Party System Collapse and Democratic Decay in Venezuela: From Ideological Convergence to Institutional Polarization

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Throughout the second half of the 20th century, Venezuela was a beacon of liberal democracy in Latin America. While many of its neighbors in the region suffered under repressive authoritarian regimes, in Venezuela free and fair elections were routine, and power alternated peacefully between competing political parties. However, while democracy was becoming common throughout the region in the late 20th century, Venezuela underwent a period of deinstitutionalization, extreme polarization, and democratic erosion. This led to the establishment of an increasingly entrenched authoritarian regime, making the country an indicator for the current wave of democratic decay in various countries

across Latin America and beyond.

This paper argues that Venezuela's democratic erosion began during the 1990s representational crisis, which caused the collapse of the country's traditional party system. This facilitated the rise of Hugo Chávez and shaped the nature of political competition that followed, marked by polarization rooted in different views regarding the significance and legitimacy of liberal democratic institutions. This institutional polarization has resulted in the deterioration of democracy and posed a significant challenge to reinstating democratic principles.

In the succeeding pages, I will elaborate on each of these points. Firstly, I summarize prior research that describes how a representational crisis led to the collapse of the party system. Following this, I explore how this collapse created an opportunity for a populist challenger and significantly altered the political landscape. I explore how polarization within institutions on the importance and goals of democratic institutions is contributing to the erosion of democracy. I conclude by reflecting on how we can learn from these experiences to better understand similar erosion processes elsewhere and consider potential paths forward.

Representational Crisis and Party System Collapse

Political parties play a crucial role in the achievement of a fundamental goal of representative democracy, which is to give citizens a voice and influence in the political processes and decisions that affect their lives (Luna *et al*., 2021). Party systems serve as the primary means of connecting ordinary citizens to the state, and ideally they should accomplish this task by providing voters with valuable programmatic choices that enable them to vote for a vision of society that aligns with their interests and aspirations when they go to the polls. If linkage does not adopt meaningful programmatic options, parties can still foster citizens' attachment to the democratic order by including significant sectors of society and ensuring some form of voice or influence for these groups, or by providing people with tangible benefits through clientelist exchanges (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007; Luna, 2014).

Parties that do not fulfill their primary responsibility of establishing connections through one or more of these methods are prone to deterioration. When all parties in the system lose their collective linkage capacity, the political party system as a whole becomes vulnerable to collapse. A prime example lies in the Venezuelan party system, which collapsed in 1998. In other words, Venezuelans rejected not just the ruling party, but also all the options tied to the traditional system (Morgan, 2011).

To comprehend the fall of a whole party system, it is crucial to account for both structure and agency. This is necessary because we must explain not only the decline of a single party, which is commonplace, but instead the rejection of the entire system. Generally, the deterioration of linkage occurs when structural changes threaten existing strategies for linkage while contextual limitations prevent the necessary adaptations to respond to such threats (Morgan & Meléndez, 2017; Roberts, 2014). However, each form of linkage has unique susceptibility to various structural threats and distinct constraints on the required adaptation. In this way, to comprehend the collapse of a party system, it is essential to outline the linkage profile of the party system and subsequently identify the exact structural obstacles and contextual limitations that eroded each linkage strategy within the system.

At its height, the traditional Venezuelan party system maintained three major linkage strategies. First, there was programmatic representation, which took two forms: Public policies that responded to the most important problems of the country as well as ideological options presented by different parties in the system (Karl, 1997; Morgan, 2007); second, parties provided group-based linkages, which incorporate major sectors of society along the worker-owner divide into the party system (Martz & Myers, 1994; McCoy, 1989), and finally; parties used clientelist exchanges to provide simple material benefits to those marginalized from other forms of linkage.

Beginning in the 1980s and accelerating in the 1990s, each of these linkage strategies lost the capacity to connect citizens to the democratic system. Identification with the two major parties, Acción Democrática and COPEI, decreased from 70% in 1988 to less than 20% by the end of the century (Morgan, 2007). The parties no longer retained control of the legislative and executive branches and the logic of partisan

competition shifted entirely. Representational crisis was the cause of the collapse of the system in 1998 (Morgan, 2011).

