challenger, and a large number of voters. We distinguish between *uninformed* voters, who make up an α fraction of the electorate, and *informed* voters, who make up the remaining $1 - \alpha$ fraction; $0 < \alpha < 1$.[10] Informed voters base their voting decisions on the candidates' policy platforms 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 $-\delta\mu^2$ if the incumbent manipulates electoral competition in his favor and wins.[11] The term μ reflects the amount of the incumbent's *manipulation*, while $\delta \geq 0$ is a *civic virtue* parameter that captures informed voters' sensitivity to manipulation.[12] Thus in an electorate with civic virtue δ, an informed voter with the ideal point x_i obtains the payoff

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

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[10] 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).

[11] Thus manipulation functions similar to "negative" valence in models of electoral competition with endogenous valence; see, e.g., Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita (2009). Our assumption that only the incumbent can engage in manipulation captures the most frequent real-world scenario: Incumbents have disproportionate access to the tools of manipulation by virtue of controlling the state apparatus.

[12] 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.

In contrast to informed voters, uninformed voters' electoral decisions are driven entirely by the incumbent's degree of manipulation μ.[13] 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 does manipulate, he gains an electoral advantage among 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.[14] We interpret ϵ as a small, exogenous perturbation that occurs at the time of the election and is commonly believed to be uniformly distributed on the interval $(-\sigma, \sigma)$, where $0 < \sigma < \frac{1}{2}$.[15] Thus in the absence of manipulation, $\mu = 0$, uninformed voters are expected to split evenly between the two candidates. Furthermore, we let $0 \leq \mu \leq 1$ and $0 \leq M \leq 1$, so that in the extreme case when $\mu = 1$, the incumbent expects to obtain the vote of at most all α uninformed voters.

In order to examine the implications of the electorate's polarization for manipulation, we let $1 - \pi$ fraction of voters' ideal points x_i be distributed uniformly along the interval $(-\frac{1}{2}, \frac{1}{2})$, with the remaining π fraction of voters' ideal points forming two equally sized mass points at the limits of the interval; $0 \leq \pi < 1$.[16] The parameter π thus captures the electorate's *polarization*: in an electorate with π close to 1, most voters' ideal points are located at ideologically opposed poles.

The two candidates are policy-motivated in the Calvert–Wittman sense (Calvert, 1985; Wittman, 1983): each has an ideal policy θ_j that he would like to implement but understands that he will get to do so only if he wins the election. Each candidate's payoff is decreasing in the absolute distance between his ideal policy θ_j and the policy x implemented by the winner of the election, $u_j(x) = -|x - \theta_j|$.[17] Without a loss of generality, we let the incumbent's (challenger's) favorite policy be to the right (left) of the expected median voter, $\theta_B < 0 < \theta_A$.

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[13]The parameter α thus may be alternatively interpreted as the probability with which any citizen fails to discern manipulation.

[14]This assumption about uninformed voters is a simplification that effectively implies that uninformed voters' ideal policies are distributed uniformly around the electoral median and are overridden by positive levels of manipulation.

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

[16]As Figure 1 shows, these assumptions closely mirror the actual left–right distribution of the Venezuelan electorate.

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

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

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

or equivalently if i's ideal policy is

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

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 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, the payoff structure in Equation (1) implies that if the candidates were to propose identical platforms, all informed voters would side with the challenger for any positive amount of manipulation μ as long as the civic virtue parameter δ is positive.

In order to present the political intuitions behind our results in the most transparent manner, we proceed in two steps. We start by examining a simplified setting in which the candidates' platforms are exogenously fixed to be symmetric around the electorate's median. We then briefly discuss the implications of relaxing this assumption. A complete analysis along with formal propositions is presented in the Supplementary Appendix.

