

Democratic backsliding through electoral irregularities: The case of Venezuela

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Abstract

This article discusses how electoral irregularities contributed to democratic backsliding in Venezuela under *chavista* rule (1999-2019). It draws from an original database of electoral irregularities created from primary and secondary sources covering a total of 24 electoral contests. I find that Venezuela experienced 117 electoral irregularities during this twenty-year period. Almost every electoral contest exhibited one irregularity, if not more. Electoral irregularities served two goals: to provide double insurance for the ruling party, and to encourage abstentionism (and divisions) across the opposition. They also increased every time the ruling party felt more electorally threatened. The article proposes a typology of irregularities applicable to other cases. It also evaluates how the opposition responded to the rise of irregularities, pointing out strategies that failed and those that worked. *Keywords:* Elections, irregularities, CNE, democratic backsliding, opposition.

Resumen: Retroceso democrático por irregularidades electorales: El caso de Venezuela.

Este artículo discute cómo las irregularidades electorales contribuyeron al retroceso democrático en Venezuela bajo gobiernos chavistas (1999-2019). Se fundamenta en una base de datos inédita de irregularidades electorales creada a partir de fuentes primarias y secundarias que cubren un total de 24 procesos electorales. Venezuela cometió 117 irregularidades electorales durante este período de veinte años. En casi todos los procesos electorales hubo al menos una irregularidad. Las irregularidades electorales cumplieron dos objetivos: proporcionar un doble seguro para el partido gobernante y alentar la abstención (y la división) en toda la oposición. También aumentaron cada vez que el partido gobernante se vio más amenazado electoralmente. El artículo propone una tipología de irregularidades aplicables en otros casos. También evalúa cómo respondió la oposición al aumento de las irregularidades, señalando las estrategias que fallaron y las que funcionaron. *Palabras clave:* Elecciones, irregularidades, CNE, retroceso democrático, oposición.

Introduction

Democratic backsliding is a term used to describe the process whereby existing democracies become less democratic (Lust & Waldner 2015). It can occur through at least three mechanisms: erosion in institutions of liberal democracy, distortions in institutions of participatory democracy, and declines in minimal democracy. Most of the literature has focused on the former two mechanisms, less on the latter. This paper focuses on the latter, namely, how electoral irregularities contribute to democratic backsliding. My focus is Venezuela, 1999-2019, one of the most acute cases of democratic backsliding in the twenty-first century.

Electoral irregularities consist of practices, regulations, and even laws that violate international standards calling for elections for state office, especially the presidency and the legislature, to be conducted under relatively stable, free, and fair norms (see, e.g., Norris 2014). Most scholars agree that meeting these conditions is the minimal requirement for a country to qualify as a democracy. Venezuela under *chavismo* (first under president Hugo Chávez, 1999-2013, and then under his hand-picked successor, Nicolás Maduro, 2013-present) has met one of the conditions of minimal democracy. The regime has held a remarkable number of elections for a large number of contests for state office: 24 in total (for the presidency, the legislature, sub-national offices, constituent assemblies, and even referenda). The deficiency, as I will show, has been in complying with norms of stability, freedom, and fairness.

During the period of *chavista* rule, Venezuela has experienced electoral irregularities in almost every electoral contest. At times, electoral irregularities were few, at other times, numerous. At times, irregularities were minor; other times, profound. But regardless of their pace and scope, electoral irregularities in Venezuela provides some lessons about the causes and effects of irregularities that are worth highlighting because they can be replicable elsewhere. These patterns are as follows: irregularities can emerge in three contexts: in the early stages of a regime, under rising electoral competitiveness, or under declining competitiveness. I will show how the scope, pace, and effect of irregularities on the opposition varied depending on the context. Regardless of the context, two forms of irregularities are worth distinguishing in terms of duration of effects: legacy and election-specific irregularities. Legacy irregularities have lasting effects, carrying over onto subsequent electoral cycles. When legacy irregularities prevail, the system becomes very difficult to reform with a quick fix. When they become too widespread, it is impossible to conduct free and fair elections. The regime no longer qualifies as a liberal democracy. To fully re-democratize, an overhaul of electoral institutions is necessary.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, it discusses the various routes to democratic backsliding, zeroing in on the electoral irregularities route. The next section proposes a typology of irregularities and provides an inventory of irregularities in Venezuela since 1999. The article then offers a theory on how