What caused such a significant collapse? Why did Venezuelans not only reject the ruling party but also turn away from all the options within the traditional party system, leading to the decline of all the old parties and the transformation of the party system? A comprehensive analysis of the Venezuelan party system collapse required detailed examination of the structural challenges and contextual limitations which hindered each linkage strategy. To this end, we need to explain why programmatic representation could not be sustained by the parties, how their group-based incorporation was curtailed, and why clientelist capacity was insufficient to meet demand. And it is imperative to analyze the concurrent events that led to a severe representational crisis and the breakdown of the entire political party system.

When considering programmatic representation, three factors come together to hinder linkage capacity: a basic crisis that questions the fundamental logic of policymaking, external constraints that restrict the policy response to the crisis resulting in only unpopular or unworkable options being available, and inter-party agreements that involve all the major parties in the unsuccessful response to the crisis. In Venezuela, the decade leading up to the collapse of the party system witnessed all three elements of the process.

An economic crisis emerged, demanding significant innovations in public policies (Roberts, 2014). Venezuela's political economy was fundamentally based on oil revenue distribution (Karl, 1997), a plan that ceased to function in the 1990s. At the same time, international financial institutions offered a range of policy options that imposed fiscal and political restrictions, hindering the governing parties' ability to respond efficiently and effectively to the crisis (Corrales, 2010). As a result, the only political options available to counter the crisis were either unpopular, ineffective, or both. Therefore, the political parties in power during the 1990s were unable to provide objective answers to the main issues affecting the population.

This lack of programmatic representation reached the system level when a series of interparty agreements committed all the major parties in the system to this unpopular and ineffective policy response.

Interparty compromise and conciliation had long been common in the Venezuelan party system (Coppedge, 1994), but throughout the 1990s these arrangements became more frequent and more formal. During the five years preceding collapse, Acción Democrática and COPEI had entered into repeated and public agreements with each other as well as Rafael Caldera's Convergencia and even the most significant parties on the left including Movimiento al Socialismo and La Causa R (Morgan, 2011, pp. 118-119). These agreements, which formally aligned traditional parties across the entire ideological spectrum, obscured programmatic differentiation between the parties and effectively eliminated any meaningful alternative to the neoliberal status quo from the traditional party system (Fernández, 2001; Lupu, 2016; Morgan, 2011).

In the waning years of Rafael Caldera's second term in the presidential office, Venezuelans became increasingly frustrated with both the ongoing crisis and the government's lack of an effective policy response, a situation that caused widespread popular discontent. Interparty agreements and successive governments' adherence to the neoliberal status quo, despite their stated ideological commitments or election promises, has led to a frustration with the failed status quo that goes beyond rejecting individual political parties. This dissatisfaction has escalated to the level of the entire system, as voters perceive no significant policy differences between the major parties and cannot identify any alternatives within the system.

Finding an alternative required looking beyond the traditional party system, as programmatic representation failed throughout, contributing to an exodus from the traditional parties and the political and economic status quo they represented. This facilitated the rise of an anti-system option that offered a substantive policy response to the crisis and could credibly promise a departure from the neoliberal status quo: Hugo Chávez.

Regarding the incorporation of major sectoral interests, Venezuelan parties historically included interests on both sides of the worker-owner divide. However, significant social transformations in the 1980s and 1990s redirected the focus of interest competition away from this traditional division and towards inclusion in or exclusion from the informal economy. Structural changes in the economy have reduced

the formal sectors on both sides of the traditional worker-owner divide, while simultaneously expanding the proportion of the population reliant on more informal sources of income. Specifically, the informal sector has constituted half of the workforce in the latter part of the 20th century. The unemployment rate doubled from the 1980s to the 1990s, and 70% of the population lived in poverty. Additionally, union membership decreased by over 60% during this period (Morgan, 2018, pp. 298-299).

The organizations required a significant reorientation to cope with these changes and to integrate the informal sector alongside their traditional bases in the formal sectors of the economy; but it was difficult to pivot in this way as the nature of informal sector interests along with the parties' existing organizational structures made such adaptation efforts a high-risk proposition. The informal sector did not have mass-based organizations that could be readily mobilized, and their interests often seemed to be in conflict with those in the formal sectors who had long constituted the core bases of the parties, especially unions.

