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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Backsliding by surprise: the rise of Chavismo

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Abstract

How do elected autocrats come to power? Prominent explanations point to distributive conflict. We propose instead that some candidates advertise democratic deconsolidation as "deepening democracy," which can have cross-cutting appeal. We evaluate this proposal through the election of Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, an emblematic elected autocrat. Using original data, we find that historical voting patterns and political rhetoric are consistent with our proposal: Chávez came to power with the cross-class support of voters from across the traditional political spectrum, and his campaign emphasized rather than obscured his plan to remake political institutions.

Keywords: Latin American politics and Caribbean Politics; political economy

How do elected autocrats come to power? Prominent explanations point to class conflict, arguing that poor voters prefer a powerful executive ally to democratic institutions that are captured by moneyed elites (e.g., Acemoglu *et al.*, 2013*b*). These accounts cast the subversion of democracy as a means to an end, the unsavory but unavoidable vehicle by which voters pursue their redistributive preferences.

But many elected autocrats initially attempt to sell democratic deconsolidation as an end in and of itself, even portraying their proposals as vaguely *democratizing*. These candidates capitalize not on polarization (Graham and Svolik, 2020; Svolik, 2020), inequality (Acemoglu *et al.*, 2013*b*), relief (Grillo and Prato, 2020), or even stealth (Luo and Przeworski, 2019; Chiopris *et al.*, 2021) but rather on cross-cutting frustration with the status quo: anti-system sentiment. Anti-system sentiment can stem from economic grievances that are weakly correlated with income or wealth, creating intra-class rather than inter-class cleavages. Proposals to shake up political institutions may then appeal to voters from across the socio-economic or ideological spectrum.

Turkey's Recep Erdoğan, for example, did not rise to power by mobilizing poor victims' of the previous years recession; rather, he exploited cross-cutting disillusionment with the status quo (Cagaptay, 2002, 2; Carkoglu, 2002, 37). Hungary's Viktor Orban, likewise, made his name with a searing pro-democracy speech; he later became prime minister not by rallying the poor against the austerity of the previous government (Lomax, 1999, 120; Scheiring, 2020, 312), but by appealing to a cross-cutting coalition of voters seeking a "new beginning" (Szilágyi and Bozóki, 2015, 162). Orban then "morphed into an opponent of democracy" (Berman, 2021, 72), while Erdoğan earned the moniker "New Sultan" (Cagaptay, 2020).

Theories focused on inequality or polarization predict that elected autocrats come to power with the support of one side of the socio-economic or ideological spectrum (Acemoglu *et al.*, 2013*b*; Graham and Svolik, 2020; Karakas and Mitra, 2020). We instead predict a fleeting realignment: that elected autocrats temporarily shift the dimension of political conflict, initially drawing

voters from across traditional coalitions (as in Schofield, 2003; Greene, 2008; Buisseret and Van Weelden, 2020).

We evaluate this prediction using new data on the rise of Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, an emblematic elected autocrat. This case is central to studies of "democratic subversion" (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018, Chapter 4), "illiberal democracy" (Mounk, 2018), and "democratic backsliding" (Bermeo, 2016), yet there is no consensus on the roots of Chávez's initial electoral success. Some scholars emphasize class cleavages, while others point to cross-cutting anti-system sentiment; quantitative evidence has come largely from correlations among variables in a handful of public opinion surveys.[1] Moreover, among scholars who focus on anti-system sentiment, there is no consensus about what (if not class) divided the most anti-system voters from everyone else.

We suggest that Venezuela's long pre-Chávez recession produced uneven harm *within* class groups, sparking anti-system sentiment among those who fared poorly relative to their socio-economic peers. We then document three findings consistent with the notion that Chávez came to power not by rallying the poor or the left against their democratic principles, but rather by selling himself as a candidate who would deepen Venezuelan democracy—thus appealing to anti-system voters from across classes and across the traditional political spectrum.

First, we find that Chávez's initial coalition was *fleeting*. Using an original data set of historical election returns, we show that the bloc that elected Chávez in 1998 quickly splintered. We interpret this fact as evidence of a temporary electoral realignment, after which many Venezuelan voters became "repented Chavistas" (Corrales and Penfold, 2015, 44).[2]

Second, we find that voting in the 1998 presidential election—which brought Chávez to power—was *less* tied to socio-economic status than voting in any other presidential election, 1958–2012. It was not "the poor" or "the left" who elected Chávez in pursuit of specific tax policies; rather, Chávez initially drew voters from across socio-economic and ideological lines.

Third, we provide additional evidence that Chávez openly campaigned on a proposal for sweeping institutional change (Hawkins, 2010; Handlin, 2017). But far from promising to undermine checks and balances or otherwise promote majoritarian institutions, Chávez vowed to curb Venezuela's "imperial presidency," push for decentralization, and even establish a prime minister and a fourth branch of government (Section 2.3). The resultant ambiguity allowed many voters to hear what they wanted to hear. We arrive at these findings by drawing quantitative and qualitative comparisons between Chávez's campaign-trail rhetoric and that of his principal opponent, Henrique Salas Römer.

Beyond work on democratic backsliding, these findings contribute to the literature on populism. Two distinct views of populism both claim Hugo Chávez as standard bearer: (1) macroeconomic populism (Acemoglu *et al.*, 2013*a*), in which "anti-establishment" means "anti-economic-elite" and entails a specific set of redistributive policies that appeal to poor voters, and (2) populism in the sense of Barr (2009), in which "anti-establishment" means "anti-political-establishment" and entails a proposal to change political institutions—a proposal that may hold cross-cutting appeal. The former requires a coalition of the dispossessed, the latter a coalition of the disappointed. We make two contributions. First, in Section 1, we describe conditions under which we would expect anti-system sentiment to span the socio-economic spectrum (and, thereby, conditions under which we would expect cross-cutting support for proposals to reshape political institutions). Second, in Section 2, our empirical analysis reveals

[1]For example, Ellner (2003, 19) and Dunning (2008, 173) emphasize class cleavages; Handlin (2017), Weyland (2003, 836), McCoy (1999, 66), and Corrales (2005, 106), among others cited below, emphasize anti-system sentiment. Seawright (2012, 134) and Roberts (2003, 66–67) both use intra-survey correlations to argue, respectively, *against* and *in favor of* class-based voting in the 1998 election. Lupu (2010) finds a *stronger* correlation between socio-economic status and vote choice in 1998 than in later elections; Handlin (2013) finds the opposite.