political context influences the pace, scope, and impact on the opposition of electoral irregularities, and applies this theory to the Venezuelan case. The empirical section shows how the opposition fared across different contexts, pointing out strategies that failed and those that worked, and how the government counteracted. The paper concludes with an analysis of how studying irregularities helps us understand the difficulty of peaceful regime transition in Venezuela.

Three routes to democratic backsliding

The fundamental paradox of democratic backsliding, as opposed to other forms of autocratization (see Frantz 2019), is that it is initiated by the winners of democracy, not the losers (Mounk 2018; Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018). Historically, democracies have died in the hands of political actors with low chances of winning electorally: unable to win at the game, they end the game (coups) or attack the game (insurrections) (Geddes, Wright, & Frantz 2018). In contrast, the more contemporary process of democratic backsliding, paradoxically, is often carried out by those who can and do win elections (Bermeo 2016). Once these actors find themselves in power, they launch attacks on democratic institutions, specifically, they erode liberal democracy and distort participatory democracy.

Before proceeding, it is important to define terms. Liberal democracy is generally understood as the set of institutions intended to create limits on the power of the Executive branch (see Mechkova et al. 2017; Coppedge et al. 2011). In presidential systems, those limits come from the constitution and the law, and involve mostly the separation of powers, and checks and balances among the different branches of government (the legislature, the judiciary, and subnational governments, in federal systems). Participatory democracy is generally understood as those institutions designed to include or empower groups that have been traditionally non-dominant (Barber 1984; Pateman 1970; Dahl 1971). It includes, of course, political minorities (e.g., the opposition), but also socioeconomic actors such as ethnic and religious groups, women, sexual minorities, immigrants, low-income people, certain professions, etc.

The erosion of liberal democracy under democratic backsliding can occur through multiple avenues: 1) autocratic legalism: applying the law harshly against enemies but softly or not at all toward loyalists (Corrales 2015; Scheppele 2018); 2) constitutional tinkering: amending or revamping the constitution to give the Executive more powers vis-à-vis other actors (Versteeg et al. 2019; Huq & Ginsburg 2018); 3) legislative dodging: avoiding the legislature to enact policy or lowering the degree to which members of the Executive branch become accountable to legislators (Pérez-Liñán et al. 2018; Mechkova et al. 2017); 4) judicial co-optation: ending the independence of the judicial branch (see e.g., Gibler & Randazzo 2011); 5) “sabotaging” state accountability through an increase in secrecy, disinformation, and disabling voices (Glasius

2018); and 6) centralization of power: lessening the autonomy of subnational actors (e.g., Dickovick 2011), or transferring power to subnational actors that are more aligned with the president.

The distortion of participatory democracy also occurs through multiple mechanisms: 1) sectarianism: offering state privileges mostly to loyalists and denying them to everyone else (Collier & Collier 1979; Collier 2001; Pappas 2019); 2) demonizing the opposition (Mudde 2004; Müller 2016) and blocking it from participation in the decision-making process; 3) expropriating the property and assets of dissident groups (North et al. 2000); 4) declining pluralism: populating the civic space with new organizations that are semi-associated to the state and highly non-pluralistic (Diamond 2019; Naim 2009); and of course, 5) outright rejection or repression of citizens' initiatives (Gaventa & Barrett 2010).

These two processes of democratic backsliding are now well understood. Less understood is how exactly presidents manipulate the institutions of minimal democracy, which are those that govern the conduct of elections for state office. The most important rules that countries need to meet in order to qualify as minimal democracy are: 1) elections must be held for the Executive branch and the legislature, and 2) they must be rule-bound, free, and fair. Rule-bound means that the rules should not change frequently or during the course of the election. Free means that no actor should pay a price (or receive a reward) for their participation in elections. And fair means that the rules cannot be stacked systematically in favor of the ruling party. Scholars of democratic backsliding have argued that most of the electoral decay tends to involve principle (2) rather than (1), that is, elections persist, but rules become more volatile and less free and fair. We know less about how this process of accumulating irregularities unfolds.