In addition, the hierarchical incorporation strategies of the parties prevented the integration of the diverse and varied interests of the informal sector: None of the parties, including the left-wing factions, attempted to incorporate the growing informal sector. Such adaptation efforts were extremely precarious under the parties' current organizational structures, and there was a complete lack of interest in making any attempts to do so. As a former president of MAS told me in an interview, "the traditional system [of political parties] excluded millions of Venezuelans, there was a lack of opportunity, poverty and misery. This exclusion today constitutes the main conflict in Venezuelan society."

The party system could not adapt to this transformed social reality, and as a result, the portions of the Venezuelan population reached through sectoral-based linkage strategies narrowed. Those in sectors marginalized from the system of interest incorporation abandoned the traditional parties at much higher rate than those in incorporated group members who were twice as likely to remain aligned with the old system (Morgan, 2018, p. 299).

Clientelism emerged as the primary linkage strategy among marginalized sectors. Nevertheless, the feasibility of using clientelist options also waned. Clientelism is not a reliable way of promoting steady linkage, which makes it vulnerable to fluctuations in supply and demand (Piattoni, 2001). In Venezuela during the 1990s, clientelist demand increased, while supply constricted. Demand increased due to social changes that marginalized more people from traditional group-based incorporation and electoral decentralization, which multiplied the need for clientelist exchanges at the subnational level (Lalander, 2004; Morgan, 2018). Supply decreased due to the economic crisis and the series of reforms that removed remaining resources from the domain of clientelist distribution (Baptista, 2005).

As demand grew faster than supply, more and more people perceived clientelism as an exclusive practice, turning it into something resembling corruption rather than a legitimate form of political networking (Morgan, 2018). Despite research indicating that corruption played a significant role in the disintegration of the party system (Seawright, 2012), the notion of corruption as a widespread issue only gained traction after the decay of political networking had already set in. The prior perception of corruption within the general public was viewed as lenient (Romero, 1997, p. 19). During the mid-1990s, a majority of Venezuelans appraised the government's efforts to combat corruption favorably. However, following the acuity of the economic crisis and limited supply, coupled with increasing clientelist demand, there was a shift in the opinion towards a more negative outlook on corruption as an unresolved issue (Morgan, 2018, p. 301). Consequently, the legitimacy of the system was delegitimized by the decay of clientelism.

With the failure of programmatic representation, the narrowing of interest incorporation, and the decay of clientelism, all major forms of linkage lost capacity in the 1990s, and a majority of Venezuelans were unmoored from the traditional party system (Morgan, 2007, 2011). Consequently, the system collapsed, opening the door to the rise of *chavismo*, which stepped into the linkage gaps left by the old system.

Populism and the Restructuring of Contestation

The collapse of the traditional party system was a critical juncture for Venezuelan politics (Roberts, 2014). Collapse opened the door to a populist challenger and fundamentally restructured the nature of political contestation. In this way, explaining the causes of the party system's collapse helps make sense of the political order that emerged in its wake, which is my intent here.

To begin, it is important to understand that *chavismo* emerged as the successor to the failed party system. Many of its fundamental characteristics derive from its origins as a movement reacting against the stasis that the old system had come to impose and promising to fill the gaps in representation that led to its demise. Characteristics including the social base of the movement, its ideology, and its efforts to disrupt old practices of negotiation and *acuerdos* (compromise among major stakeholders) between political elites are rooted in this reaction against old patterns (Morgan, 2018).

For instance, the traditional parties centered their attention on including the formal sectors through appeals based on groups. However, this led to large segments of Venezuelan society being cut off from the old system, and *chavismo* utilized these marginalized sectors for support. *Chavista* leaders explained in interviews how the traditional parties' inability to connect with the poor, the unemployed, and the informal sector enabled them to establish their base effectively. In its early years and under Chávez's leadership, *chavismo* presented policy proposals and implemented programs concentrating on meeting basic needs and investing in human capital development for these communities. Impoverished Venezuelans and individuals dependent on informal sector jobs reacted positively.

