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Whose Right, Whose Left? Analyzing the Complexities of Right-Wing Politics in Venezuela

Maryhen Jiménez and Guillermo T. Aveledo

> Rafael Caldera, Rómulo Betancourt, Jóvito Villalba signed the Puntofijo Pact to distribute the cake and there the puntofijista dictatorship began to settle in Venezuela, and now there comes the so-called ultra-right table, the MUD, and says that it is ready to return to the Government, the dictatorship of Puntofijo will never return, the Venezuelan right will never again govern the Venezuelan people!
>
> Chávez, 2007

INTRODUCTION

The pink tide in Latin America began in Venezuela when the once-stable party system broke down and Hugo Chávez rose to power in 1999 after winning the presidential election in December 1998. Progressive movements at home and abroad hoped that the antiestablishment former military officer and 1992 coup leader would initiate reforms that would deliver a "participatory democracy" for Venezuelans. Chávez promised to put "the people" at the center of his transformative process and end the oppression of "the right." However, two decades after his first election and a decade after his passing, his "Bolivarian revolution" instead eroded democracy and caused one of the world's ten worst humanitarian crises due to a lack of checks and balances, rule of law, and gross mismanagement. Despite this, Chávez and his handpicked successor Nicolás Maduro continue to blame "right-wing" opposition groups for the country's ongoing turmoil. Who truly represents the Venezuelan right?[1] How do we best make sense of political cleavages in contemporary Venezuela?

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[1] Civil society organizations in Venezuela started to alert about a growing humanitarian emergency that is still taking place today. https://humvenezuela.com/en/chronology/, www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/venezuela/

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To answer these questions, we analyzed electoral data and party programs, and used original interview data collected during iterative trips to the field between 2014 and 2022. In this chapter, we make three arguments. Venezuela has witnessed a dramatic transformation of its party system, which has been shaped by the collapse of the traditional political establishment and the rise of Hugo Chávez to power in 1999. In line with existing research, we first argue that Chávez's charismatic leadership and socialist agenda generated a new political system that revolved for a long time around his personality and ideas. Political identities in Venezuela were strongly influenced by such a polarizing president, resulting in the formation of a pronounced cleavage between *Chavismo* and anti-*Chavismo*. In this sense, the "anticleavage" has been more significant than traditional left–right polarization. Political elites on both sides have forged identities around the support or animosity toward "the other," building a new political system that has de-emphasized ideological and programmatic discussions and created polarization along *chavista*/ anti-*chavista* identities. In other words, politics in contemporary Venezuela has mainly centered around a fight between *Chavismo* and anti-Chávez forces and less around policy and programs (UCAB and Delphos, 2021, 2020 Morgan, 2018).

Secondly, while the opposition has been traditionally seen as a coalition of right-wing parties and actors, we will show that opponents have always been ideologically diverse. The opposition includes not only right-wing parties but also center–left and liberal actors who have rejected *Chavismo*'s socialist agenda and authoritarian practices. With an increase in authoritarian practices under Chávez and particularly under Maduro, the opposition long de-emphasized their ideological differences to focus on cooperating and gathering resources to oust the government. Mainstream opposition groups, who have ostensibly organized around the *Coordinadora Democrática (CD)*, *Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD)*, *Frente Amplio*, or *Plataforma Unitaria*, range from the center–right to the center–left and have converged around a relatively well-established social–democratic tradition (Sucre Heredia, 2014; Aveledo, 2014; Jiménez, 2023). Rather than prioritizing individual party programs and ideologies, under the MUD's leadership (2008–2016), parties have focused on boosting competitiveness through a more centrist approach.

Finally, we argue that major changes have occurred under the rule of Chávez's handpicked successor, Nicolás Maduro. The significant void left by the absence of Chávez's charismatic leadership and the consolidation of an authoritarian system, as well as rampant corruption and economic crises, resulted in the softening of the once-dominant *Chavismo*/anti-*Chavismo* blocs. Despite pursuing a radical-left discourse, under Maduro's leadership, *Chavismo* has pursued conservative policies on salient contemporary issues, including LGBTI+ rights, reproductive rights, and secularism, as well as a neoliberal shift in terms of the country's economy, in order to solidify Maduro's grip on power (Rosales and Jiménez, 2021). We also show how after the

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MUD's collapse in 2016, opposition actors have also turned to the right; new populist right-wing factions have emerged while formerly social democratic parties have adopted right-wing discourses.

THE RIGHT BEFORE CHAVISMO

The dearth of a right-wing tradition in Venezuela stems from the lack of a single durable oligarchy. Instead, the country has seen a succession of unstable regimes unable to autonomously accumulate status resources typical of a landed aristocracy or an urban bourgeoisie, and therefore lacking both class and ideological self-assuredness. Venezuelan oil riches controlled by the state entrenched this dynamic, making these groups rent claimants to successive governments (Urbaneja, 2013). Nonetheless, during the first half of the twentieth century, the two main existing ideologies were positivism,[2] the closest thing to local right-wing thought, and variants of social democratic thought (Urbaneja, 1992).

Venezuelan democracy was founded in the mid-20th century around reformist social democrats (AD) and social Christians (COPEI) with a policy consensus whereby these strong and popular political parties would defuse their ideological differences around a common program of social modernization and economic development through oil rents to appease both the masses and the elites (Rey, 1972). These two organizations took turns in the presidency for four decades, negotiated widely consensual policies and state reforms, and controlled state–society relations. AD and COPEI dominated electoral competition and shared most of the votes, reaching a 75 percent to 80 percent threshold throughout the 1970s and 1980s. For the first two decades of this pact, these parties boosted economic development, dominated state institutions, and implemented social policies that promoted social mobility. Both were relatively highly institutionalized and seen as legitimate by the citizenry and elites. In their programs and policymaking, AD and COPEI successfully integrated the interests of the private sector, organized labor, and the middle and upper classes according to established class cleavages (Urbaneja, 2007). AD and COPEI were committed to social–democratic and social–Christian values. If anything, the ideological divide between these two parties was skewed to the center–left, with a focus on modernizing policies of redistributing wealth and investing heavily in housing, health, and education. Policies of import substitution industrialization (ISI) and labor peace were also key components. Oil riches allowed for harmonious policies of economic growth and the improvement of social standards until the late 1970s.

[2] The most powerful example of positivist thought in Venezuela is "*Cesarismo Democrático*," by Laureano Vallenilla Lanz (1870–1936), which proposed that rule by a powerful caudillo is a reflection of the popular will, given the particular racial, cultural, and social circumstances in Latin American republics (Vallenilla Lanz, 1991).

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For its critics to the left – from which *Chavismo* ultimately originated – it was proxy rule for bourgeois and foreign interests. For its critics to the right, this pacted democracy represented a corporatist state that stifled the dynamism of free enterprise and civil society. Even though there were personalities, organizations, and small parties that claimed the mantle of the right and criticized the failings of a "populist democracy," they had no permanent national importance and only rarely reached significant levels of representation. In general, criticism from the right lamented the populist features and mass politics inherited from the 1945 revolution within the Puntofijo system, and also worried about the power of mass parties that were beholden to lower-class voters while ruling a very powerful state. In their view, Venezuela's representative institutions were derided as "populist," and its political class as corrupt or, at the very least, inefficient. In the most extreme cases, nostalgia for more restrictive political regimes was evident (Aveledo, 2020).