[2]Chiopris *et al.* (2021) also highlight the role of uncertainty, but their model (like that of Graham and Svolik, 2020, among others) predicts that polarization enables elected autocrats to come to power with the support of one side of the ideological spectrum. We instead focus on realignment.

that Chávez in 1998 was very much a Barr-type populist—not yet a macroeconomic populist—even shifting political competition from a left–right dimension to a change–status-quo dimension (Handlin, 2017, 17, 43). By proposing an ambiguous "new democracy" to a diverse set of voters disgusted with the status quo (Hawkins, 2010), Chávez assembled a heterogeneous anti-system coalition. When his new democracy proved not-so-democratic after all, the coalition splintered. In our account, cross-cutting anti-system sentiment—more than class conflict—brought Chávez to power, and merits renewed consideration in the analysis of other cases.

1 Theory: elected autocrats as Riker's heresthetic leaders

Prominent explanations for the rise of elected strongmen focus on distributive conflict and ideological polarization. Acemoglu *et al.* (2013*b*), for example, propose that checks and balances allow the elite to capture policymaking; for the poor majority, when inequality is high, the cost of elite capture outweighs the benefits of checks and balances.[3] Other accounts point to polarization (e.g., Haggard and Kaufman, 2021). In Svolik (2020), for example, polarization threatens democracy because voters far enough to the left will vote for the left candidate no matter what—even if the voter values democracy and the candidate subverts it.

What these theories have in common is that candidates who subvert democracy draw electoral support from one side of the socio-economic or ideological spectrum. We instead follow Handlin (2017, 43) in describing two dimensions of political conflict in Venezuela: an economic dimension (left–right) and an institutional-change dimension (change–stability).[4] We propose that Chávez won election in 1998 not primarily by leveraging left–right polarization or poor–elite distributive conflict, but rather by exploiting a cross-cutting cleavage that divided the most virulently anti-system voters from everyone else. Chávez came to power by shifting political conflict onto the change–stability dimension, thus "structuring the world so [he] could win" (Riker, 1986, ix).

This is not to say that anti-system sentiment in Venezuela was divorced from preferences over economic policy—only that those preferences may have been weakly correlated with income or ideology. Like many scholars before us, we view anti-system sentiment as the consequence (at least in part) of a prolonged recession (e.g., McCoy and Myers, 2004; Morgan, 2011). But while much of the literature considers how recession fuels class conflict—Dunning (2008), for example, shows that low oil prices exacerbate poor–elite conflict and thereby spark attacks on democracy—we suggest that recession also provokes *intra-class* conflict. In Venezuela, the recession sharpened intra-elite and even intra-sector business rivalries, leading the losers of the most recent round of crony-capitalist battles to support Chávez's candidacy (Santodomingo, 1999; Gates, 2010). It also widened the longstanding system-sentiment gap between formal and informal workers (Díaz-Cayeros and Magaloni, 2009) and between the urban and rural poor. The rural poor voted for Venezuela's traditional parties, whereas the urban poor were long neglected and alienated (Myers, 1975; Canache, 2002*b*; Ellner, 2003; Velasco, 2015).

These precise mechanisms may be specific to Venezuela, but the logic is general: adverse economic conditions can spawn a set of material grievances whose severity is weakly correlated with income or with preferences over redistribution (or, more generally, with preferences over any single economic policy issue). While a vote for macro-economic populism may be an expression of a preference for specific new institutions that change tax policy in known ways (Acemoglu *et al.*, 2013*a*,*b*), we see a vote for anti-system populism as the expression of a hope that unspecified (or underspecified) new institutions will produce economic outcomes unlike those of the status quo. Such hopes proliferate with recession but are not always predicted by income.[5] The

[3]Similarly, the threat of elite capture fosters macroeconomic populism in Acemoglu *et al.* (2013*a*).

[4]"Stability" here is a relative term; even Chávez's opponent proposed some degree of institutional reform. But he criticized Chávez's call to rewrite the constitution (Handlin 2017, p. 88).

[5]This may help explain why, for example, Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders earned some of their highest vote shares in the same counties, or why the recent wave of anti-system populist sentiment seems at once obviously tied to the Great

implication is that, while macro-economic populist coalitions may be defined by income, anti-system populist coalitions unite disparate groups each with their own reasons for a "palpable sense of general unhappiness with the status quo" (Ward *et al.*, 2021, 370). In addition to Handlin (2017), this account builds on Buisseret and Van Weelden (2020) and Greene (2008), who emphasize that outsider candidates can win by activating a second issue dimension, as well as Greene and Robertson (2022), who highlight the role of *sentiment* in generating support for authoritarian leaders.[6] Schofield (2003) clarifies how shifts in the dimension of political conflict can occur in equilibrium, developing a model of spatial competition in two dimensions with "activist valence": valence that is endogenously determined by contributions from individuals. In pursuit of help from disaffected activists who care passionately about the latent dimension of conflict but little about the active one, vote-maximizing candidates shift dimensions, producing electoral realignment (see Miller and Schofield, 2003).[7]

When anti-system sentiment is widespread, candidates may profitably campaign on promises of institutional change (Barr, 2009). Whether that change will deepen or dismantle democracy is often ambiguous *ex-ante*, in part because the outcome likely depends not only on candidate characteristics (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018) but also on hard-to-predict circumstances (Corrales, 2018). It is this ambiguity that allows for backsliding by surprise.

2 Backsliding by surprise in Venezuela

We investigate three empirical implications of this proposal.

First, we find that the 1998 election induced a fleeting *electoral realignment*: a change in which people vote together. Realignment is an empirical implication of the idea of a shift in the dimension of conflict (Miller and Schofield, 2003). The temporary nature of the realignment is an empirical implication of the idea that Chávez's initial coalition endorsed a vague *change* platform, not the specific slate of institutions created during his first years in office.

Second, using survey and administrative data, we find that voting in the 1998 and 2000 elections was *less* tied to socio-economic status than vote choice in other presidential elections, 1958–2012. This result is difficult to reconcile with the idea of 1998 as an election that *sharpened* class cleavages in voting, but it resonates with our proposal that the left–right dimension of conflict was salient in all elections except 1998 and 2000, which were contested on the cross-cutting change–stability dimension.

Third, using text analysis, we find that, in 1998, Chávez campaigned on a platform of (vaguely defined) institutional change. This finding, too, is consistent with the notion that the change–stability dimension was salient in 1998.

2.1 The 1998 coalition was fleeting

The election of Chávez in 1998 induced a fleeting *electoral realignment*. The voters who elected Chávez in 1998, we find, often opposed each other in previous elections—and they opposed each other in subsequent elections, too. Chávez's initial coalition coalesced briefly and then dissolved.

Recession and yet disconnected from simple survey measures such as *I lost my manufacturing job* (Guriev, 2018; Sides *et al.*, 2019; Berman, 2021; Mutz, 2021).