Even in years when *chavismo* enjoyed widespread support, those belonging to traditional marginalized groups were more likely supporters than those who were more affluent or in the formal sector (Canache, 2002; Hellinger, 2003; Molina, 2002). These typically marginalized groups have exhibited greater dependability and zeal in supporting *chavismo* during periods of stress and uncertainty. This tendency was evident when economically disadvantaged and unorganized Venezuelans mobilized to support the regime during

the 2002 coup attempt, the opposition-led general strike later that year, and the 2004 campaign for recall referendum on the president (Ciccariello-Maher, 2013; López M. & Lander, 2007). Support from sectors outside of the traditional party system has been essential to *chavismo*'s legitimization of their power through elections. Moreover, lower-income and less-educated Venezuelans are significantly more likely to align themselves with the *chavista* apparatus (García-Guadilla, 2005; LAPOP, 2012; Valencia, 2005). As recently as the 2020 election cycle, public opinion data suggested that approval of the incumbent *chavista* government was three times higher among Venezuelans in the bottom income strata than those in the middle, while the alternative government headed by Juan Guaidó was evaluated favorably by twice as many people in the middle as compared to the bottom strata (Datanálisis, 2020).

We observe similar patterns when we consider the geographical distribution of votes, with *chavista* candidates tending to attract larger vote shares in poorer regions and neighborhoods (García-Guadilla, 2005; López & Lander, 2007; Morgan, 2018). Of course, the movement has also attracted support from new economic elites emerging under *chavista* rule as well as some elements of the old parties' traditional support bases in the formal sector (Cyr, 2013; Ellner, 2013); but its core base and by far its largest set of supporters comes from those marginalized from the group-based incorporation strategies employed by the old system.

Similarly, *chavismo* pledged programmatic connection where the historic parties failed. As conventional parties ideologically aligned with a neoliberal agenda, Chávez introduced a left-leaning substitute. This stance enticed those positioned on the ideological left and the ones dissatisfied with the neoliberal status quo in general (Molina, 2002). *Chavista* politicians and supporters in the general public continue to ideologically position themselves further to the left compared to those aligned with the opposition. The movement's rhetoric has consistently maintained its left-leaning traits during its time in government, despite tangible programmatic policymaking initially being significant and expanding social policies for poor and marginalized sectors. However, such policymaking has largely disintegrated (Lopez, 2011; Morgan, 2011, 2018). Overall, *chavismo*'s appeals to marginalized sectors and left-wing ideological positioning enabled Chávez's rise to power and

have lasting effects on the movement's contours.

The drawbacks of the traditional party system also shaped the alternative that emerged to take its place in other significant ways. Perhaps most notably, the old system was controlled by a group of political elites determined to uphold the existing economic, social, and political order, despite its collapse. The incapacity of this group to adjust discredited the entire political system, as outlined above. This delegitimization process not only weakened particular parties or leaders, but it also tainted the entire political framework.

As a result of a yearning for a significant deviation from the existing state of affairs, Chávez presented himself as the solution. Although he proffered an unconventional programmatic agenda and extended an olive branch to marginalized groups, as highlighted earlier, Chávez's political logic represented a complete departure from tradition.

Hugo Chávez pledged to alter entrenched political procedures and promote the will of the people, attracting those dissatisfied with the customary practices of interparty agreements and intra-elite negotiations that typified the former system (Hawkins, 2010). Instead of allocating resources to party organizations, Chávez cultivated a devoted following. He employed a populist discourse and made personal appeals based on his charisma and status as a political outsider, which legitimized his promises to upend the prevailing order (Hawkins, 2009; Sagarzazu & Thies, 2019). These aspects of *chavismo* placed the post-collapse system in stark contrast to the conventional norms and procedures of the former party system, which was dominated by an entrenched elite.

With this shift, post-collapse politics in Venezuela display several concerning elements that jeopardize democracy. The process of deinstitutionalization has now encompassed almost all significant public and private institutions, which began with the party system. However, upon their initial rise to power, the *chavista* government perceived several aspects of the standard institutional structure as jeopardizing the establishment of their new political regime. Consequently, *chavistas* took action to erode and abolish various institutions that could have acted as a check on their authority. One of the primary deinstitutionalization efforts was the complete rewriting

of the constitution. However, this process had a widespread impact on both government and civil society institutions and affected institutions of all kinds, including organized labor, media organizations, opposition parties, state agencies, the legislature, and the courts, across the traditional political spectrum.