The electoral irregularities route

Focusing on electoral irregularities is important to understand democratic backsliding. Although we know that conducting a good election does not guarantee that a good democracy will follow (Dahl 1971), we also know that decays in the “quality of elections” translate into decays in the quality of democracy (Cameron 2018; Mechkova et al. 2017; Norris 2014, 2017; Van Ham 2014). It is important to distinguish electoral irregularities from electoral fraud. Electoral fraud consists of deliberate attempts to miscount or suppress the vote on voting day, typically through illegal acts (Álvarez, Hall, & Hyde 2008). Electoral irregularities is a broader concept, which includes electoral fraud, for sure, but also manipulating the entire set of rules and norms governing the elections (Hall & Wang 2008). It includes problems on the day of voting (e.g., fraud, infrastructure disruptions, coercion of voters), and just as important, practices, norms, and rules affecting the pre-campaign, the campaign, and the post-election periods. In an increasing number of regimes, including Venezue-

la, the preferred forms of electoral irregularities are not so much those that occur on voting day (such as fraud), but rather those that can occur in the period before and after voting day.

It should also be stated that very few presidential and legislative elections are a hundred percent free and fair, in part because perfect freedom and fairness is utopic. So when scholars make assessment about whether an election is free and fair they consider the historical context (i.e., the historical past, is the trend toward improvement or decay?), comparable cases in similar contexts, and the judgments made by opposition figures and international observers. It should also be stated that the opposition itself can commit electoral irregularities (acts of violence, misinformation, illegal financing, bribing, irresponsible boycotting, cheating). But in judging the levels of freedom and fairness of elections, the onus is on the actor that plays the role of arbiter in this game, which in almost every regime is the state. Precisely because the state is the arbiter, electoral irregularities committed by the state – and which go unsanctioned by the state – impact the system the most. And in Venezuela since 1999, the state has been responsible for the most egregious irregularities.

Electoral irregularities are a serious form of democratic backsliding for two reasons. First, they make it increasingly difficult for the opposition to compete. Second, they also help guarantee that the ruling party will win, and win big, in part because irregularities can inflate the ruling party's vote (through fraud or peer-pressure) and simultaneously discourage voting by the opposition (Hall & Hyde 2008). When the opposition experiences increasing electoral obstacles and the government conveys invincibility, the opposition is likely to fragment. At the very least, the opposition splits into three camps: those who still want to compete electorally, those who lambast the opposition for accepting unfair rules, and those who opt out, that is, disengage from electoral politics altogether. These divisions get added onto any pre-existing ideological and historical divisions that might have existed across the opposition.

An opposition that is fragmented, regardless how widespread its electoral base, is always at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the incumbent party (Morgenstern et al. 2008). Electoral irregularities violate democracy, therefore, because they promote the problem of the incumbent's advantage, and simultaneously introduce disarray, disunity, and declining leverage within the opposition. This incumbent's advantage is the reason illiberal incumbents favour electoral irregularities. This proclivity to demobilize and fragment the opposition is also the reason that the fundamental challenge for the opposition under democratic backsliding is to fight abstentionism and achieve unity across parties (Bunce & Wolchik 2010).

Finally, there is the vital question of: at what point do irregularities lead to a transformation of regime? We know since at least Schedler (2006) that when irregularities multiply to the point where the principles of fairness and freedom are violated, the regime ceases to be democratic and becomes instead an "electoral autocracy." It would be ideal to specify a threshold for regime transfor-

mation, i.e., a point in the rise of irregularities after which a country ceases to be democratic and becomes semi-democratic or even autocratic. Specifying such a threshold is hard, and there is no consensus in the literature on where that threshold is located. One way forward might be to focus on “the exact forms of electoral manipulation or organizational constraint and its consequences” (Morse 2012: 170). In the next section, I try to distinguish among different forms of manipulation (i.e., offer a typology) and discuss consequences. While still unable to specify the threshold after which a democracy becomes an electoral autocracy, I suggest that once there is a cumulus of irregularities that get entrenched in the system and carried over into the next electoral cycle (i.e., a cumulus of legacy irregularities), the regime can no longer qualify as democracy.