Several organizations and think tanks were created by classical liberal professors and journalists to adamantly promote the rejection of traditional statism and constitutional welfarism in the democratic system. Newspapers like *La Verdad* and academic centers such as the Institute of Higher Studies in Management (IESA) and the Center for the Dissemination of Economic Knowledge (Cedice) promoted free-market ideas as a counterpoint to the dominant center–left consensus. While they did not dismiss democracy, neoliberal thinkers were critical of traditional parties, and in general terms endorsed political reforms that would diminish their influence in the political system (such as first-past-the-post voting, decentralization and federalism, and nonpartisan appointments) (Cabeza and Vieira, 2001). While no neoliberal party was formed, their influence was very important during the eighties and nineties and they were also discussed by the political elite through the modernizing *Comisión Para la Reforma del Estado* (COPRE). They even appeared in the political platforms of mainstream parties for the 1988 and 1993 elections, fostering two consecutive unpopular emergency austerity plans. Despite criticisms from the Marxist Left, who felt excluded from the system and eventually turned to armed opposition, as well as from more conservative voices, the interests of the center–left and center–right parties (i.e., AD and COPEI) were mostly satisfied, with increasing dominance gained in every electoral cycle up to 1993 (Coppedge, 1999b).[3] Meanwhile, right-wing and moderate-to-far-left parties struggled to gain consistent traction (see Figure 9.1).

[3] Corporativist representation was established through a series of formal and informal mechanisms, making these more traditional sectors stakeholders in the broad consensus on representative democracy, acquiescing to the more welfarist aspects of the new regime. The Catholic Church was recognized as a non-state actor through the 1964 Covenant between the Holy See and the Venezuelan Republic, whereby the colonial *patronato* was cancelled; furthermore, Catholic education, particularly in poorer areas, was significantly expanded and supported by the state (Levine, 1976). The Armed Forces became relegitimized through their actions against

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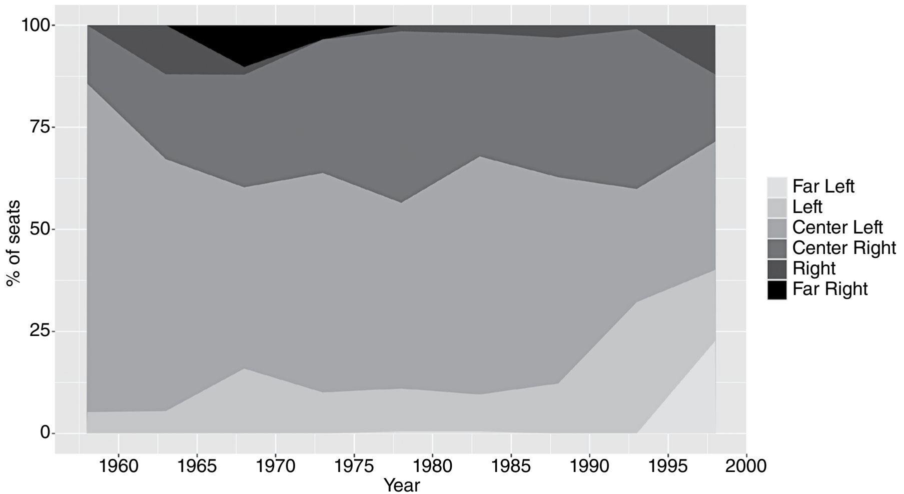

FIGURE 9.1 Percentage of seats according to ideology, Chamber of Deputies Venezuela, 1958–1998.
Source: CNE, authors' own calculations.

By 1998, the Venezuelan political *status quo* had lost popular support. The country's once-stable party system had turned into a rigid *partidocracia* whereby political parties turned into the only vehicle for participation in public affairs and the expression of preferences or concerns (Coppedge, 1997: 800; Crisp and Levine, 1998). Unions, professionals, and student associations, just to name a few, were dominated by parties (Rey, 1992), while alternative independent mechanisms for participation were limited. This strong party system left little room for independent social forces to emerge, and some sectors of Venezuelan society felt marginalized in terms of participation and representation (Kulisheck, 1998; Morgan, 2011; Lupu, 2016). Moreover, AD and COPEI, which had blurred their ideological differences into an increasingly pragmatic policy consensus, eventually moved away from their welfarist- and consensus-driven positions in order to implement a series of unpopular

left-wing guerrillas and were granted an unofficial veto power both in military budget and organization decisions, as well as in matters of territorial disputes (Urbaneja, 1995; Norden, 1998; Trinkunas, 2002). Business interests, which had begun to organize around rent-seeking practices in the 1940s, and had also begun to become more diverse, were quelled by the "Labour-Patron Agreement" of 1958, which postponed labor disputes for more than a decade, and were consistently present in public-sector boards (Karl, 1987). More significantly, under Article 109 of the 1961 Constitution, it was established that labor, business, and civil society organizations would be recognized in matters of economic policy, and this became common practice throughout Venezuela's increasingly decentralized public administration. Every significant sector also enjoyed direct or indirect government aid through direct subsidies, monetary policies, protective regulations, and a low tax base.

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neoliberal market reforms (Roberts, 2013). In doing so, parties diluted their brands and partisanship declined (Morgan, 2011; Lupu, 2016). This, together with a major economic crisis that deteriorated the parties' patronage networks and nonideological followings (Karl, 1995; Rodríguez Sosa and Rodríguez Pardo, 2013), caused the collapse of the old party system. In the aftermath of the oil price decline and two "lost decades," GDP per capita in 1998 fell to the level of the 1950s, moderate poverty rates oscillated, hitting around 57.6 percent in 1998, and extreme poverty reached 28.8 percent in that same year (Corrales and Penfold-Becerra, 2011). Claims for change were headed by radical, antiestablishment, or populist alternatives (Levine, 2002; Aveledo, 2016).

Ideological de-alignment within the old party system contributed to the rise of an outsider left-leaning candidate who mobilized various sectors of society and put forward a vision of punishing traditional elites. The combination of political and economic decay paved the way for Hugo Chávez's electoral success in 1998. He strategically capitalized on the decline of established representative institutions while promoting their ultimate downfall with his discursive attacks on political parties that had created undemocratic and corrupt structures, leading to a failed status quo (Roberts, 2003). The deterioration of parties in Venezuela led Chávez to avoid collaborating with any established organization or association for the elections in 1998. He created his own movement, MBR 200, which later became *Movimiento Quinta Republica* (MVR), an allusion to the end of the Fourth Republic, highlighting his proposal for a complete change to the political status quo (Maya, 2004).

NEW CLEAVAGES IN CHÁVEZ'S VENEZUELA

Although some scholars have argued that political cleavages express social divisions (Lipset, 1967), others recognize that cleavages have a social component, but are essentially politically constructed by elites (Torcal and Mainwaring, 2003). The profound transformations described earlier have produced a new party system that has been largely characterized by the emergence of two heterogeneous blocs – pro-incumbent and anti-incumbent. Beyond the left–right ideology cleavage, the driving divide in Venezuelan politics continues to be that of *Chavismo*/anti-*Chavismo*. This cleavage has had implications for the left–right ideological spectrum in Venezuela. While Chávez identified himself first as a moderate left-wing candidate and then an openly socialist leader, he framed anti-*chavistas* as right-wing factions from the very beginning. However, as we show in the following sections, this ingrained premise is not always accurate. Neither *Chavismo* nor the opposition can be simply characterized as exclusively left-wing or right-wing. Figure 9.2 shows how political polarization increased between 1998 and 2018. In practice, this implied that government supporters and challengers generally interacted in a hostile manner.