In addition, because the primary potential counterweight to *chavismo* —the opposition in its various iterations— has been repeatedly defeated both in the streets and at the polls, efforts to keep this process of deinstitutionalization at bay have floundered. Instead, elements of the opposition have also used extra-institutional strategies that have served to discredit and undermine political institutions. Most overtly, the 2002 coup attempt circumvented democratic processes that were still intact at the time; but other more subtle moves, such as boycotting elections or failing to invest in party building, also contribute to the enervation of institutions and procedures that are integral to democracy (Hsieh *et al*., 2011; López & Lander, 2007; Sagarzazu, 2011).

Instead of centralized and potentially fossilized institutions dominating society and politics, as was the case during the *puntofijista* era (cooptation by and compromise among stakeholders of the political elite), personalism is now the dominant force in Venezuelan politics. The most prominent example of this phenomenon was the oversized presence of Hugo Chávez. However, beyond Chávez, contemporary discussions of Venezuelan politics largely revolve around individual names, personalities, and conflicts rather than institutional frameworks and organizations. As a result, the Venezuelan political landscape for the past 20 years has consistently revolved around a personalist divide between the *chavistas* and anti-*chavistas*, as noted by Cyr (2013) and Morgan (2018).

Institutional Polarization and Democratic Erosion

These dynamics of deinstitutionalization and personalization in politics, which often occur after a collapse of party systems, not only in Venezuela but also in other post-collapse contexts like Italy, Greece, and Spain, can endanger democracy in several ways (Casal B. & Rama, 2020; Halikiopoulou & Vasilopoulou, 2018; Taggart & Rovira-

Kaltwasser, 2016; Verbeek, 2016; Vidal, 2018; Zanotti, 2021). The challenges of achieving lasting political agreements are exacerbated by deinstitutionalization and personalism. Institutions play a critical role in ensuring that agreements are not only binding for those present at the negotiating table at a specific moment, but also for a broader set of institutionally involved actors over an extended period of time. Without institutions to facilitate productive debates and commitment to creating and maintaining solutions, conflict tends to intensify and become more volatile. Political differences in Venezuela have become increasingly extra-institutional since the collapse of the party system, manifested in street protests and on the international stage, extending well beyond the structured confines of domestic political institutions.

In addition to heightened conflict, the post-collapse setting is also vulnerable to a distinct type of conflict, typically revolving around disagreements about the foundational goals and structure of the political system. While there are some conventional ideological differences between the government and opposition, these partisan divisions are not the primary aspect of conflict (Morgan, 2018, pp. 312-313). Any differences between the left and right pale in comparison to the deep chasms of personal loyalties and struggles for control over the state. Winning control of the state is not about pursuing different policy goals but rather deciding the rules of the political game (Hawkins, 2010). This means that polarization is more institutional than purely ideological (Roberts, 2022).

Ideological vis-à-vis Institutional Polarization

Much of the increasing scholarly focus on polarization views the phenomenon as a matter of degree instead of a fundamental difference. This perspective is rooted in Giovanni Sartori's seminal work from 1976, which defined polarization as the ideological gap between political parties. Many attempts to comprehend the origins and outcomes of polarization initiate with this theoretical framework, and then move on to construct empirical measures that highlight the degree of divergence between parties within the policy spectrum (e.g., Hetherington, 2001; Poole & Rosenthal, 1984).

Some research notes that the polarization most concerning for democracy in contemporary politics involves clustering into social and political groups. This leads to competing clusters developing an us-versus-them mentality that pits two opposing sides against each other (e.g., Arbatli & Rosenberg, 2021; McCoy, Rahman, Somer, 2018). This conceptualization recognizes that the type of polarization that can weaken democracy and jeopardize social cohesion and political order takes on a different tenor than can be captured by simply focusing on ideological distance. According to this perspective, polarization measures aim to capture the clustering of political society into ideologically distant groups, as opposed to distance alone (e.g., Dalton, 2008; Esteban & Ray, 1994). While this approach surpasses ideological distance and aims to grasp Manichean conflict, it is still grounded in a Sartorian logic that emphasizes ideology as the heart of the conflict. The majority of this research still portrays polarization in terms of ideological extremes, rather than examining the core issues that drive polarization, as I do here (but see Garcia-Guadilla & Mallen, 1999; Roberts, 2022).