Manipulation with Exogenous Platforms

Suppose that the candidates' platforms are exogenously fixed to be symmetric around the electoral median 0. The vote shares that the two candidates obtain

when the incumbent manipulates at $\mu > 0$ are

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

$$V_B = (1 - \alpha) \left[(1 - \pi) \left(x_S(\mu) - \left[-\frac{1}{2} \right] \right) + \frac{\pi}{2} \right] + \alpha \left(\frac{1 - \mu M - \epsilon}{2} \right),$$

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

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

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

Maximizing $\Pr(V_A - V_B \geq 0)$ with respect to μ, we obtain[18]

$$\mu^* = \frac{\alpha}{1 - \alpha} \times \frac{M x_A}{\delta(1 - \pi)}.$$

The expression for μ^* summarizes the key result of this benchmark scenario: the equilibrium amount of manipulation μ^* as well as the resulting probability of the incumbent's victory are (weakly) increasing in the level of 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 an extreme amount of manipulation to abandon the incumbent in favor of the challenger.

The remaining comparative statics are also intuitive. A greater share of uninformed voters α, a more effective technology of manipulation M, and more extreme candidate platforms (a large x_A) all result in greater equilibrium amounts of manipulation. Civic virtue δ, meanwhile, has the opposite effect on μ^* because it raises voters' sensitivity to manipulation. Note, however, that even at arbitrarily low levels of polarization π, the equilibrium amount of manipulation μ^* is positive. It is only in the limit, as α or M go to zero or as δ goes to infinity that μ^* tends to zero. This is a consequence of the fact that even when $\pi = 0$, there is a significant degree of ideological disagreement within the electorate as informed voters' ideal points are distributed uniformly along the interval $(-\frac{1}{2}, \frac{1}{2})$.[19]

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[18]This is the interior solution. If polarization is extreme, $\pi > 1 - \left(\frac{\alpha}{1-\alpha} \right) \frac{M x_A}{\delta}$, the incumbent optimally manipulates to the fullest extent, $\mu^* = 1$. See the Supplementary Appendix.

[19]In the conclusion, we discuss the implications of introducing a mass of ideological centrists.

Manipulation and Platform Choice by Policy-Motivated Candidates

The analysis so far assumed exogenously fixed and symmetric candidate plat-forms. Given this simplification, the only strategic decision for the incumbent has been to choose an amount of manipulation μ that maximizes his probability of victory.[20] The assumption of exogenous candidate platforms raises two 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 build on one classic microfounda-tion for platform divergence: the assumption of policy-motivated candidates (Calvert, 1985; Wittman, 1983).[21] Due to the complexity of this analysis, we only highlight the key results of this setting and defer the rest 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, $x_A, x_B \in [\theta_B, \theta_A]$, their respective payoffs are

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

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

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

We see that as in the scenario with exogenous candidate platforms, the equi-librium amount of manipulation μ^* is increasing in polarization π. But addi-tionally, greater polarization results in a shift in both candidates' equilibrium

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[20] This, in fact, closely matches a frequently evoked rationale for electoral manipulation: to eliminate (Schedler, 2013) or insure against (Rundlett and Svolik, 2016) the uncertainty that is inherent in electoral competition.

[21] 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).

platforms to the right — toward the incumbent's ideal point. This shift obtains because manipulation now relates to candidates' optimal policy choices 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. As a result, the more polarized the electorate is, the closer are *both* candidates' equilibrium platforms to where the incumbent would like them to be.[22]

Empirical Analysis

We now empirically assess our theoretical framework's predictions about the relationship between polarization, voters' willingness to tolerate undemocratic behavior by elected politicians, and the subversion of democracy by incumbents. We focus on 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.[23] Our analysis proceeds in two steps: we start with a non-parametric analysis that is only informally motivated by our theoretical framework; we then take advantage of the close connection between our model and the candidate-choice experiment and estimate the model's key parameters. We conclude this section by highlighting the implications of our findings for measuring the public's support for democracy.

Venezuela is a prominent, contemporary instance of the subversion of democracy by an elected incumbent.[24] 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

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[22]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.

[23]The survey took place in October (pilot) and December (main round) 2016.

[24]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); for the role of oil, see Dunning (2008, Chapter 5).

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 took place before elections and, until the summer of 2017, there was little evidence of significant election-day fraud.[25] This accords with our theoretical focus on incumbent-driven pre-election manipulation (as opposed to 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 in the field 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. At the time of our survey, the left block consisted of the incumbent government led today by Chávez's successor Nicolás Maduro and the socialist PSUV; the right block was represented by the opposition alliance MUD led by Henrique Capriles.