In 1998, Chávez and his MVR offered what the system lacked: an outsider candidate capable of exploiting anger and mistrust toward the old democratic

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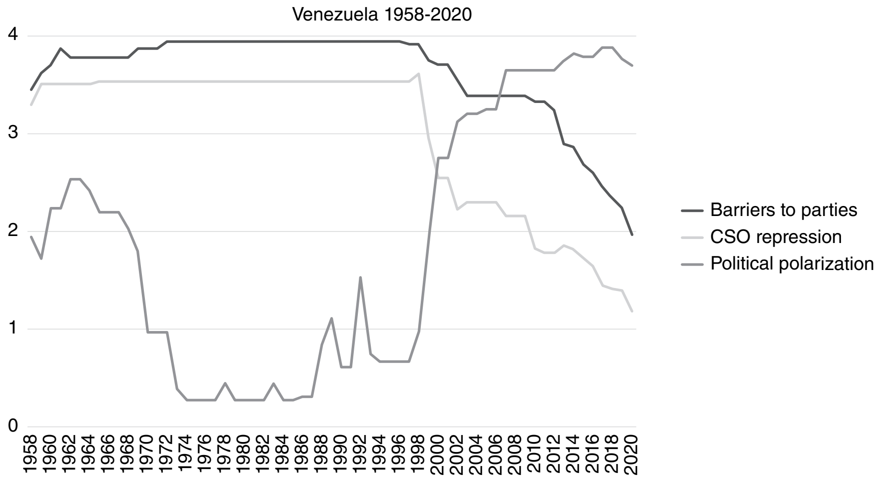

FIGURE 9.2 Barriers to parties, civil society organization repression, and political polarization in Venezuela, 1958–2020.
Source: V-Dem Data Version 11.0.

regime (Leone, 2008). His aim was to do away with "corrupt" and "oligarchic" groups that had dominated the then forty-year-old Venezuelan representative democracy. This was a reaction against the neoliberal consensus of the nineties, but more importantly, a denunciation of polyarchic and consensus-driven politics (Ramos Rollón, 2004). Chávez used his charisma and radical discourse to rally a coalition of discontented politicians from across the ideological spectrum – including nationalists and right-wing *perezjimenistas* (Chávez, 1997),[4] academics, and ex-guerrillas, as well as cadres of relatively small far-left parties. Despite representing an alternative on the left, his first campaign did not explicitly appeal to socialist or Marxist principles or radical economic reforms. Instead, it relied on a populist anti-party discourse and the need to create a "new Republic" that would deepen democracy by increasing participation. This approach even garnered support from important elites in the private sector, such as the Cisneros Group and the daily newspaper *El Nacional*, who believed they could influence a newly elected Chávez-led government – not because these actors were necessarily concerned about democracy but because they shared Chávez's purpose of punishing traditional parties (Santodomingo, 1999; Ramos Jiménez, 2002).

His leftist and increasingly authoritarian leadership style, along with his decision to escalate political conflict in the early days, also created a strong *anti-Chávez* identity. For instance, he rewrote the constitution to increase executive power, expand the role of the military in political affairs, and

[4] Followers of former General Marcos Pérez Jiménez, military ruler between 1952 and 1958.

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abolish public funding for political parties, among other changes. He also treated political opponents and enemies harshly, purged state institutions of them, and gained control over PDVSA. These actions fundamentally contributed to the rejection of the president (González, 2021). Chávez's first challenger was the conservative Henrique Salas Römer, whose candidacy was backed by both traditional parties, and *Por Querer a Mi Ciudad*, a small center–left local party. Thus, *Chavismo*'s first opponents were both traditional centrist parties, including AD and COPEI; and left-wing parties, such as *La Causa R* (LCR), which deemed Chávez too authoritarian; emerging parties that had split from already established parties, such as the conservative PRVZLA (Cartay, 2000); and some civil society organizations linked to the previous political system. Even during the first elections (1998) and after the approval of the 1999 Constitution, the opposition was heterogeneous; while Salas Römer was conservative, his supporters ranged from the center–left to the center–right.

In terms of policy, Chávez promoted an increasingly radical-left program, including redistribution and price controls, deficit spending, nationalizations, restrictions on the private sector, and criticism of the United States. Moreover, as the president increased his antiestablishment rhetoric and control over state institutions, the opposition camp began to change as well. Key events included the dissolution of an opposition-led Congress in 1999, the Trade Union referendum in 2000, and the enabling law of 2000, which granted Hugo Chávez law-drafting powers in a broad range of issues without legislative oversight (Garcia-Serra, 2001). In response, civil society organizations, the Catholic Church, and political parties began to actively oppose Chávez's incipient process of autocratization.

Between 2002 and 2004, various groups came together under the *Coordinadora Democrática* (CD), an informal coordination effort where ideologically diverse actors discussed ways of dislodging the president (Jiménez, 2023). The CD represented a broader movement against *Chavismo* in which both left- and right-leaning antiauthoritarian and discreetly reactionary groups coalesced. Though composed of several parties, including AD and COPEI, PRVZLA, *Primero Justicia* (PJ), *Un Nuevo Tiempo* (UNT), *Bandera Roja*, LCR, *Solidaridad*, and MAS – the latter two having been part of *Chavismo*'s first coalition, Polo Patriótico – the CD was ostensibly led by the private sector and civil society organizations such as the *Confederación de Trabajadores de Venezuela* (CTV) and FEDECÁMARAS (López Maya, 2004; Meucci, 2016). This movement was based solely on the common goal of removing Hugo Chávez from the presidency. During this period, these groups rallied around maximalist mechanisms to oust Chávez: organizing strikes, mass protests, and even participating in a coup d'état led by business leader Pedro Carmona. However, due to their short-term goals, this alliance did not clearly define a consensus-based ideological program and lacked significant coordination mechanisms to resolve strategic differences (Jiménez,

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2021a). After Chávez's victory in the 2004 recall referendum, the coalition collapsed during the 2005 parliamentary election boycott.

After the failed extra-institutional and maximalist strategies pursued by the CD and the acknowledgment that the 2005 electoral boycott was a mistake, parties began to adopt a gradual institutionalist strategy in 2006. With the UNT founder Manuel Rosales' candidacy, the opposition returned to the electoral arena to challenge *Chavismo*. Key leaders across parties began to understand the need for coordination and strategic unity during elections, and Rosales was endorsed by almost all opposition parties, including two potential presidential contenders: Teodoro Petkoff (a historically left-wing figure) and Julio Borges (PJ) (Jiménez, 2021a). Pursuing this strategic path, opposition parties began to de-emphasize their ideological differences to favor coordination. On this occasion, Chávez remained unbeaten, but democratic opposition parties regained electoral experience and maintained their electoral support without returning to polarizing rhetoric. At a time when the president controlled the Supreme Court, parliament, most TV outlets, and the state-owned oil company PDVSA, and could draw on oil prices of over $100/barrel to invest in social programs, reaching over 4,292,000 votes in popular support entailed much collective effort.