Typology of irregularities

Although the political science literature is unspecific regarding the threshold for regime change based on electoral irregularities, it is nonetheless very detailed about how to classify irregularities. These classifications are useful if one wishes to create an inventory of irregularities and how they evolve over time. In general, electoral irregularities can be classified according to two characteristics: type of violation and effect.

Types of violation

Each irregularity is classified according to the following types of violation, which are drawn from international conventions, regional conventions, and think tanks (e.g., OSCE 2005; United Nations 2005; OAS 2007; Freedom House, various years; Sabatini n.d.; Corrales 2013):

1. Violation of constitutional law = L.
2. Manipulation of timing (and scheduling) for self-serving purposes = T.
3. Voting day irregularity, including major disruption of infrastructure needed for voting to happen smoothly (e.g., broken machines, power outages) or disorder and lack of transparency at voting booths = VD.
4. Violation of international standards for clean elections = IS.
 - IS1. Freedom from coercion: voting authorities are supposed to ensure that voters are not coerced or bribed to participate in the elections or cast their vote for a specific side.
 - IS2. Impartial access to public resources: avoid gross, overt use of state resources – funds, state offices, armed forces, other public officials, materials, social welfare programs – for partisan or campaign purposes.
 - IS3. Relatively equal access to public media and general information in terms of content, air or paper space, and coverage in public media during the campaign.

IS4. Voter access to information: all major candidates should be able to distribute materials and information without intimidation or efforts to block them by opponents.

IS5. Secrecy of the vote: voters should be assured that their vote is secret and that their participation will not be used against them on election day.

IS6. Transparency of the voting process: so as to ensure confidence in the voting process, credible, non-partisan groups should be allowed to observe voter lists (through a sample), the processes for establishing voting locations, the voting process (with due respect for secrecy) and the process or algorithms for tabulating votes.

IS7. Impartiality of electoral authorities: officials regulating an election must act in a non-biased, effective, transparent and accountable manner.

IS8. Impartiality of electoral laws: electoral laws must be approved with the consent of and input from leading opposition forces, must be enforced impartially, and should not be changed unilaterally or ad hoc (close to election day).

IS9. Recognition of results: elected officials must recognize the results of the election, and allow for a smooth transfer of full powers to winners.

IS10. Freedom to compete: opposition figures should not face unreasonable restrictions on their right to compete for office.

IS11. Reliable fraud investigation: serious allegations of fraud must be investigated following principles of impartiality and with the consent of the parties involved.

IS12. Voter registration normalcy: no systematic impediment to voter registration; anomalous changes in the growth rate of registry must be adequately explained and accounted for.

IS13. Respect for the powers of the elected office: government should not arbitrarily change the powers of elected posts after an election, especially if the post went to the opposition.

Effects: legacy and election-specific irregularities

In addition, irregularities can be classified according to their effects. Two possible effects exist: legacy, and election-specific. Legacy irregularities are those that, once introduced, tend to have lasting effects, tarnishing the electoral arena into the future, or at least until a new reform is introduced to make amends. Examples include eroding the impartiality of electoral authorities, biased state-run media, and inexplicable and uncorrected changes in voter registration patterns. The other type of irregularity is election-specific. They refer to practices or regulations introduced for the conduct of a particular election. Examples include voting day disruption in the infrastructure, mishandling claims of fraud, rules for determining who gets to compete, manipulation of the timing of the election, and poor impartial observation of elections on voting day.