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 apiece: 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.[26]

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

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[25]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 *et al.* (2017), and Handlin (2016).

[26]The candidate-choice experiment belongs to a broader category of survey-experimental techniques known as conjoint experiments (Hainmueller *et al.*, 2015).

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 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 and design considerations, 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.) The purpose of these specific platforms 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, by contrast, 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. We present an analysis of the remaining platforms in the Supplementary Appendix.

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.

Table 2: The candidate choice experiment: across-subject treatment assignments.

Treatment condition C1 vs. C2	Percent voting for C2 (95% C.I.)
T1: LD^+ vs. RD^+	37.46 (31.85, 43.41)
T2: LD^- vs. RD^+	53.52 (47.54, 59.41)
T3: RD^- vs. RD^+	63.64 (57.20, 69.64)

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

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 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 0.01 level (with a p-value < 0.01 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: *Identify the respondents who would support a more democratic candidate when the only choice is between two rightists; what fraction of these 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 platform results in an approximately 10% increase in C1's vote share — holding C1's D^- position constant. This change is statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

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., δ 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., δ is finite): voters are willing to vote for a less

democratic candidate if that candidate delivers on policy. In sum and consistent with out 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 vice versa.

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 their policy preferences. Specifically, our model implies that it is 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.[27] Figure 1 plots the distribution of these indicators. A notable feature of both histograms is a significant left–right polarization of the Venezuelan electorate.

Figure 2 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
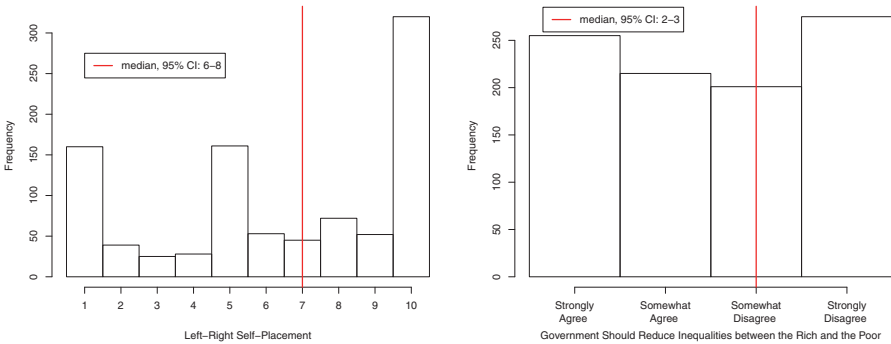

Figure 1: Left: a 10-point left–right self-placement scale; right: a scale based on attitudes toward economic inequality.

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[27]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.
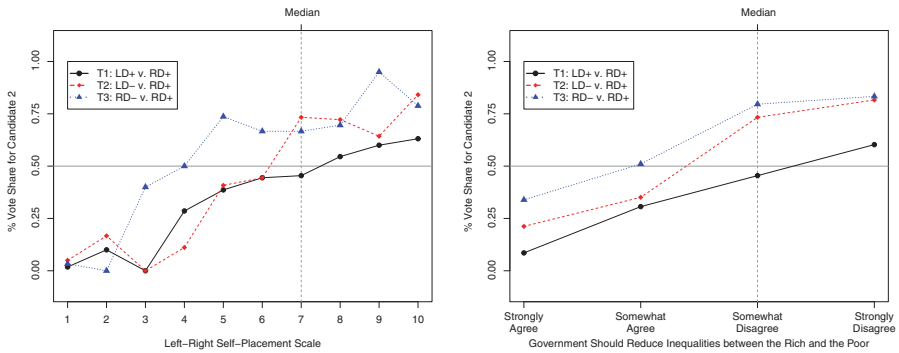
Figure 2: Fraction of respondents voting for candidate 2 by the 10-point left–right self-placement scale (a) and attitudes toward economic inequality (b).

the two treatment conditions occur around the median (with another large difference at the right extreme).[28] 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.[29]

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.[30] 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.[31]

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[28] 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 when using the nonparametric binomial test for proportions; higher levels of statistical significance obtain using the t-test/OLS. See the Supplementary Appendix for details.