As *Chavismo* has grown more authoritarian over time, opposition parties have tried to use the democracy–authoritarianism cleavage to differentiate themselves from *Chavismo*. Figures 9.2 and 9.3 show clear declines in individual liberties and judicial independence as well as the repression of civil society and opposition parties over the past two decades. As democratic backsliding and government intervention in socioeconomic issues continued through the 2000s, anti-Chávez groups continued to de-emphasize differences along traditional left–right cleavages, including economic policy, the state–market divide, their social bases, social policy, and religion, to coordinate strategies for pursuing regime change. The main cleavage within the heterogeneous opposition camp has been primarily strategic, not ideological. While some groups believe that regime change should occur gradually and institutionally (i.e., through negotiations or elections), others believe that *Chavismo* should be challenged through radical and contestatory means (i.e., mass protests, or military or foreign intervention).[5]

[5] Ideology may influence actors' strategic preference. In Venezuela, maximalist strategies have been mostly supported by conservative actors in the private sector, media, and political parties. Examples range from the 2014 "*La Salida*," and 2017 street protests to the promotion of boycotts, the establishment of a Trump-backed interim government, and even a request for international intervention to topple *Chavismo*. Social–democratic mainstream opposition parties have largely given in to these calls to action, possibly out of concern for losing relevance among anti-*chavista* followers or facing government repression. In a polarized and nondemocratic context like Venezuela, parties do not want to be framed as co-opted or weak by those who already reject their ideological moderation.

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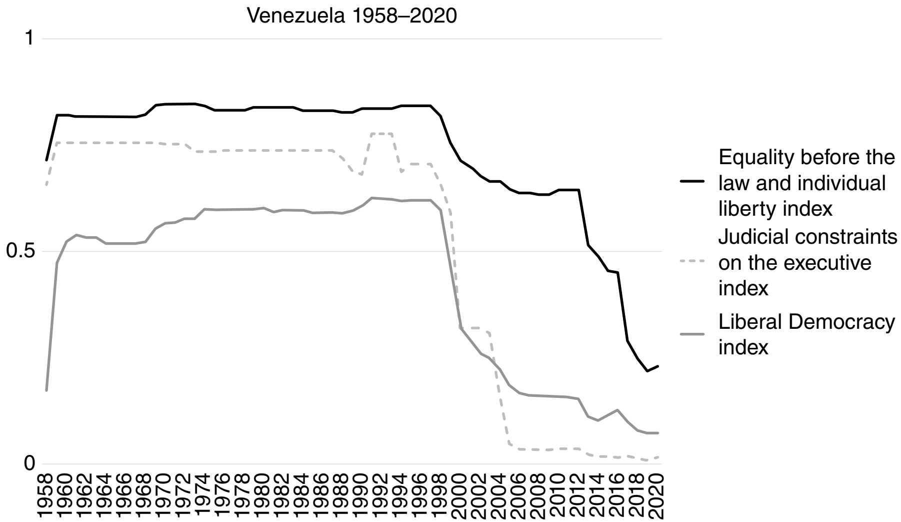

FIGURE 9.3 Equality before the law and individual liberty, judicial constraints on the executive and liberal democracy index in Venezuela, 1958–2020.
Source: V-Dem Data Version 11.0.

After closing the popular television network RCTV in 2007, Chávez called for a referendum on the approval of the wide-ranging socialist reform of the 1999 Constitution, which failed to pass in the same year. In 2009, the president convened another referendum in order to approve indefinite reelection for local, regional, and national offices, in which the PSUV obtained a straightforward win: Chávez's personality proved to be more popular than his more clearly ideologically minded reforms. Upon this defeat, opposition parties decided to formally coordinate among themselves to become more competitive. In 2009, parties created the MUD to gain electoral strength and pursue political change through the ballot box (Jiménez, 2021a). Thus, their strategic preference was to focus on institutional means for accessing power, unlike in Chávez's first term. This was formalized through a common party ticket, a collective political platform, regular working commissions, and an executive secretariat for coordinating the coalition through clear decision-making rules. The MUD, which incorporated up to thirty parties from the left, center, and right, began to participate in legislative elections in 2010 (Aveledo, 2014). Only two years later, in October 2012, the alliance nominated Henrique Capriles, the winner of open primaries in 2011, as its candidate to challenge Chávez at the ballot box. Opposition parties campaigned together and presented a common platform that contributed to its increased competitiveness and credibility (Kutiyski and Krouwel, 2014). As a result, Capriles increased the opposition's vote share from 36.9 percent

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in 2006 to 44.3 percent in 2012. After Chávez's death, a new presidential election was held in 2013 where Maduro beat Capriles by only 1.5 percent.

SHIFTING IDEOLOGIES: RIGHT-WING POLITICS IN THE MADURO ERA

Under Maduro, the polarization between left and right gradually changed, but the "anti-*Chavismo*" cleavage persisted. We identify two main trends. On the one hand, *Chavismo* has turned to the right. Maduro has implemented a series of drastic "liberalizing" economic policies to deal with the economic crisis created during the height of socialist policies, while also returning to the promotion of seemingly conservative and religious values, unlike more genuine leftists who promote secularism and inclusion; this has triggered the emergence of new dissent from the far left. On the other hand, in the absence of the charismatic Chávez, a few traditional opposition parties have begun to identify themselves more openly with right-leaning ideals and salient global conservative figures and groups.

Since 2013, these blocs – which had been rather stable – have begun to shift. Despite having lost the election, the MUD made successful inroads among former *chavista* voters. The coalition pursued a collective strategy around formal coordination, including a common candidate and program. Two years later, in 2015, the MUD designed and executed its last joint campaign for the legislative elections. As a result of previous lessons learned and increased grassroots linkages, the opposition managed to win a supermajority in the National Assembly under the MUD coalition, a landmark victory since *Chavismo* rose to power (Maya, 2016). These partial successes mainly resulted from: (1) a trade-off between collective and individual gains in a nondemocratic context, whereby electoral asymmetries increased the incentives for coordination; (2) parties prioritizing survival and competitiveness over ideology, thereby pragmatically blurring ideological divergences and making policy trade-offs on divisive issues. This in turn facilitated a centrist approach conducive to internal negotiations and concessions within the MUD. The underlying assumption that *Chavismo* was a common adversary and a preference for a more pluralistic polity led radical left parties such as *Bandera Roja* and LCR, to form alliances with right-wing parties such as COPEI, PJ, or *Vente*.

Despite this significant win, or because of it, the centrist coalition did not survive beyond the 2015 legislative election. This was not necessarily attributable to a decline in the utility of coordination or pragmatic ideological trade-offs, but to the strategic differences within the opposition that caused increased internal divisions. This was also exacerbated by the increased government repression after losing the National Assembly (Aveledo, 2020). Persecution, repression, and the growing closure of democratic spaces reduced the incentives for electoral participation and formal coordination (Jiménez, 2021a). Moreover, the government has relied on the selective repression of mainstream opposition

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actors (G4) and the co-optation of others to divide the opposition further. This strategy of repressing some and sparing others has had the sustained effect of dividing the opposition into multiple factions (Jiménez, 2021b). Fostering an environment of fear and mistrust polarized the opposition into conflicting strategies in their approach toward the regime, pursuing mechanisms to either adapt, survive, and/or challenge the government. Ultimately, this created incentives for the more radicalized groups to further their ideological differentiation and, moreover, to brand relatively centrist approaches as kowtowing to the regime. Interestingly, it is only in recent years that parties have invested in their individual brands and ideology. As we will show in the following sections, there has been a right turn both within the ruling coalition and opposition parties.