[6]Buisseret and Van Weelden (2020) propose that outsiders compete as third-party candidates—rather than crashing established-party primaries—when intra-party polarization is *low*. This logic is consistent with our case: left–right polarization between the two main parties was low, and Chávez competed under his own party label. However, the model does not entirely apply to Venezuela because (a) only one of the two major parties held a primary and (b) that primary was also won by an outsider, who later dropped out of the race. Greene (2008) shows that Mexico's PAN defeated the PRI by mobilizing pro-democracy voters.

[7]This is an apt description of the Venezuelan case. Veterans of longstanding institutional reform efforts initially supported Chávez *despite* not hailing from the left, and, in some cases, despite active ideological misgivings. These activists made significant contributions to Chávez's campaign and credibility.

This fact is consistent with the notion of a shift in the dimension of political conflict (Miller and Schofield, 2003), and with the idea that many of Chávez's initial supporters experienced remorse (Corrales and Penfold, 2015, 44). But it is difficult to reconcile with the image of far-sighted voters correctly anticipating the content and consequences of Chávez's new political institutions (Acemoglu *et al.*, 2013*b*).

We observe this fleeting realignment in an original data set of district-level election returns. Beginning with the 1998 elections, these data are publicly available online; for 1958–1993, we digitized returns printed in volumes published by Venezuela's *Consejo Supremo Electoral* (CSE). Overall, our data include vote shares for 287 districts over twelve presidential elections.[8]

In the absence of electoral realignment, we would expect Venezuela's electoral geography to remain stable. The districts most in favor of Acción Democrática (AD)—one of the two parties that dominated presidential elections from the 1960s through the 1980s—would remain the most pro-AD districts from one election to the next; likewise, the least-AD districts would remain anti-AD. Realignment, in contrast, shows up as a scrambling of the electoral map: the most-AD districts might suddenly vote for the same candidate as the least-AD districts. Realignment produces coalitions of strange bedfellows (e.g., Miller and Schofield, 2003; Sundquist, 2011, Table 2).

We measure the (in)stability of Venezuelan electoral geography using the correlation between district-level vote shares in one election and district-level vote shares in subsequent elections (following Miller and Schofield, 2003; Eubank, 2012, for the United States).[9] High inter-election correlations suggest stability. Low inter-election correlations reveal realignment: a mixed-up electoral map.

We find that Venezuela's electoral geography remained remarkably stable for 35 years, abruptly changed with the election of Hugo Chávez in 1998, and then abruptly changed back by the time of his re-election in 2006. To see this, consider Figure 1. The first point in this figure—the one corresponding to 1963—marks the correlation between AD's vote share in the 1963 presidential election and AD's vote share in the 1958 presidential election (the first election after Venezuela's transition to democracy).[10] Unsurprisingly, this correlation was high: 0.86. Over the five years between 1958 and 1963, Adeco districts (i.e., pro-AD districts) stayed Adeco. The other points in Figure 1 mark the correlation between AD vote share in subsequent elections (1968, 1973 … 1993) and AD vote share in 1958. Naturally, the correlation weakened somewhat as time progressed. But it remained high: in 1993, the correlation with AD's 1958 vote share was 0.54. (We present all corresponding scatter plots in Appendix Figure E.4.)

That changed in 1998. The old AD coalition split; some Adeco districts voted for Chávez, others against. The correlation between the vote share of AD's eventual candidate in 1958 and AD's candidate in 1998—Chávez's principal opponent—was almost exactly zero ($\widehat{\rho} = 0.01$). So was the correlation between *Chávez's* vote share in 1998 and AD's vote share in 1958, which we plot in Figure 1 ($\widehat{\rho} = -0.02$). After decades of stability, the 1998 election scrambled Venezuela's electoral map.[11]

[8]These geographic units correspond to Venezuelan municipalities *as they existed in 1993*. We choose the 1993 municipality as a unit of analysis for both practical and conceptual reasons, as recommended by Soifer (2019, 105–6). Practically, the 1993 municipality is the smallest jurisdiction for which we can construct geographic units that are stable over time. Conceptually, the municipality is a political jurisdiction governed by a mayor; in that sense, it is a unit "at which actors form their perceptions of relevant aspects" of politics (105). In any case, repeating our analysis at the state level reveals a similar pattern (Figure E.4).

[9]The relationship between district-level vote shares in one election and district-level vote shares in subsequent elections is approximately linear, as we show in Appendix Figure E.4.

[10]We use "AD's vote share" as shorthand for "the vote share of AD's presidential candidate." Venezuela allowed voters to cast ballots for the same candidate under different party endorsements.

[11]Appendix Figure D.2 presents alternate versions of Figure 1 that use 2012 or 1998 as the base year for bivariate correlations (rather than 1958). The takeaways are similar: Chávez's 2012 vote share is more correlated with historical AD votes than with Chávez's own 1998 vote share; moreover, inter-election correlations under Chávez weakened much more in the 14 years between 1998 and 2012 than AD's did in the 35 years between 1958 and 1993.

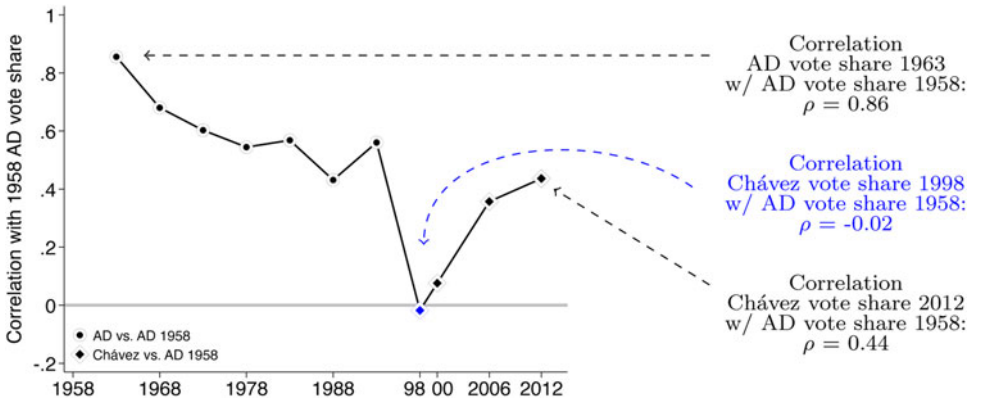

Fig. 1. Chávez's election temporarily scrambled Venezuela's electoral map. Using an original panel data set of municipal election returns, this figure plots the bivariate correlation (across municipalities) between (i) AD's vote share in 1958 and (ii) AD's or Chávez's vote share in each year indicated on the x-axis.

Remarkably, Venezuela's traditional geographic voting blocs reemerged in 2006 and 2012, when Chávez was twice reelected. Indeed, by 2006, Chávez had largely captured former AD municipalities. The correlations between (a) the vote share of AD's candidate in 1958 and (b) Hugo Chávez's vote share in 2006 and 2012 were 0.34 and 0.44, respectively (Figure 1). Districts sorted back into the voting blocs of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. The old Adeco coalition re-formed as Chavismo.