[29] As mentioned 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.

[30] Only category 5 on the left–right self-placement scale is statistically significant at conventional levels when using the nonparametric binomial test for proportions; higher levels of statistical significance obtain using the t-test/OLS. See the Supplementary Appendix for details.

[31] 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.
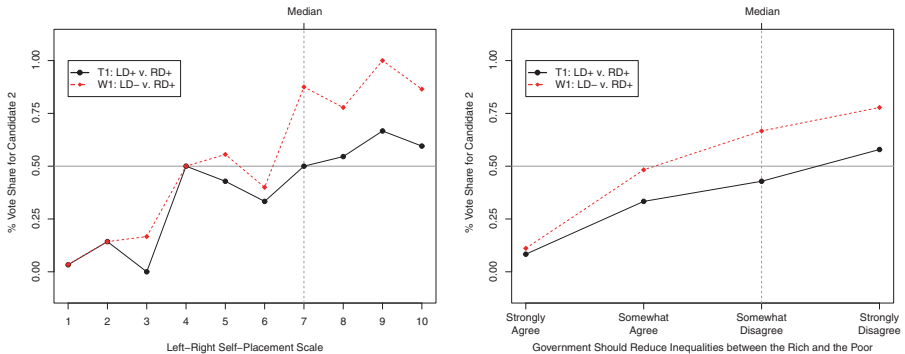
Figure 3: Within-subject analysis: Fraction of respondents voting for candidate 2 by the 10-point left–right self-placement scale (a) and attitudes toward economic inequality (b).

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 one. Due to space constraints, we focus here on the subset of respondents who were initially presented with the LD^+ vs. RD^+ scenario, which we now treat as a control, and were next asked to consider a shift to the LD^- vs. RD^+ scenario. This shift mirrors most closely the process of democratic backsliding in Venezuela.[32]

Both the overall and conditional comparisons parallel those from the earlier, across-subject analysis. Overall, a shift from the LD^+ vs. RD^+ to the LD^- vs. 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 least willing to trade off democratic values for their policy interests.

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[32]In the Supplementary Appendix, we analyze the remaining platform shifts within our survey experiment, the effects of which are consistent with our theoretical expectations.

Model-based Estimates

A key feature of our candidate-choice experiment is that its design was guided by our theoretical framework. This allows us to estimate key parameters from our model, including the civic virtue parameter δ. As we shall see, these theoretically informed parameters effectively summarize the empirical variation discussed so far.

Recall 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

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

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[33]:

$$\Pr(i \text{ votes for C2}|x_i, \tau_L) = \text{logit}^{-1}(\beta_0 + \beta_1 \tau_L + \beta_2 x_i). \tag{3}$$

In Equation (3), the T1 control scenario LD^+ vs. RD^+ serves as the baseline, the dummy τ_L denotes the T2 scenario LD^- vs. RD^+, and x_i is respondent i's ideal point on a left–right scale. Normalizing μ_j to 1 when L adopts the D^- platform and comparing the left-hand side of Equation (2) with the right-hand side of Equation (3), we obtain $\beta_0 = -(x_R^2 - x_L^2)$, $\beta_1 = \delta$, 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 β_1 estimates of civic virtue parameter δ, $\delta = \beta_1$. The expressions for β_0 and β_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^- vs. RD^+ 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,

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

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[33]See, e.g., Cameron and Trivedi (2005, pp. 476–478, 486–487).

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

Logit	Coef.	S.E.	95% C.I.
β_0 *(intercept)*	-3.223***	0.303	$(-3.842, -2.651)$
β_1 *(LD^- vs. RD^+)*	0.643***	0.208	(0.237, 1.054)
β_2 *(i's left-right position)*	0.413***	0.036	(0.344, 0.487)
Model parameters	**Mean**	**S.E.**	**95% C.I.**
δ	0.644	0.210	(0.238, 1.054)
x_L	7.703	0.368	(6.981, 8.441)
x_R	7.909	0.366	(7.189, 8.693)
$x_S(0)$	7.806	0.367	(7.084, 8.540)
$x_S(\mu)$	6.240	0.359	(5.504, 6.928)
N	551		
Log-likelihood	-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.