Chavismo's Turn to the Right

Looking back at twenty-three years of leftist rhetoric in Venezuela, it is easy to argue that *Chavismo* does not perform well in contrast to other progressive governments in the region. Over time it has shifted from presenting itself as a progressive force to being an openly socially conservative and authoritarian capitalist bloc. At first, the PSUV adopted a radical left-wing position on the state–market divide, but a right-wing position on the liberal–conservative dimension, by reducing its focus on the historical grievances of the left while also eroding civil liberties while also eroding civil liberties. In contrast to other progressive governments in the region, which effectively reduced inequality and poverty by combining pluralism and social progressiveness, in Venezuela, Chávez promoted clientelist networks to build loyal support bases. These *misiones*, and other social programs developed under *Chavismo*, have been designed to gain social control over the population (Lustig, 2020). Despite having enshrined progressive economic, cultural, environmental, and indigenous rights in the constitution, those same rights have been deeply affected by the Bolivarian revolution (IACHR, 2019b; OHCHR, 2019; Watch, 2021). Despite having implemented *misiones* in 2004, *Chavismo* has not prioritized sustainable policies for reverting structural inequalities and poverty because of economic mismanagement, large-scale corruption, and extractive policies. In fact, self-identified socialist governments have created a humanitarian emergency and neglected all the left-leaning ideals they came to represent. Under the Maduro governments, the life of common Venezuelans has consistently worsened: Data provided by the National Survey on the Living Conditions of the Venezuelan Population (ENCOVI) states that 96 percent of surveyed households suffer from income poverty; multidimensional poverty, which incorporates indicators on education, standard of living, employment, public services, and housing, affects 64.8 percent of households, an increase of 13.8 percent between 2018 and 2019 (ENCOVI, 2021). Economic policies adopted by the Maduro government, particularly after sectoral sanctions were imposed in 2019, have led to the emergence of what Bull and Rosales

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call a neo-patrimonial and authoritarian form of capitalism (Bull and Rosales, 2023). In line with existing work, we observe that *Chavismo* has not only failed to implement policies to alleviate poverty and inequality but also diverted state resources into the private pockets of its authoritarian cohort to maintain its hold on power (Jiménez, 2022; Bull and Rosales, 2023).

Continuous shortages of food, clean drinking water, and medical supplies across the country have dramatically affected the full exercise of people's rights (HumVenezuela, 2021). Power outages and cuts in water supplies have also caused deaths, suspended surgical treatments, dialysis, hematology, and oncology, and affected the hygienic conditions of health and sanitary services (IACHR, 2019b).[6] Given this multifaceted crisis and the 2019 outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Special Rapporteurship on Economic, Social, Cultural, and Environmental Rights (SRESCER) of the Inter-American System of Human Rights has raised concerns regarding access to the right to food, health, and education across the country (OAS, 2020). In terms of labor rights, for example, in 2018, the ILO set up a Commission of Inquiry to examine complaints against the Venezuelan government for its nonobservance of ILO conventions and acts of violence, persecution, and harassment, as well as campaigns to descredit the employers' organization FEDECÁMARAS. Although both Chávez and Maduro have long emphasized the importance of workers and the working class to their Bolivarian revolution, the ILO states in its report that, while workers linked to the ruling party are favored and promoted, independent workers and union leaders are exposed to exclusion, discrimination, persecution, imprisonment, assaults, and murder (ILO, 2019).

As Figure 9.4 shows, the continuing decreases in social and economic guarantees such as access to public services and educational equality seem to be correlated with the erosion of civil liberties, which deepened after Maduro's rise to power.

Regarding diversity, gender equality, and women's rights, *Chavismo* has not followed left-leaning ideals. Abortion continues to be considered a crime unless the woman is at risk of death according to the current penal code, which was reformed in 2005 (Rights, 2020). During the rewriting of the constitution in 1999 but also throughout the 2000s, civil society and feminist organizations promoted the decriminalization of abortion and reform of the penal code, but to no avail, despite the Bolivarian revolution's claim to be socialist and feminist (Púrpuras, 2021). Furthermore, women's sexual and reproductive rights have not been fully guaranteed according to human rights organizations: high

[6] According to data provided by the National Hospitals Survey, in 2019 alone, only 9 percent of hospitals had regular provision of water, 63 percent reported power failures, and there were shortages of medical supplies in 50 percent of emergency rooms. Their data shows that between November 2018 and February 2019, 1,557 Venezuelans died due to a lack of supplies and 79 died due to power outages (ENH, 2019).

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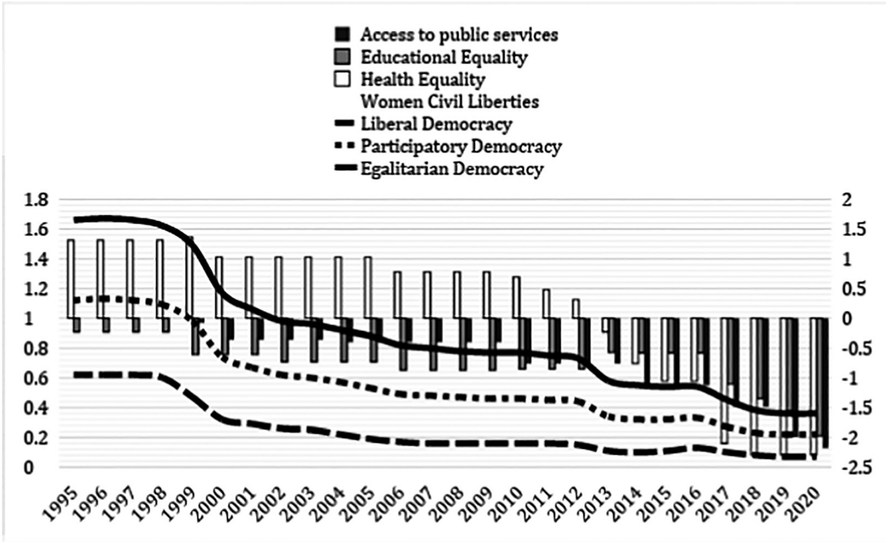

FIGURE 9.4 Venezuela: Selected social indicators, 1995–2020.
Source: V-Dem Data Version 11.0.

prices, significant shortages, and a lack of awareness-raising campaigns limit women's capacity to exercise their rights. This has led Venezuela to have one of the highest rates of adolescent pregnancies in Latin America (Rodrigues, 2021). Additionally, people with diverse or nonnormative sexual identities and expressions continue to face discrimination and violence in Venezuela (IACHR, 2019a). The government has thus far not kept its promises of greater inclusion and recognition of their rights, nor has it advanced or enforced policies on equality and nondiscrimination that could guarantee their freedom from all types of violence. In fact, key PSUV members, including Chávez and Maduro, have engaged in sexually discriminatory messaging during political campaigns or speeches (Chávez, 2009; Noticias, 2013; Maduro, 2017). Other party members, such as Freddy Bernal, have publicly stated that homosexuals could only be members of the police forces "so long as they don't manifest their sexual preference publicly," thereby reinforcing conservative stereotypes and discrimination (Noticias, 2015). Moreover, the PSUV has not yet legalized equal civil marriage, despite having repeatedly promised to do so since the mid-2000s and holding majorities in the NA between 2005 and 2015 (Maduro, 2017, 2020).