Consider, for example, the district of Unión, in the foothills of the sierra of Falcón state, an eight-hour drive northwest of Caracas. Unión is rural and agricultural; the capital has fewer than 10,000 residents. For decades, Unión was AD country: in 1958, AD won 82 percent of the vote in Unión, putting Unión in the 92nd percentile of AD vote share across all districts; in 1993, Unión still ranked in the top 40 percent most-Adeco districts (Figure 2a). And eventually, by 2012, Unión became Chavista, ranking in the 73rd percentile of Chávez vote share. But in 1998, Unión was one of the least-Chavista districts in the whole country, in the 4th percentile of district-level Chávez vote share. The urban district of Maracaibo, Zulia—part of one of Venezuela's biggest cities—followed the opposite trajectory: it was anti-AD for decades and later became anti-Chávez, but strongly endorsed Chávez in 1998, with a Chávez vote share in the 72nd percentile nationwide (Figure 2). Yet other districts remained anti-AD/anti-Chávez or pro-AD/pro-Chávez throughout, with no blip in 1998 (e.g., Chacao and Rojas, respectively, Figure 2c). Thus in every election except 1998, Unión voted with Rojas and Maracaibo with Chacao; in 1998, in contrast, Unión voted with Chacao and Rojas with Maracaibo. These examples illustrate the dynamic behind the temporary scrambling of Venezuela's electoral map.

We interpret this result as evidence that the 1998 election induced a fleeting electoral realignment, the result of a momentary shift in the dimension of political conflict. Rather than capture one or another traditional voting bloc, Chávez won with the support of voters from across the traditional political spectrum. But this strange-bedfellows coalition quickly splintered. This fact is difficult to reconcile with the idea that voters correctly anticipated the content of Chávez's early power grabs, deemed those power grabs in their own material interest, elected Chávez accordingly, and were satisfied with the consequences. Rather, our finding of a fleeting electoral realignment is consistent with the idea that people did not get what they voted for.

2.2 Voting in 1998 was less tied to socio-economic status than voting in other elections

These results suggest the presence of (roughly) two winning coalitions in Venezuela: the old Adeco (pro-AD) coalition that later reelected Chávez, and the coalition that brought Chávez

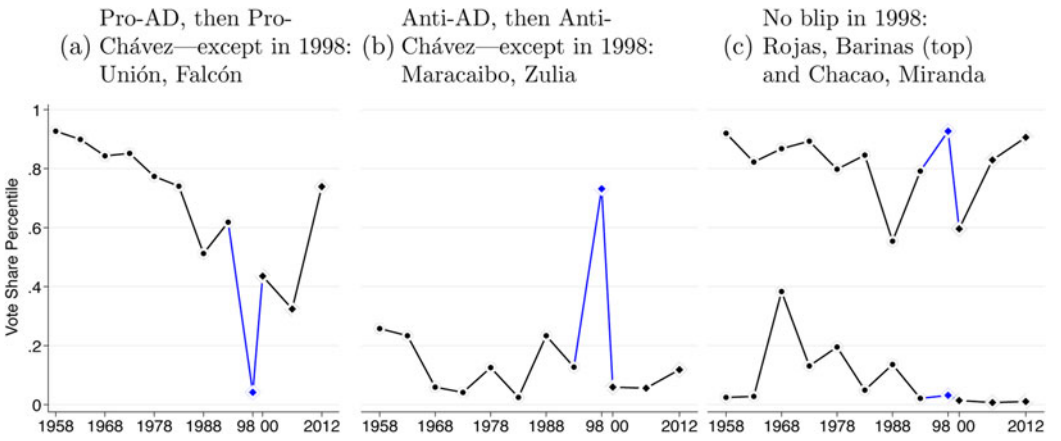

Fig. 2. Four examples to illustrate the dynamic of fleeting realignment. The evolution of vote share in these four municipalities illustrates the dynamic driving the temporary-realignment result in Figure 1. Each line plots one municipality's percentile in the distribution of AD vote share (through 1993, marked with circles) and then of Chávez vote share (from 1998, marked with diamonds). (a) Unión was pro-AD from 1958 to 1993 and later became Chavista—but ranked among the least-Chavista municipalities in 1998. (b) Maracaibo was anti-AD from 1958–1993 and later became anti-Chávez—but not in 1998. (c) Yet other municipalities voted as expected in 1998. (a) Pro-AD, then Pro-Chávez—except in 1998: Unión, Falcán, (b) Anti-AD, then Anti-Chávez—except in 1998: Maracaibo, Zulia. (c) No blip in 1998: Rojas, Barinas (top) and Chacao, Miranda.

to power in 1998. We now characterize these two coalitions. To use a reductive but perhaps useful shorthand, the first coalition—the old Adeco coalition that later became Chavismo—united poorer, less-educated, and rural voters against wealthier, more-educated, more-urban opponents (for additional evidence of strong socio-economic differences in AD support, see Baloyra and Martz, 1979, 75).[12] The latter—Chávez's 1998 coalition—united a heterogeneous group of anti-system voters: "alienated but educated" city dwellers (as Myers, 1975, characterized Venezuela's anti-system vote in the 1970s), scattered rural elites (Gates, 2010), business rivals of Chávez's opponent in the 1998 election (Santodomingo, 1999; Gates, 2010), a faction of the traditional elite left (such as the *Movimiento al Socialismo*; see also Morgan, 2011), voters concerned about crime (Pepinsky, 2017; Kronick, 2020), and also the urban poor (Canache, 2002*b*). This potpourri was *more* socioeconomically diverse than the old AD coalition (cf. Ellner, 2003, 19). Far from an unprecedented bloc of poor and left-wing voters, Chávez's initial coalition picked up a diverse anti-system current in Venezuelan politics. Across districts, his vote share was correlated with that of past anti-system candidates on the left *and* on the right (Appendix C).

This characterization resonates with the work of scholars who emphasize that Chávez's initial supporters "hailed from all walks of life" (Weyland, 2003, 836) and that his 1998 coalition "united different classes" (Corrales, 2005, 106). Handlin (2017) argues that, in 1998, voters' enthusiasm for *institutional change* spanned social classes and cut across the left–right dimension of conflict. Our findings support these accounts, contradicting work that instead highlights a sharp class cleavage in early voting for Chávez and his referenda (e.g., Buxton, 2003: 123; Ellner, 2003; Acemoglu *et al.*, 2013*b*). Our findings are consistent with the idea of a shift in the dimension of conflict, of the type described by Schofield (2003) and Miller and Schofield (2003).