The identification of the central node of conflict around which polarization occurs is vital both conceptually and theoretically. This is because certain types of polarization are expected, normal, and even essential for democratic representation, while other types are harmful and may even run counter to democracy (McCoy, Rahman, Somer, 2018). In my research, I delimit two distinct forms of polarization, with varying central nodes of conflict.

The first kind is **ideological polarization**, which follows the classical Sartorian conceptualization and emphasizes the ideological distance between parties. In this category, diverse parties or participants within the democratic system hold distinct goals for what the government should strive to achieve and how it should be done. We frequently associate polarization with a left-right divide, but it can also manifest across other policy domains. These may include competing stances on immigration, religion, or urban-rural divides, among others. Greater discrepancies over programmatic goals result in heightened polarization. The second kind is **Institutional polarization**, which is predominantly about democratic institutions and procedures. The varying interpretations of the value and purpose of democracy lead to greater polarization. As I explain below, the modes of polarization have

different implications for the practice and maintenance of democratic politics, as different focal points of conflict emerge in ideological and institutional forms.

Ideological polarization is ubiquitous in democratic contests where diverse political actors deliver distinctive policy choices. Indeed, the notion of programmatic representation, as described previously, mandates a certain degree of ideological polarization to offer voters significantly meaningful policy alternatives. Having programmatic options in this fashion allows individuals to assess various policy perspectives and select the one that aligns best with their personal interests and priorities. Therefore, ideological polarization promotes programmatic representation via policy distinctions among parties in the democratic system.

We can see the role that this ideological polarization can play within ordinary democratic contestation by considering the heyday of Venezuela's traditional party system. During the 1960s, 1970s, and into the 1980s, Acción Democrática and COPEI offered ideological options to voters, which played a role in supporting programmatic representation during that period. This programmatic differentiation between the parties was far from harmful to democracy. Rather, it was integral to the stability of the party system and the institutionalization of democratic competition. Conversely, as I have discussed above, when the parties converged ideologically —in other words, as ideological polarization evaporated completely— the old system became vulnerable. The deterioration of programmatic representation put increased pressure on other forms of linkage and ultimately paved the way to party system collapse and the rise of authoritarianism. Cross-national research also suggests that this pattern in which democratic institutions erode as a result of ideological convergence (or lack of ideological polarization) is not unique to Venezuela but has contributed to party system decay and broader democratic decline in many other contexts as well (Berman & Kundani, 2021; Morgan, 2011; Roberts, 2014).

Chávez capitalized on the ideological alignment within the previous system, gaining support from left-wing voters who preferred a more interventionist state over the dominant neoliberal policies presented by the traditional parties toward the end of the old system. The remaining

ideological gap between *chavismo* and the leading opposition options persists, with the opposition being more inclined towards market-based economic policies than the more interventionist *chavistas*. However, the intense polarization presently defining Venezuelan politics cannot be explained by the small divergence between the two factions in terms of conventional left-right ideological differences.

Rather, the primary form of polarization that drives a deep wedge between *chavistas* and anti-*chavistas* today is of a different sort entirely —it is what we can call institutional polarization (Roberts, 2022). Institutional polarization is less about the role of policy and more about the goals and nature of democracy. As Ken Roberts defines it, institutional polarization "entails frontal conflict over the basic rules of the political game —rules that were designed and evolved, in large part, to process and manage political conflict itself" (2022, pp. 17-18). Here the division occurs between forces on one side that emphasize the rules and practices of a liberal democratic order —things like free and fair elections and the rule of law—and those on the other side who are more interested in substantive policy goals and who are perhaps more willing to compromise or actively undermine liberal democratic procedures in pursuit of these goals. This second form of polarization is a more fundamental divide that is focused not just on competing policy paths within a shared commitment to the basic rules of the game, but instead is a more fundamental form of polarization about the purpose and value of liberal democracy itself.