In terms of public security and law enforcement, despite its enduring left-leaning rhetoric, *Chavismo* has promoted deeply conservative policies (Antillano and Ávila, 2017). As Venezuela is consistently considered one of the most violent countries in Latin America, the socialist government moved away from reducing crime through social policies and has resorted to

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heavy-handed measures typically promoted by conservative elites across Latin America (Ávila, 2020; Hanson and Zubillaga, 2021). Chávez and Maduro have de-emphasized the relevance of structural explanations for growing crime and increasingly focused on moral and individualistic causes for criminal behavior (Antillano and Ávila, 2017), understanding criminals as enemies who must be neutralized through the use of force and punitive measures, including militarized raids and extra-judicial killings (de Víctimas, 2018). Key *chavista* officials have openly called for harsher crime fighting strategies, arguing that the people should be disciplined through the use of force (Globovision, 2014; Estimulo, 2017; Lacava, 2017; Mozo, 2021). Studies show that security forces, including the Bolivarian National Guard, the Bolivarian National Police, the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN), the Scientific, Penal, and Criminal Investigative Police (CICPC), and state police forces, have conducted violent operations in low-income communities, such as the Operation for the Liberation of the People (OLP), which has been responsible for over 20 percent of violent deaths in Venezuela since 2017 (HRW, 2016; Hanson and Zubillaga, 2021).

Finally, forced by the economic crisis and sanctions imposed in 2019, Maduro has enacted a series of changes in economic policy that completely contradicted leftist principles. Splintered economic liberalization and deregulation have been occurring since 2016 with the creation of the Orinoco Mining Arc Special Development Zone, followed by the abolition of the Illicit Exchange Law to allow for the use and exchange of the US dollar (2019), the Anti-Blockade Law (2020), and the promotion of Special Economic Zones (Bull et al., 2021). New economic activities facilitated by these arrangements are not subject to economic regulations: imports enter the country without tariff payments, sanitation, or quality controls, which are also hindered by a collapse in government spending and state capacity (Jiménez, 2022). In other words, these measures, which aim to alleviate the economic crisis and the shortage of products generated by the *chavista* government, are openly allowing the privatization of domestic assets and de facto dollarization of the economy while deepening inequalities within Venezuelan society and tolerating a new moneyed elite of well-connected businessmen and entrepreneurs among former cadres of the Socialist party (Aveledo, 2021; Bull et al., 2021).

Beyond economic policies, Maduro has also been courting support from socially conservative independent evangelical and Pentecostal Christian groups – particularly the *Movimiento Cristiano Evangélico de Venezuela* and the *Congreso de Iglesias Evangélicas de Venezuela* – after a surge of support for evangelical candidates between 2018 and 2020, promising funding for building renovations, official support for a Theological University, and a declaration that the country is “truly Christian,” in overtures criticized by both the Catholic Church and traditional Christian organizations. In a testament to the importance of this pivot, Maduro’s eldest son, Nicolás Maduro Guerra,

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a current congressman for the PSUV, was named Vice President of Religious Affairs by the ruling party.

While *Chavismo* has not rationalized this within an overtly right-wing program under Maduro – unlike social–democratic governments during the neoliberal era – ultimately, it has increasingly delivered policies that contradict rather than reaffirm the key ideas of the progressive and democratic left it purportedly represents, both through socioeconomic and cultural policy decisions. As the next section will show, there has been a general turn to the right across political actors in Venezuela.

The Rise of Left- and Right-Wing Anti-Maduro Groups

As Figure 9.5 shows, *Chavismo* has been losing support among its voter bases, especially under Maduro's leadership. Likewise, the opposition camp has become more divided and heterogeneous in the Maduro era, with three trends emerging. First, there has been a rise of left-leaning dissent; secondly, we observe a right turn among mainstream opposition parties; and finally, there have emerged new right-wing parties and/or movements. As we have argued in this chapter, this suggests that the opposition is not limited to one particular

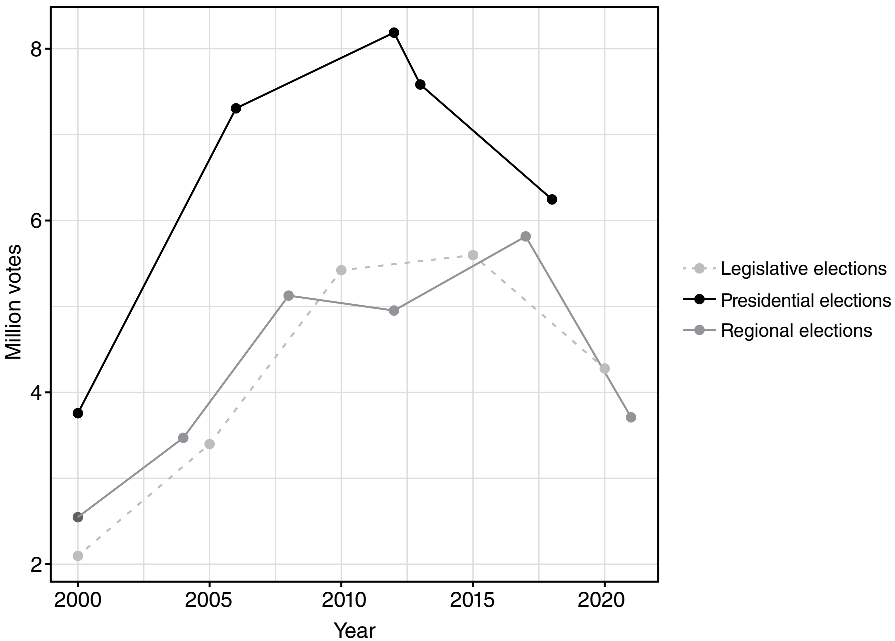

FIGURE 9.5 Votes for *Chavismo* (2000–2021).
Source: CNE, authors' own calculations.

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group or ideology, but rather a diverse range of movements and organizations that challenge the government for a variety of reasons.

The left in Venezuela has been represented by many different movements and organizations, identifying as communist, Trotskyist, Marxist–Leninist, among other labels. Some left-leaning opposition groups or politicians have firmly challenged Chávez and Maduro from the very beginning. For example, the MAS (Movement toward Socialism) split into one faction who supported Chávez in 1998 and one, led by Teodoro Petkoff, who opposed him. As we argued earlier, Bandera Roja or LCR, both leftist movements with roots in guerrilla warfare, also always opposed the "Bolivarian Revolution" contending that it was an authoritarian project from the very beginning. During the past two decades, new left-wing politicians and parties rescinded their support from the ruling party. For example, between 2000 and 2002, the MAS, once close to the president as well as Chávez's mentor Luis Miquilena and his faction Solidaridad, distanced themselves from the government. Between the 2007 and 2009 referendums, more voices who opposed Chávez's attempt to recentralize power, defected. Among the most noticeable cases are the PPT (Fatherland for All) and *Podemos*.[7] Under Maduro, further left-wing critique has been coming from within the ruling coalition. The harshest questioning stems from the *Alternativa Popular Revolucionaria* (APR), an alliance of left-wing parties, and dissatisfied *chavistas*, including the once loyal PCV (Communist Party). These actors condemn Maduro's "neoliberal turn" and the betrayal of Chávez's socialist revolution. They also criticize increasing corruption, cronyism, state repression, and the worsening of wages and workers' rights. At the same time, however, they also distance themselves from the traditional "bourgeois" opposition. The APR believes the cause of the ongoing Venezuelan crisis lies in the structural changes of late capitalism, and in the "asphyxiating" and "imperialist" sanctions imposed by the West, which is why they call for a radicalization of revolutionary policies (Clases, 2020), while also stressing the limits of *Chavismo*'s populism in spearheading a true Marxist revolution, as denounced at the XXII *Encuentro Internacional de Partidos Comunistas y Obreros* in Havana in late 2022.