We provide new empirical evidence. Previous work has relied largely on qualitative data and on analysis of a handful of surveys taken immediately before the 1998 election. These intra-survey

[12]See Appendix Figure D.3 for correlations between vote shares and population density; denser municipalities were more anti-AD and more anti-Chávez in every election except 1998 and 2000.

correlations are informative, but different scholars have used the same data to draw conflicting conclusions about the relative importance of socio-economic status in explaining vote choice in 1998 (e.g., Roberts, 2003, 134; Seawright, 2012, 66–67). We instead use two new sources of data: a collection of historical public opinion surveys, and, beginning in 1998, a voting-booth-level correlate of socio-economic status. These data allow us to evaluate whether voting was *more* or *less* tied to socio-economic status in 1998 than in other presidential elections. We find that, far from sharpening class cleavages in voting, the 1998 election dulled them.

First, using the public opinion surveys, we consider the relationship between educational attainment and (self-reported) vote choice in each election.[13] Education is often used to study the class bases of political parties in Latin America (Canton and Jorrat, 2002; Lupu and Stokes, 2009), and Handlin (2013) makes a strong case for it in Venezuela in particular. An index of education and wealth might better capture socio-economic status (Handlin, 2013), but we cannot consistently measure wealth across these surveys.[14]

For each election 1958–1993, we estimate the difference between (i) AD vote share among those with at least college education (high school in ≤1973) and (ii) AD vote share among those with less than primary education. For 1998–2012, we estimate an analogous difference for Chávez's vote share:

$$\widehat{\theta}_t = \begin{cases} \frac{1}{n}\sum_i \left[\left(\text{VoteAD}_{it} | \text{College}_{it}\right) - \left(\text{VoteAD}_{it} | < \text{Primary}_{it}\right)\right] & \text{for } 1958 - 1993 \\ \frac{1}{n}\sum_i \left[\left(\text{VoteChávez}_{it} | \text{College}_{it}\right) - \left(\text{VoteChávez}_{it} | < \text{Primary}_{it}\right)\right] & \text{for } 1998 - 2012 \end{cases} \quad (1)$$

where VoteAD_{it}, VoteChávez_{it}, College_{it}, and $<\text{Primary}_{it}$ are indicators for each voter's (self-reported) vote choice and educational attainment.

We find a steep education–voting gradient in every presidential election *except* 1998 and 2000. Between 1958 and 1993, college-educated voters were much less likely to vote AD than voters who did not finish primary school (Figure 3); similarly, in 2006 and 2012, college-educated voters were much less likely to vote Chávez than those who did not finish primary school. These differences are intuitive: both AD and Chávez sat to the left of their main rivals on the ideological spectrum (Baloyra and Martz, 1979, 119; Lupu, 2016, 103). But in 1998 and 2000, the education-voting gradient flattened. In those elections, the most- and least-educated voters were equally likely to vote for Chávez.[15]

Relative to other survey-based evidence, ours has the advantage of drawing comparisons across many elections. But our analysis does not escape known problems of using survey self-reports to study correlates of voting behavior. For one thing, stated vote intentions may differ from actual votes cast, and this intention–behavior gap may covary with education. For another, educational attainment—the only aspect of socio-economic status that is consistently measured across all of the surveys in our data—captures only one part of what we seek to estimate.

For these reasons, we also use administrative data to study the relationship between vote choice and socio-economic status, finding a similar pattern. In particular, for 1998 and subsequent elections, we pair electoral returns at the voting booth level with a voting-booth-level, election-specific measure of formal-sector employment.[16] We construct this measure using data that

[13]The question is: "If the elections were this Sunday, for whom would you vote?"

[14]See Appendix B for details on the public opinion surveys.

[15]This contrasts with the finding reported in Lupu (2010)'s influential article on voting in the 1993–2006 elections, "Who Votes for Chavismo?" Lupu finds a *stronger* SES-voting gradient in 1998 than in 2000 or 2006; we find a weaker gradient. The contrast stems from different measures of SES: Lupu uses income, unadjusted for household size; we use education. Handlin (2013) discusses Lupu's measure in detail.

[16]There are approximately 23,000 voting booths per election, on average, each with an average of 590 registered voters. To the best of our knowledge, booth-level electoral returns and/or the voter registry are not available for elections prior to 1998.

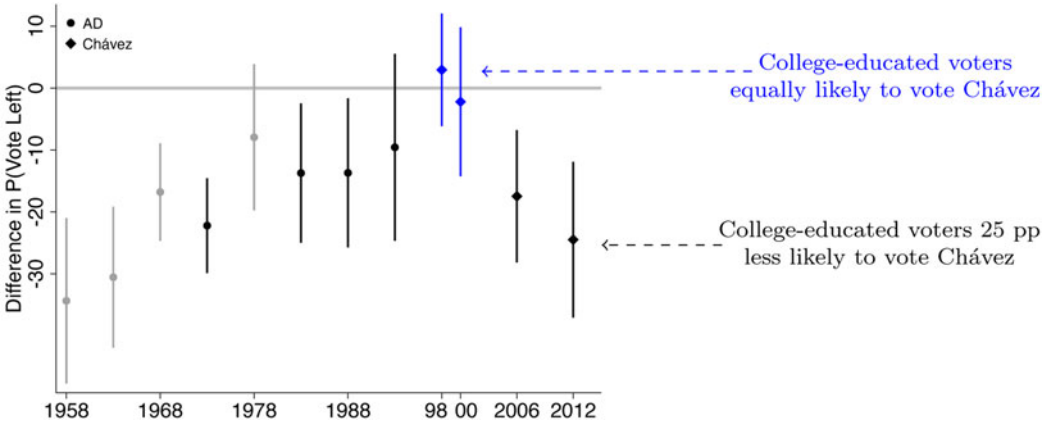

Fig. 3. Voting tied to education in every year except 1998 and 2000. Points mark estimates from Equation (1): the difference between (i) AD vote share among college graduates (high school in ≤1973)[†] and (ii) AD vote share among those without primary education, for 1958–1993; for 1998–2012, analogous quantities for Chávez's vote share. [†] We pool high school and college education in ≤1973 because there are too few college-educated respondents. Sources: 1973 survey from Baloyra and Martz (1973); 1983 survey from Baloyra and Torres (1983); 1988 survey from Baloyra and Torres (1983); 1993–2006 surveys from Lupu (2010); 2012 from LAPOP (2012). Grayed-out points rely on retrospective reports from later surveys rather than contemporaneous responses; readers may therefore take them with a grain of salt.

other researchers scraped from the website of Venezuela's social security institute. These data, which Hsieh *et al.* (2011) and Guerra Guevara (2019) generously shared with us, indicate which individuals held formal-sector employment in which years. We merge this person-specific formal-employment indicator to the voter registry, allowing us to estimate *the proportion of registered voters in each booth who held formal-sector employment in the two years prior to each election*, or *percent formal*.[17] This proportion, which varies across voting booths from 0 to 40 percent (see Appendix Figure D.3), captures a meaningful component of socio-economic status in Venezuela: Ellner (2012), for example, describes informal-sector workers as *marginalized* or *semi-marginalized* (108).