Estimates of these model parameters are presented in the bottom part of Table 3 and portrayed in Figure 4.[34] We see that when the only difference in the candidates' platforms concerns their left-right economic policies (this is the T1 control scenario LD^+ vs. RD^+), the swing voter's ideal point is located at $x_S(0) = 7.806$. 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 $x_S(\mu) = 6.240$, to the left of the electorate's median x_M.

The estimated civic virtue parameter causing this shift is positive, $\delta = 0.644$, and statistically different from zero. This implies that voters indeed value democracy for its own sake — a key assumption in our theoretical analysis. Note, furthermore, that our formulation of the voters' payoff function in (1) implicitly assumes that the weight that voters put on the candidates' left-right policies is one. In turn, our estimate of δ implies that voters' value

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[34]Estimates using a scale based on attitudes toward economic inequality are presented in the Supplementary Appendix.
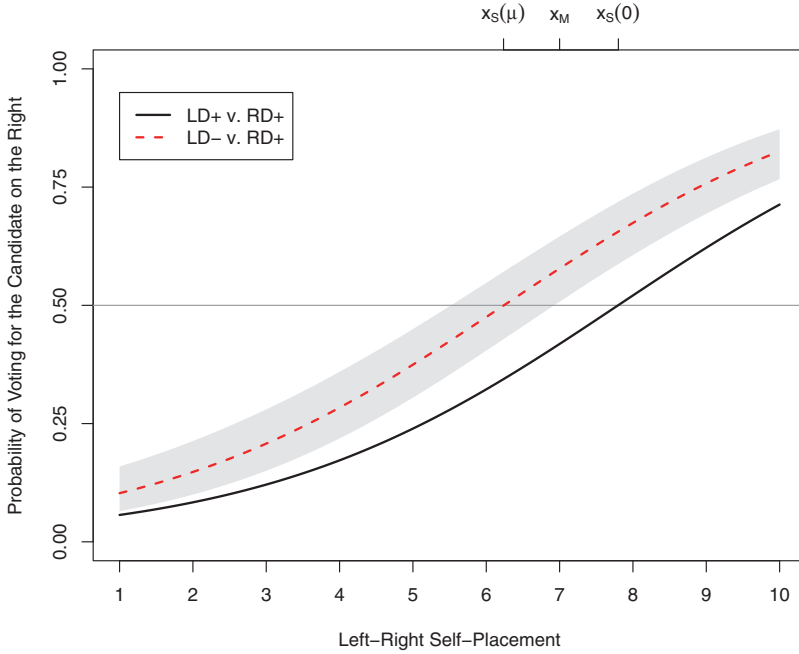
Figure 4: The probability of voting for the candidate on the right as a function of voters' left–right self-placement.

for democracy is only about 64% of the value that they attach to economic policy.[35]

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 those for whom the opposite holds. Specifically, we see in Figure 4 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. Their defection corresponds to an approximately 5% decline in the leftist candidate's vote share and — assuming that manipulation does not make up for that loss

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[35]This quantity likely overstates the value that voters place on democracy as the estimates in Table 3 are based on the entire sample. As discussed earlier, voters on the right have an instrumental reason for supporting pro-democratic reforms.

of voters — results in his defeat. 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 the latter.

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, 91% 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^- vs. 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. This consistent with Venezuelan political development since Hugo Chávez's election to the presidency in 1998.

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 existing measures of support for democracy. The conventional 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?"[36] Compare our respondents' answers to this direct question and their choices in the candidate-choice experiment. Figure 5(a) 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 86% of these respondents either "strongly" or "somewhat" agree with the statement "Democracy may have problems but it is the best system of government." Yet about a half of the same respondents (55%) 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 little 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