Moreover, the absence of a popular, charismatic and resource-rich executive lowered the costs for right-wing opponents to identify with right-wing ideas and radicalize their strategic preference for change (i.e., maximalist top-down approaches). Though it is hard to assign a definite right-wing typology as they are all opposition parties, we argue that several opponents oscillate between the electoralist right and the radical right. For instance, we can identify a shift to the right among other centrist and center–left opposition parties and

[7] It is important to highlight that defecting has carried a significant cost for politicians, activists, or movements who have distanced themselves from Chávez and/or Maduro. As in most authoritarian contexts, defecting is seen as an act of "treason." Following this logic, the government has repressed several disloyal civilian and military elites.

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individuals that seem at odds with their ideological self-definition. One case in point has been the former mayor of Caracas, Antonio Ledezma, a relevant figure of the social–democratic AD for decades. In 2000, Ledezma founded his own social–democratic party called *Alianza Bravo Pueblo*, splitting it from the discredited AD, and with whom he won the 2008 mayoral elections. According to its platform, ABP's goal is to "work closely with the people, listening to their claims, aspirations, and providing answers that satisfy the questions that are posed on behalf of the communities: both those for the present and those about the future that we will live in these turbulent times" (Pueblo, 2021). However, at least since 2014, when he joined María Corina Machado and Leopoldo López in staging the protests called *La Salida*, he repositioned himself as a hardliner based on his increased radicalization and maximalist strategies. In 2017, he created an alternative coalition to the MUD called "*Soy Venezuela*," along with *Vente Venezuela* and other conservative movements to "restore the Republic" (Nacional, 2017). After escaping house arrest in 2017, Ledezma became a vocal politician in the diaspora, openly calling for military intervention. His discourse has increasingly focused on the quest for freedom and the fight against the worldwide "communist spread," and he has aligned himself with right-wing and ultra-right-wing parties like Spain's *Partido Popular* and *Vox*, respectively (Confidencial, 2020; EFE, 2021).

A similar trend can be observed in speeches and alliances of the VP, a party with a social–democratic program that is a member of the Socialist International. Despite having several founding members and activists from former social–democratic parties such as AD, MAS, and UNT (Velázquez, 2019), it appears that their ideological perspectives now coexist with those that are more oriented toward the right of the ideological spectrum. Since 2014, the main party leader, Leopoldo López, has joined Ledezma and Machado in strategic actions to dislodge Maduro, with a focus on freedom, security, and justice without impunity, rather than equality and social justice. Since 2019, important VP members have allied with right-wing politicians and parties, including Donald Trump and the most conservative sectors within the Republican Party, particularly anti-communist exiled Hispanic communities. In Latin America, López, Juan Guaidó – former head of the so-called interim government (2019–2022) – and other members have pledged allegiance to conservative politicians such as Colombia's Álvaro Uribe, Iván Duque, Peru's Keiko Fujimori, Chile's Sebastián Piñera, and Bolivia's Jeanine Añez; some party members even advised Nayib Bukele in El Salvador during his right populist turn (Borger, 2019; Comercio, 2019; CCN, 2020; FNF, 2021; Alvarado, 2021; VOA, 2021). Similarly, in Spain, VP politicians have cultivated strong relationships with conservative parties and leaders, such as Isabel Díaz Ayuso and José María Aznar of *Partido Popular*, for which López's father, Leopoldo López Gil, successfully ran in the 2019 elections to the European Parliament (Junquera, 2019). Although VP has also met with Democrats in the US and social–democratic politicians worldwide, it seems that the party has prioritized alliances with more conservative

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groups, given the ways in which the Venezuelan crisis has played out in their respective constituencies.

Another example is "*Encuentro Ciudadano*" founded by Delsa Solorzano in 2018 (Solorzano, 2020). The former social–democratic UNT leader and legislator now focuses on developing a new party structure that responds to center–right ideological preferences. In its foundational documents and ideological and programmatic ideas, the party strongly focuses on themes around "individual freedoms" and advocates for a "citizen liberalism"; it also sees economic freedom as a human right and underlines the importance of private property for Venezuela's economic and democratic restoration (Ciudadano, 2021b). At the same time, the party's documents briefly refer to the needs of all members of society for equal opportunities, "social justice," and a social ecological market economy. Even so, its main focus centers around individuals' responsibilities and freedom (Ciudadano, 2021). Since 2019, it has supported VP's strategic choices (Cual, 2019).

Regarding the latter trend, a few salient organizations, independent journalism outlets, and social media influencers have claimed the mantle of "the right," not only as a viable ideological option, but as the only true opposition in the country. Breaking with the historical taboo that pervaded the term since the 1930s, these groups – which range from anarcho-capitalism to classical liberalism and collectivist ultranationalism – share a common disdain for the current political system, which they see as a bipartisan collaboration between the Socialist PSUV and the "mildly socialist" MUD (even if this coalition has effectively ceased to exist). This stems not only from a broader distaste for socialism (derived in turn from a criticism of the current ruling party) and its policy outcomes, but also for the political tradition of twentieth-century Venezuela. We would categorize these groups as in between the ultraconservative partisan right and radical-right movements. For these new radical-right groups, *Chavismo* would not be characterized as a movement seeking a rupture against the old representative democracy, but rather an exacerbated continuation of its socialist ideology, and particularly the "light socialism" of AD and COPEI. These new right groups see a history of state control, populism, and corruption that has impeded the development of the country, and are extremely disaffected with mainstream opposition parties, which are seen as, at best, inefficient and impotent in their moderate tactics, or at worst, as strategically complicit with the regime: a "fake and whorish opposition," as a noted media personality of this camp pithily labeled them (Farías, 2020).

The most significant of these organizations is the aforementioned *Vente Venezuela*, led by former voting rights activists and MUD assemblywoman and presidential hopeful Machado, who has been barred from running for office since 2014. *Vente*, which has not been granted party status by the national authorities, had a small parliamentary faction that split in 2017 from the opposition majority that had been elected in 2015 after tactical differences regarding that year's protests. It defines itself as liberal and center–right and

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has developed an organizational presence throughout the country, a considerable social media following, and a treatise of its vision for Venezuela, "*Se Trata de la Libertad*," with a foreword written by Machado. In this document, the party portrays Venezuelan history as a succession of illiberal regimes and promotes the idea of individual initiative in a "Liberal Democratic Republic," with "popular capitalism," while not hiding their criticism toward local entrepreneurs as political cronies. It is informally linked with mainstream liberal think tank Cedice and has therefore been criticized by other right-wing parties for being opportunistic and not sufficiently orthodox in its ideology. On the strategic front, Machado has been a hardliner who blames the government's socialist ideology for Venezuela's crisis. She has found strong allies in other radical or extreme-right politicians and parties, including Argentina's Milei, Chile's Kast, and Spain's Vox.