Because the distribution of *percent of voters with formal-sector employment* is skewed, and because the maximum changes over time (see Appendix Figure D.3), Figure 4 plots Chávez's vote share against each voting booth's *percentile* in the election-specific distribution of *percent formal* (such that observations are distributed uniformly along the x-axis by construction). The results echo those of the survey analysis in Figure 3. In 1998, Chávez's vote share actually increased slightly with the proportion of voters with formal-sector employment; by 2006, in stark contrast, voting booths with the highest proportions of formal-sector voters supported Chávez at rates 30 percentage points lower than those of voting booths with the lowest *percent formal*. By 2012, the difference had widened to 40 percentage points.

This finding, which emerges both from survey data and from administrative data, is hard to reconcile with the hypothesis that the 1998 election *sharpened* class cleavages in voting, or with the notion that Chávez won in 1998 primarily by mobilizing lower-class voters (though it is consistent with Ellner's view that "following his original electoral triumph Chávez relied *increasingly* on the support of the marginalized sectors," 2003, 20, emphasis added; see also Dunning 2008, 174). Instead, our findings support the idea that Chávez's initial coalition drew voters from across the socio-economic spectrum and from across traditional political divides.

[17]Using a longer or shorter window does not affect the results.

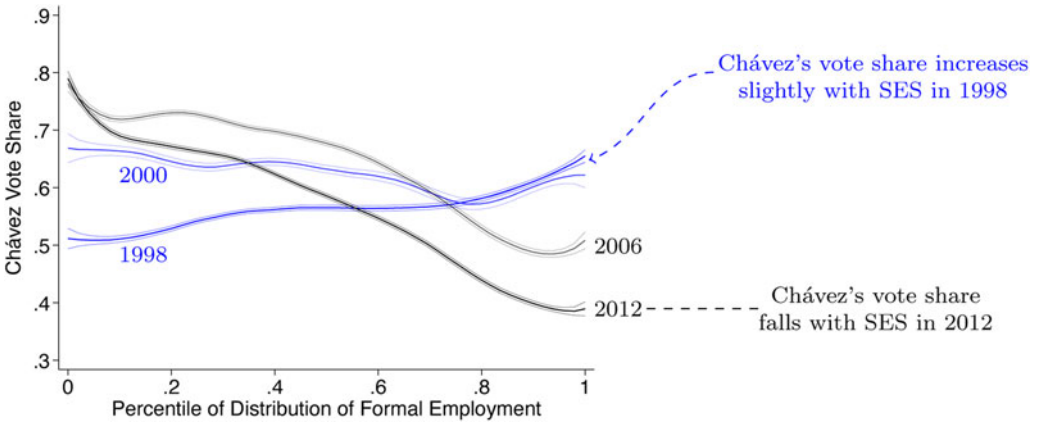

Fig. 4. Voting–SES gradient reverses after 1998. This graph uses voting-booth-level data (N = 10K–30K) to plot the relationship between Chávez's vote share (y-axis) and a measure of socio-economic status (increasing along the x-axis), specifically, each voting booth's percentile in the distribution of the fraction of voters with formal-sector employment. Consistent with Figure 3, Chávez's vote share actually increased slightly with SES in 1998, turned negative in 2000, and then became more negative in 2006 and 2012. Individual-level data on formal-sector employment were scraped from the Venezuelan Social Security Institute (IVSS) and shared with us by Hsieh *et al.* (2011) and Guerra Guevara (2019). Individual-level voter registration and voting-booth-level electoral returns published by the Venezuelan electoral council.

2.3 Chávez campaigned on institutional change

In Svolik (2020), incumbents get away with subverting democracy by exploiting left–right polarization. Voters don't value autocratic maneuvers for their own sake; rather, they accept packing the electoral council (e.g.) as the price they pay for an executive with favorable distributional policies.

This implies a prediction for campaign rhetoric: candidates should flaunt their economic policies and hide their plans to rewrite the rules. In Chiopris *et al.* (2021) and Luo and Przeworski (2019), elected autocrats rely on stealth: voters don't hear about institutional change one way or the other. In contrast, our proposal of a shift in the dimension of political conflict implies active campaigning on *institutional change* (Miller and Schofield, 2003; Schofield, 2003).

The Venezuelan case is long on anecdotal examples of such campaigning. Chávez named his political party the Fifth Republic Movement, an expression of his intent to re-found the nation.[18] On the campaign trail, he referred to the Venezuelan political system as a "moribund democracy" and proposed a constituent assembly (Chávez Frías, 1998). He slammed his political opponents for trying to "put makeup on rot," declaring himself the only candidate who would take the necessary step of "eradicating the rot," even comparing himself to a doctor excising cancer from the body politic (ibid). Handlin (2017), based on interviews and press accounts, concludes that Chávez attempted to "reframe the presidential contest itself as a referendum on [rewriting the constitution]" (87).

Of course, we could also provide examples of Chávez lamenting the plight of the poor and emphasizing economic policy. To characterize his rhetoric somewhat more systematically, and to compare it with that of Henrique Salas Römer—Chávez's principal opponent in the 1998 presidential campaign—we focus on a small set of television interviews: those conducted on the long-running talk show *Front Page*, hosted by network executive Marcel Granier. During the campaign, Granier interviewed Chávez once and Salas Römer three times. Each of the four interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. The limitation of this approach is that the corpus is small; the advantage is that it allows us to observe both candidates in roughly similar settings.

[18]The first four republics ran from 1810–1812, 1813–1814, 1817–1819, and 1830–1999, respectively.

Table 1. Chávez stressed constitution, opponent talked more about poverty

	Chávez	Salas Römer	Difference
Constituent assembly	3.35	1.93	1.42
Poverty, inequality	1.86	2.50	−0.64
Poverty:assembly ratio	0.56	1.30	

Using topic-specific dictionary words (see main text), we compare the (normalized) frequency with which Chávez and his opponent addressed two themes—the constituent assembly and poverty—during appearances on the television show Front Page.
Theme prevalence per 1000 words.

We approach the *Front Page* interviews in two ways. First, we estimate and compare the frequency with which each candidate addressed two particular topics: *institutional change* and *poverty*.[19] Second, we describe the interviews qualitatively.