In Venezuela, polarization between institutions divides the government and opposition over the importance of formal democratic rules such as elections and respect for civil liberties versus the pursuit of substantive goals like social equality and the interests of the general public (García-Guadilla & Mallen, 2019; Hawkins, 2010; Morgan, 2018). Surveys indicate that these issues consistently differentiate *chavistas* and anti-*chavistas*. For example, opposition supporters tend to prioritize civil rights, political parties, and democracy as the optimal form of governance, while those who support the government often favor direct democracy without institutional mediations and are accepting of non-democratic government institutions (Datanálisis, 2020; LAPOP, 2012; Morgan, 2018).

Of course, these opinions are not merely theoretical commitments to a particular style of government, but rather indicate the position each group holds regarding the current power structure. The opposing side is understandably more focused on civil rights and protections for minority groups since they lack control of the government. Consequently, they are more open to foreign involvement in domestic politics (Datanálisis, 2020). Today, in Venezuela, polarization regarding the importance of liberal democratic institutions and practices is significantly greater than in other Latin American countries (Handlin, 2017; Morgan, 2018, pp. 317-318).

How Institutional Polarization Harms Democracy

The differences between ideological and institutional polarization are more than just semantic. The first form of polarization around policy differences is good and healthy for democratic competition. The second type around the importance of democratic procedures can be much more problematic and has the potential to produce significant democratic backsliding.

Furthermore, a democratic system lacking policy-based polarization is highly susceptible to becoming vulnerable to the second, more insidious form of democratic polarization. In Venezuela, the absence of substantial ideological alternatives within the established party system caused the system to lose its programmatic legitimacy among disillusioned voters. As individuals sought an alternative to address the worsening economic and social circumstances, they searched for options outside the conventional political parties. As individuals sought an alternative to address the declining economic and social circumstances, they searched for options outside the conventional political parties. Consequently, they gravitated towards a leader who pledged to deliver solutions, which included ensuring representation for those marginalized by the established system and addressing economic inequality. This approach aimed to alleviate the hardships faced by vulnerable groups, who had encountered years of declining living standards. In other words, they prioritized the achievement of substantive outcomes over the formal democratic procedures that are intended to produce them.

The emergence of this type of polarization concerning the nature of the rules of the game presents a formidable challenge to contain, and its persistence poses a significant threat to the sustainability of democratic institutions and practices. The Venezuelan experience can shed light on some of the dire consequences that can arise from this situation.

In Venezuela, institutional polarization clearly **preceded** the country's slide into authoritarianism. I propose two primary mechanisms through which institutional polarization can lead to democratic erosion.

First, institutional polarization pits the procedures of democracy against the substantive goals of democracy —instead of seeing these as complementary, institutional polarization positions them as being in competition with each other. Consequently, politicians and ordinary voters are faced with a trade-off between preserving democratic institutions but not finding much by way of substantive representation or allowing democratic procedures to be compromised but gaining the substantive outcomes they care about. Once democracy is seen as being orthogonal to the substantive interests of the majority of ordinary citizens who should presumably benefit from democratic practices, it becomes increasingly difficult to sustain abstract investment in the regime, which paves the way for democratic erosion.

Second, institutional polarization means that the democratic rules of the game are no longer a given but rather they are the subject of political debate. When this occurs, politicians, activists, voters, even international actors become willing to use extra-institutional and non-democratic strategies to hold onto or regain power and to accomplish their substantive goals. We have seen this dynamic in Venezuela where both sides of the *chavista*-opposition divide have increasingly resorted to tactics that are indisputably undemocratic. Of course, *chavismo* controls the levers of state power so their strategies have involved more overt violations not only of liberal democratic rules but also of fundamental political and even human rights —censoring the press, manipulating elections, circumventing policymaking institutions, imprisoning opponents, etc. However, the opposition has not consistently shied away from approaches that neglect domestic democratic institutions like investing in political parties and have instead resorted to pursuing extra-institutional solutions like international pressure campaigns or even direct intervention.