Other peripheral radical-right organizations include *Rumbo Libertad*, *Orden*, and *Movimiento Democrático Liberal*. *Rumbo Libertad* (RL) was founded in 2016 by former student union leader, political prisoner, and UNT member Roderick Navarro alongside the conservative activist Eduardo Bittar. RL espouses a libertarian and anti-communist ideology and holds that only foreign intervention can liberate Venezuela; this organization was recognized as a relevant opposition group by the Bolsonaro government in Brazil. *Orden* was constituted in 2012. It is a traditionalist organization with an important presence in student circles. Unlike RL, *Orden* defines itself as nationalist and conservative, and its ideas hark back to the Praetorian tradition in Venezuela, particularly that of Pérez Jiménez's military regime. *Orden*'s uniformed militants have held rallies in public spaces of historical significance (such as the National Pantheon or the Carabobo Battlefield) and have also arranged demonstrations against mainstream opposition parties and media outlets, voicing their criticism toward their political and strategic views. The oldest of these salient radical right organizations is the *Movimiento Democrático Liberal*, founded in the early 2000s by entrepreneur Marco Polesel. This organization pioneered the characterization of all mainstream opposition politics as left-wing through their *Mapa Ideológico* and gave up on the possibilities of seeking change through elections after the 2004 recall referendum. Polesel has promoted a *Frente Nacional de Derechas Unidas*, seeking an anti-communist alliance of different right-wing organizations and individuals, appealing to both ultraconservative and radical right groups with little-to-no mainstream appeal.

Important ideological differences remain between these peripheral groups. While they are generally wary of *Chavismo*'s compatibility with liberal democracy, more classical liberalism-oriented groups still adamantly support the establishment of representative democracy and even pluralistic politics, while paleoconservative and ultranationalistic groups see mass democracy as a historic error. Furthermore, differences in terms of identity politics and sociocultural issues are prevalent, as shown in a recent row over a social media post by

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Vente celebrating the LGBTI+ pride of conservative individuals and groups.[8] Factionalism and splinters are common, as mutual accusations of a lack of purity and "real right-wing" credibility are frequently hurled between them. Beyond this, these groups have not been able or willing to promote a coordinated right-wing front given their refusal to participate in electoral politics as well as the distortions of the current political system. It is thus difficult to gauge whether they could muster significant social support beyond their social media presence. Only Machado has registered modest but consistent standing in national polls.[9] However, the presence of these "new right" groups and their strategic choices is not merely a matter of gaining political office immediately but rather a symptom of the shift in the country's spectrum of acceptable political discourse and action. This emergence illustrates the radicalization of mainstream opposition politics, which seems to have successfully pushed out the political center that had been carefully crafted during MUD times.

CONCLUSIONS

Hugo Chávez rose to power at the end of the last century because of the collapse of the party system, economic instability, and structural inequalities that were not sustainably addressed during the four-decade democratic period. Being an antiestablishment candidate who promoted both progressive ideas of "deepening democracy" through increased participation and social inclusion, as well as the dismantling of the much-maligned representative democratic system, he received the support of various groups, including political and economic elites and the middle classes. From the very beginning, Chávez campaigned on a polarizing rhetoric that reduced all challengers to "the right." It is thus worth asking, "who represents the right in Venezuela?"

In this chapter, we demonstrate that Venezuelan politics is more complex than the *chavista* government and its allies have long claimed. We explain how even before Chávez, the political system oscillated around the center, with

[8] Erik del Búfalo, a philosophy professor formerly linked with the organization, declared via Twitter "Today it is confirmed that there is no moderately conservative political force in Venezuela," to which he added: "The conservatives will have to go to the catacombs. Which is not so bad, because the powers-that-be cannot reach down there and it is the ideal place to tunnel underneath the decadence that is sold as a civilization. It has happened before in history and with long-term success" (Bufalo, 2021).

[9] With differing percentages, only *Vente* and Machado register on Venezuelan popularity surveys. For a more illustrative measure, however inexact, we can use social media follower counts. For example, *Rumbo Libertad* has about 85,000 Twitter followers, while ORDEN and the MDL do not reach 5,000. In contrast, the followers of Machado (4 million) and Vente (170,000) can compare to the numbers of mainstream opposition parties and leaders: AD (195,000), PJ (885,000), UNT (201,000), and VP (1 million). Among national opposition political leaders, Machado is only surpassed by Henrique Capriles (7.3 million) and Leopoldo López of VP (5.3 million), whereas other figures such as Julio Borges, Henry Ramos, Henri Falcón, and Manuel Rosales hover around 1 or 2 million followers.

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center–left and center–right parties like AD and COPEI. While Venezuela's representative democracy (1958–1998) was generally aligned with the West's capitalist system as a dependable oil-exporting country, it also pursued nationalistic economic policies and strived to form a welfarist society with significant state intervention until various economic crises emerged at the end of the century and resulted in austerity reforms. Thus, the system was slightly skewed to the left as more left-leaning parties developed. On the right side of the spectrum, most political movements did not survive one or two electoral cycles and ultimately failed to materialize as viable conservative oppositions to *Chavismo*.

Furthermore, we argue that after Chávez's rise to power, Venezuelan politics cannot be fully understood through a rigid left–right lens. The country's political landscape has mostly been divided into two poles: *Chavismo* and anti-*Chavismo*. However, while the government has insisted on framing all challengers as "the right," the opposition has long de-emphasized ideological differences and moved away from ideological extremes to favor broad coordination agreements. This ideological blurring was a necessary mechanism, particularly during the formal electoral coordination around the MUD (2009–2015), which allowed the opposition to grow and further resisted *Chavismo*'s hegemonic tendencies.

In addition, this chapter illustrates that conservative ideas cannot be solely associated with factions within the opposition. Despite the government's heavily financed left-wing propaganda, in practice, *Chavismo* has not delivered on any landmark issues it aims to address, including poverty, inequality, social justice, inclusion, and secularism. In contrast, during the past two decades, *Chavismo* has not seriously addressed policies for some of the most vulnerable groups in Venezuelan society. Finally, we also identify a rightward shift within otherwise social–democratic groups, as well as the emergence of marginal far-right and right-wing parties. We argue that with the increasingly repressive nature of *Chavismo* domestically and a favorable international environment among the new right, particularly in the US and Spain, some groups have radicalized their ideological and strategic preferences beyond center–left and center–right politics.

The past six decades show that Venezuelan politics are unpredictable. The country experienced a right-wing military dictatorship under Pérez Jiménez (1952–1958), followed by four decades of one of the most stable pacted democratic systems in the world (1958–1998), the failures of which paved the way for a left-wing movement that, while promising the establishment of "true democracy," has ultimately delivered an authoritarian regime. These conflicts are better explained through the concepts of liberalism and illiberalism and by examining the opposition's responses to such trends, rather than solely by ideological differences. It remains to be seen whether the non-*chavista* camp will be able to develop a compelling programmatic proposal that can appeal to the ideologically diverse sectors disillusioned with the Bolivarian revolution.

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