To estimate the prevalence of our two topics of interest in this corpus, we first construct topic-specific dictionaries. Using pre-trained word embeddings, we identify terms that tend to co-occur with the seed words *constituent assembly* (for the institutional change topic) and *poverty* (see Appendix A for details). We then use the resulting dictionaries to estimate the prevalence of each topic in each candidate's *Front Page* appearances. Table 1 presents the results. Chávez spoke about the constituent assembly at approximately twice the rate of Salas Römer, while Salas Römer spoke much more (than Chávez) about poverty and inequality. Moreover, while both candidates devoted more time to institutional change than to poverty, the difference was considerably larger (both in absolute terms and in relative terms) for Chávez than for Salas Römer. Given the small size of the corpus, these results are far from definitive. But they are consistent with the widely held view of Chávez as a candidate who campaigned on his proposal to remake Venezuela's political institutions.

Qualitatively, the *Front Page* interviews help clarify why there was ambiguity about the direction of institutional change under Chávez, despite his past as leader of a (failed) coup d'etat. We address three points: (1) how he described his vision for a new Venezuelan democracy, (2) the coup itself, and (3) Chávez's language toward his political opponents.

Many accounts portray Chávez in 1998 as a candidate who promised to raze horizontal accountability, empower the president, and promote majoritarian institutions. We argue that this is a reading colored by hindsight. Far from promising to dismantle checks and balances, candidate Chávez vowed to curb Venezuela's presidentialism, "which still [had] an imperial feel" (Table 2). He proposed to introduce a prime minister, to establish a fourth branch of government, to promote a more federal state, and to advance "a real process of decentralization and de-concentration of power." The communication director for the Salas Römer campaign, Miguel Rodríguez Siso, said in an interview for this project that Chávez "appropriated the decentralization proposal" that Salas Römer (as governor of a major state) had long championed, echoing Salas Römer's own comments in one of his interviews on *Primer Plano* (Table 2). This is not to say that there were no signs that Chávez would move in a majoritarian or delegative direction; for one thing, he proposed to hold a referendum on convening a constituent assembly, thus embracing the "plebiscitary appeals" that are a hallmark of anti-system populism (Barr, 2009). Yet these signs were sufficiently ambiguous that several veterans of Venezuela's decade-old decentralization efforts joined the Chávez campaign, lending credibility and credence to his claim to carry the mantle of democratizing reform.

Nor did Chávez imply that the new political institutions would shift economic policy in one direction or another. Indeed, he explicitly and repeatedly separated the constituent assembly from specific economic policy outcomes, allowing voters to project their own hopes onto a vague vision.

[19]In Appendix A, we estimate a topic model using the universe of Chávez's speeches and interviews. The results confirm the conventional wisdom that *institutional change* and *poverty* (or economic policy) were the primary topics in the 1998 campaign; no other topic approaches their prevalence.

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Table 2. Comparison of campaign rhetoric from TV interviews on *Front Page*

Marcel Granier (host)	**Hugo Chávez Frías**, 18 October 1998
Tell me which of the people's problems will be resolved by the constituent assembly. Will it create jobs? Improve the quality of education? Improve health? Reduce the cost of living? Improve citizen security?	We can't think of the constituent assembly in those terms … the objective is not to create jobs. My opponent says "you can't eat [a new constitution]," but that's reductive. You're a Catholic like me, so you know that, in the Bible, Satan tells Jesus in the desert: "If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread." And Jesus replies, "Man does not live by bread alone." We can't view the world as existing just to create jobs. Jobs are necessary, of course, but that's about our economic and social systems more than the political system … That's why [the constituent assembly] has as its sole objective to transform the political system … I don't think that there's a single Venezuelan who would defend it. It's also part of our platform to create jobs, boost the agricultural sector, tourism—but that doesn't depend on the constituent assembly, that depends on the Executive, on businesses, on international investment that we are already attracting.
Why was [one of your allies] criticizing businesspeople who support your opponent?	I can't speak for him [the ally]. Coming back to the topic of the constituent assembly, it's not to feed people, Granier … it has the fundamental objective of transforming the political system.
Why not reform the constitution via Congress?	No, Granier, I'm not going to fall in that trap. The country needs a fast track, a fast way to solve the drama of a political system that is rotten—and our proposal is fast, democratic, and depends on the will of the people: the constituent assembly, whose objective, I repeat, is not to give people food (for that there is the economic model, to generate jobs), it's to transform the political system. And something very important: to relegitimize it, a new model of the State. We propose to curb presidentialism, which still has an imperial feel in Venezuela. A president should be leader of the country and head of state. But we need a prime minister, a new vision for the Executive Branch, and a more federal state, a real process of decentralization and deconcentration of power.
Marcel Granier (host)	**Henrique Salas Römer**, 1 November 1998
When I asked Lieutenant Colonel Chávez about the constituent assembly, he answered with a quote from the Bible: "Man does not live by bread alone."	Well, that's [Chávez] acknowledging that the constituent assembly won't solve anything. The true meaning of that biblical quote is clearly *not* that we need a new congress or that we need more laws in a country that already has so many laws. That biblical quote is a reference to the fact that human beings need spiritual and cultural development … we've neglected important parts of the Venezuelan soul, but the constituent assembly is not one of them. And the fact that he is recognizing that it doesn't solve problems, that it's not a panacea, explains why he's more and more defensive.
The primary cleavage in Venezuelan politics is between people who support the political parties and those who do not … are you now proposing a new cleavage, between centralization and decentralization?	There are two candidates: [me], a son of … the political reforms that arose as a result of [the Caracazo] in 1989: reforms that allowed the first direct election of governors and mayors, and that began the decentralization process. The other candidate [Chávez] is a person who impatiently tried to interrupt that process of decentralization … I think that, at heart, Venezuelans recognize all that Acción Democrática and Copei—and to a lesser extent MAS and newer parties—did in their moment contribute to the consolidation of Venezuelan democracy.

Asked whether the constituent assembly would solve Venezuelans' material problems, Chávez cited Jesus saying "Man does not live by bread alone" and explained that economic outcomes "do not depend on the constituent assembly" (Table 2). The objective of the constituent assembly was "not to feed people," Chávez said, and, in case anyone missed it: "the objective, I repeat, is not to give people food." We view these statements as evidence of an effort to deemphasize the mapping from political institutions to economic policy (to say nothing of economic *outcomes*).