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[36]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).
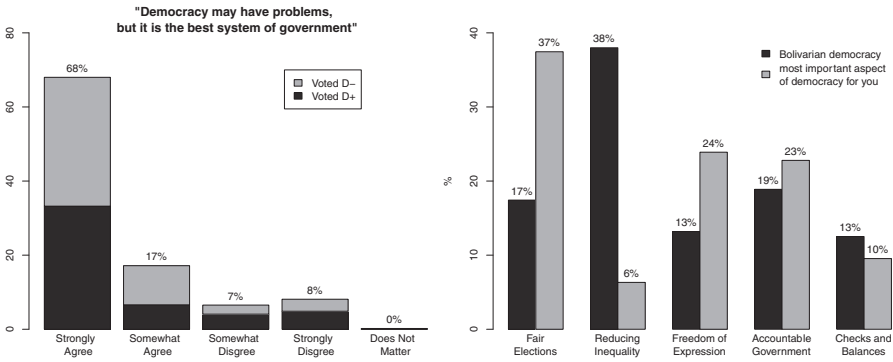
Figure 5: (a) Support for democracy as measured by agreement with the statement "Democracy may have problems but it is the best system of government " vs. voting for the more democratic candidate in the candidate-choice experiment. (b) The most important aspect of "Bolivarian democracy" vs. the most important aspect of democracy for the respondent.

Figure 5 — is no better at predicting support for the more democratic candidate than the flip of a coin!

A potential objection to this analysis 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 all the while undermining civil liberties and constitutional checks and balances. 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."[37] Figure 5(b) 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 inequality. In other words, the vast majority of Venezuelans subscribe to the same conception of democracy that

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[37] 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?"

political scientists do — consistent with a similar analysis conducted by Canache (2012) using data from almost a decade ago.

In sum, conventional measures of support for democracy appear to be potentially misleading as indicators of voters' willingness to resist the authoritarian tendencies of elected politicians.[38] Our analysis suggests two reasons for this. First and as observed in earlier research (Schedler and Sarsfield, 2007), direct questions about support for democracy are vulnerable to social desirability bias: citizens in most democracies have been taught that the only politically correct answer to the question "Democracy may have problems but it is the best system of government; do you agree?" is some form of "I agree." By contrast, our approach avoids social desirability bias as multiple differences across candidates allow respondents to conceal potentially politically incorrect reasons for their choices (see also Hainmueller *et al.*, 2015). Second, direct questions about support for democracy preclude — by design — any measurement of respondents' willingness to trade off democratic principles for competing political ends. Yet such trade-offs, as we have argued, are at the heart of the process of democratic backsliding. We therefore interpret our candidate-choice experiment as an alternative, revealed-preference technique that measures support for democracy by probing its robustness to trade-offs between democratic principles and competing political ends while mirroring the most relevant real-world political act: voting in an election.

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.[39] In studies of electoral malpractice, this frequently entails protest, rebellion, or even outright civil war.[40] Yet when the primary manner by which democracies break down is their gradual subversion by elected incumbents, voters have at their disposal a

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[38]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 past research on the support for democracy in Venezuela, 87% of our respondents agreed with the statement "Democracy may have problems but it is the best system of government" and 86% disapproved of the proposition "Today, our country is going through difficult times. Would it be justified for the president to close the National Assembly and govern alone?"

[39]See, e.g., Acemoglu and Robinson (2005), Boix (2003), Fearon (2011), and Przeworski *et al.* (2015).

[40]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).

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. This conception of the role of ordinary people in democratic survival stands apart from 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, 1960, pp. 83–96), our arguments imply that elites with authoritarian ambitions succeed in subverting democracy only when given that opportunity by a factious public.

Our focus on the intensity of political conflict raises the question of whether a mass of centrist voters could provide precisely the kind of credible deterrent against manipulation that polarized societies lack. Our framework suggests an affirmative answer: 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 the defection of a sizeable mass of centrists may trigger an electoral penalty severe enough to forestall manipulation entirely. Our arguments thus provide a microfoundation for one of the most prominent conjectures in the study of democratization: that a strong middle class is essential for democratic stability (Lipset, 1960; Moore, 1966).[41]

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[41] 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" (1960, p. 66). On the role of the middle class in democratization, see also Acemoglu and Robinson (2005), Ansell and Samuels (2014), Boix (2003), and Debs and Morrison (2015). See Rosenfeld (2017) for a recent empirical assessment of this proposition.

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