The dynamics inherent in both of these processes suggest that under conditions of institutional polarization strengthening or protecting democratic institutions is often seen as secondary to other more immediate political goals having to do with control of state power or the pursuit of certain substantive interests. When this happens there are no guardians of democracy, and the regime is highly likely to erode (Arbatli & Rosenberg, 2021; Svolik, 2019). This is precisely what happened in Venezuela. Moreover, once the regime does erode, reinstating democracy under conditions of institutional polarization is quite challenging because few political actors are prioritizing democratic logics of contestation as a means for resolving social and political conflict.

In summary, it is hasty to equate all forms of polarization. Representative democracy requires some level of policy-based polarization to function effectively. Without it, representation and electoral competition lose their substance. However, we must distinguish this valuable type of polarization from the harmful polarization concerning the value of democratic institutions which hinders the maintenance and restoration of democracy.

Conclusion

Party system collapse and the representational crisis that causes it puts democracy at risk. The representational crisis prompts individuals to doubt democracy's capability to fulfill their substantive concerns. Subsequently, the party system's breakdown contributes to the deinstitutionalization of democracy, providing an opportunity for successors who promise to address the representational shortcomings of the old parties, but who may lack a firm commitment to democratic processes and institutions. Instead of parties with differing ideologies providing substantive representation, institutional polarization regarding the worth of representative democracy and its fundamental establishments becomes established. These procedures are visible in the progressive decline and eventual collapse of Venezuelan democracy during the past 25 years.

The Venezuelan experience also serves as a warning regarding procedures of institutional polarization and the erosion of democracy throughout the hemisphere. Recent developments in Chile indicate a growing democratic fragility, which stems from various sources such as representational shortcomings, party system deterioration, and institutional polarization. The traditional party system that was once highly institutionalized and offered some programmatic diversity has lost its legitimacy due to the lack of meaningful policy differentiation. The political establishment strives to maintain its grip on power by uniting against external interference. This echoes the situation in 1990s Venezuela and is currently resonating in Chile (Morgan & Meléndez, 2017). The nation has witnessed a decline in the established democratic order's competitive patterns and witnessed the emergence of anti-establishment figures advocating for undemocratic practices. Democracy in Chile is at a critical juncture. While traditional ideological divisions have reduced, opinions on the importance and function of democracy have become increasingly polarized.

Even in the United States, where some important policy differences between the two major parties remain, particularly on non-economic or cultural issues, the leaders of both parties tend to support policies that protect the economic interests of elites (Kelly, 2020; Witko *et al*., 2021). In this context, institutional polarization is escalating, and the two parties are increasingly divided over the legitimacy and utility of core democratic institutions like elections, parties, and even the Legislative. These kinds of dynamics create openings for anti-democratic actors and have real potential to erode democracy (Arbatli & Rosenberg, 2021; Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019; McCoy & Somer, 2021).

All too often, the procedures of representative democracy fail to deliver on the substantive interests of ordinary citizens. Such failures ultimately erode democratic institutions and provoke skepticism towards the legitimacy and functionality of democracy (Morgan & Kelly, 2021). Consequently, democracy's credibility is compromised, and individuals who are excluded from the system turn to less-than-democratic alternatives. At the same time, those who benefit from a limited democratic system often resist substantive reforms that could ultimately enhance democracy and increase its legitimacy among marginalized communities. This blend of deep-seated resistance along with simmering discontent is conducive to the ruptures that

have surfaced throughout the region, starting with Venezuela towards the end of the 20th century and persisting through the growing tide of democratic erosion.

In this way, while proponents of democracy frequently prioritize institutions and procedures, which are unquestionably crucial, supporters of democracy must also strive for the development of inclusive social and political structures that engender widespread legitimacy for democratic institutions and procedures. When such circumstances prevail, citizen attitudes and behavior tend to align with democratic principles, reducing the likelihood of polarization regarding democracy, as opposed to policy. This in turn provides a better habitat for a stable and deeply rooted democratic system. Conversely, when democratic procedures fall short, citizens understandably become more ambivalent about the actual worth of democracy. Institutional polarization becomes more likely in such cases, placing democratic systems at risk.

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