Similarly, some scholars interpret Chávez's past as the leader of a (failed) coup d'etat against the elected government of Carlos Andrés Perez as an unmistakable sign of authoritarian intentions, part of an "obvious antidemocratic record" (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018, 21). But Chávez told voters that his resort to violence had been valid only because then-president Pérez had himself used violence, sending security forces to kill hundreds of civilians (see Table 2). Asked whether a coup would be justified against the unpopular administration of Rafael Caldera, Chávez answered with an emphatic *no*, emphasizing that, whatever Caldera's failings, his "was not a government that had sent troops to fire on the people." This ambiguity is consistent with the conclusion of Canache (2002*a*), who studies the evolution of support for Chávez between 1995 (three years after his coup attempt) and 1998. Using two public opinion surveys, Canache finds that, in 1995, Chávez drew most of his support from the minority of Venezuelans who expressed ambivalence about democracy. By 1998, in contrast, Chávez drew at least half of his support from Venezuelans unequivocally committed to democracy. For Canache, this result supports the *converted militant* hypothesis: that Chávez successfully convinced a significant fraction of voters that he would protect democracy. In fact, some of the most committed democrats in Venezuelan politics in the 1990s (e.g. Teodoro Petkoff; Handlin, 2017) were themselves converted militants, having left the guerrilla after the 1960s. For these reasons, we contend that Chávez's history did not entirely negate his claim that he would democratize Venezuelan political institutions.

Moreover, the most dramatic alleged example of Chávez's violent language was fabricated. An influential attack ad apparently included audio of him promising to "eliminate Adecos from the face of the earth, fry their heads in oil, and dissolve them in acid." Marcel Granier, host of *Primer Plano*, repeated this line in his interview with Salas Römer. But, as it turned out, someone had hired actor Gonzalo Cubertos to impersonate Chávez saying these lines; when Cubertos publicly admitted this, the Venezuelan electoral council ordered the attack ad off the air, allowing Chávez to tell audience after audience that the fabrication was evidence of his commitment to peace: if his discourse were really so violent, he pointed out, his opponents would not have had to fabricate evidence to the contrary (Socorro, 2018).

3 Alternative explanations

We interpret these three findings as evidence that Chávez first won election not primarily by exploiting class conflict but rather by tapping into cross-cutting anti-system sentiment. One alternative interpretation is that the fleeting electoral realignment we observe in 1998 had little to do with Chávez and everything to do with the collapse of the Venezuelan party system (Morgan, 2011; Lupu, 2016). It stands to reason that widespread rejection of traditional parties would shuffle coalitions, at least temporarily. Yet party-system collapse does not always redraw cleavages. Seawright (2012) argues that voters' abandonment of traditional parties in Peru—comparable in magnitude to that of Venezuela—led an outsider (Alberto Fujimori) to win simply by capturing an existing bloc: the ideological right (141). Chávez, in contrast, while certainly appealing to left-wing voters, was vehemently opposed by the former icon of the Venezuelan left, while one of the country's most prominent right-wingers briefly joined Chávez's commission on rewriting the constitution (Corrales and Penfold 2015, 17).[20]

[20]Ideally, we would study the relationship between ideology and vote choice systematically over time; unfortunately, the historical surveys do not allow for this. In the 1998 Latinbarometer survey, intention to vote for Chávez did decline with ideological self-placement (on a 1–10 left–right scale), though Chávez outperformed his main opponent even among center-right respondents (self-placement =7); among the farthest-right respondents (self-placement =10), Chávez earned 30 percent to his

A second way to rationalize the cross-cutting Chávez vote as the direct result of income considerations is to follow Weyland's observation that economic losses make voters risk-loving, or at least risk-tolerant (2004). If we view outsider candidates as risky, Venezuela's 1980s–1990s economic collapse should have whet voters' appetites for outsiders. This explanation is not incompatible with ours, though (on its own) it does not clearly explain either voters' preference for Chávez over other outsiders or the quick disintegration of the initial coalition.

Other scholars might point to the 1999 referendum on Chávez's new constitution as evidence against our emphasis on *ambiguity*: by then, with all 350 articles of the constitution written and published, what ambiguity might remain? Voters approved that constitution in a referendum, suggesting, perhaps, that they endorsed not only Chávez's vague call for *change* but also his specific, centralizing institutional reforms and their policy consequences (Acemoglu *et al.*, 2013*b*). We would counter, first, that even after the constitution was drafted there remained considerable ambiguity about the mapping between de jure institutional arrangements and policy outcomes (Shepsle, 1986, 75); Crisp (2000, 234) even expressed optimism about certain features of the new electoral system. Second, Chávez's most authoritarian moves (in that period) occurred not through the constitution itself but around and outside of it, through a series of decrees not submitted to voters (Brewer-Carias, 2005). These decrees, the most dramatic of which arrived *after* the popular referendum on the new constitution, granted such power to Chávez that they alienated even some of the constitution's architects and most zealous champions.

Finally, we note that our results are not inconsistent with polarization and/or inequality as explanations for *subsequent* votes for Chávez (in particular, his reelection in 2006 and 2012), as proposed especially by Svolik (2020). In those years, we find, the pro-versus-anti-Chávez vote *did* split along socio-economic lines (Handlin, 2013; cf. Lupu, 2010). Indeed, if our argument is correct, Chávez's initial coalition fell apart, requiring him to assemble a new one in its place.

4 Conclusion

In 2017, well before the election of Jair Bolsonaro as President of Brazil, a Brazilian comedy group made a video in which a woman arrives at a department store determined to exchange her president (Zorra, 2017). The salesman walks her around a showroom pointing to possible alternatives: monarchy ("classic!"), parliamentary democracy ("cool!"), and, finally, a military regime. "I like this one," the customer says. "If anything goes wrong, I'll just bring it back." The general on the display responds: "Take me back? I don't think so. You're stuck with me for a minimum of twenty years." As his officers escort the customer out of the store, the salesman calls after her: "Sorry, once you activate it, it's on autopilot!"

This captures the spirit of our argument. Elected autocrats come to power not because voters correctly anticipate the consequences for (re)distributive policy but because of ambiguity about the direction of future institutional change, and because of uncertainty about the mapping between institutional arrangements and policy outcomes. Exploiting this uncertainty together with cross-cutting anti-system sentiment, Hugo Chávez won election with a mandate to democratize Venezuela—only to usurp power "by surprise" (Stokes, 2001), quickly alienating many of his early allies.

Our empirical analysis focuses on Venezuela, but the argument is general. Evo Morales in Bolivia and Rafael Correa in Ecuador, for example, both campaigned on promises to cure the ills of their countries' democracies by remaking political institutions; both of the resulting new constitutions then concentrated power in their respective presidencies (Corrales, 2008; Corrales and Penfold, 2014; Anria, 2016, 2018; Corrales, 2018). Sufficient numbers of Bolivian and Ecuadoran voters disliked this outcome that they subsequently voted to reinstate (or maintain) presidential term limits (AP, 2018; Idrobo *et al.*, 2022). These cases underscore our conclusion

opponent's 39 percent. See also Appendix C. By "former icon of the Venezuelan left," we mean Teodoro Petkoff. By "prominent right-winger," we mean Oswaldo Álvarez Paz, who briefly joined Chávez's commission on rewriting the constitution.

that ambiguity and anti-system sentiment merit renewed attention in the study of democratic deconsolidation.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2023.1.

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Conflict of interest. The authors declare none.

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