The Venezuelan case, 1999-2018

Venezuela has become the emblematic case of democratic backsliding for upper-income and long-standing democracies of the last two decades. Democratic decay in Venezuela began in the 1990s but accelerated under *chavismo*, between the early 2000s and the present. The process of democratic backsliding has involved all three mechanisms: erosion of liberal, participatory, and minimal democracy. However, the role of electoral irregularities has received less attention. Scholars have recorded these irregularities, but not theorized much about their role in changing the regime. An important exception is Kornblith (2005, 2007), who has studied electoral irregularities in Venezuela since the start of *chavismo*, arguing precisely that one way that democratic backsliding has occurred in Venezuela has been by way of decay in the quality of electoral rules and norms. This section, in fact this paper, focuses on expanding Kornblith's work by documenting how electoral irregularities accumulated with time, theorizing about their impact on the regime and the opposition, and explaining the different contexts in which irregularities are likely to emerge.

When backsliding began, Venezuela was one of the most established democracies in the world and one of the wealthiest. As the country became more semi-autocratic, the regime still exhibited frequent electoral activity, leading many analysts to suggest that despite all its problems, the regime managed to uphold minimal democracy and thus some form of democratic credential. No doubt, regular and frequent elections were held for the Executive branch and the legislature, both of which are important elements of minimal democracy. But a closer look at these elections show that minimal democracy became tainted by electoral irregularities.

I conducted a thorough review of newspaper accounts and reports by international organizations to create a database of documented electoral irregularities in Venezuela. These irregularities are listed in the Appendix (see ERLACS website). Table 1 illustrates *chavismo*'s rain of irregularities from 1999 to 2018. They are broken down by timing, type of violation, and whether the violation has legacy effects (in blue) or are election-specific (in yellow). The table also shows instances in which the opposition boycotted an election (in orange). Numbers indicate the introduction of an electoral irregularity. It's important to note that some irregularities violate more than one of the above principles. For those cases, to avoid double-counting, I opted to classify the irregularity based on what I deemed to be the most serious violation. For legacy irregularities, the table indicates the year that the offending law or practice was introduced, as well as any additional changes in laws, regulations, and practices that either reinforced or compounded the trend. While this list does not report some of the important reforms and changes the government has made, it still reveals that the government developed a penchant for introducing new sets of irregularities with almost every electoral event.

Table 1. Rain of electoral irregularities, Venezuela 1999-2019

Date (Month.Day.Year) and electoral event	Total	Freedom from coercion (IS1)	Impartiality of Elect. authorities (IS7)	Voicing registration normalcy (IS12)	Impartiality of electoral laws (IS8)	Impartial access to public resources (IS2)	Equal access to state media (IS3)	Freedom to compete (IS10)	Timing or scheduling regularity (T)	Respect for elected post (IS13)	Compliance with Constitutional law (L)	Voicing day normalcy (VD)	Secrecy of vote (IS5)	Transparency of voting process (IS6)	Recognition of results (IS9)	Reliable fraud investigation (IS11)	Boycotted by major parties
Chávez Era																	
4.25.99 Referendum to create a Constituent	1										1						
6.25.99 Constituent Assembly	1				1												
12.15.99 Referendum on new constitution	3	1				1					2						
6.30.00 Mega-elections for all public posts	2		1					1									
12.2.00 Municipal councils, civil parishes	0																
9.12.03 1st recall referendum request	7	1	2	1	1				1				1				
8.15.04 Presidential recall referendum	7			1	1	1							1	2		1	
10.30.04 Governors, state legislature, mayors	1							1									
8.7.05 Municipal councils, civil parishes	2		1		1												
12.4.05 National Assembly, Andean & L. Parl.	2		1														1 Yes
12.3.06 Presidential	3	2		1													
12.2.07 Constitutional referendum	5						1				2			1		1	
11.23.08 Governors, mayors	6	1			1	1	1		1						1		
2.15.09 Referendum to abolish term limits	3					2					1						
9.26.10 National Assembly	4		1		2		1										
10.7.12 Presidential	8			1	1	1	2		1				1	1			
12.16.12 Governors and mayors	1																1
Total	56	5	6	4	8	5	4	1	4	1	6	0	3	4	1	4	
Maduro Era																	
17.4.13 Presidential	7	1		1							2	1	1				1
8.12.13 Municipal	1							1									
6.12.15 Legislative	12	1			2		1	4	1		2			1			
2016 Presidential recall referendum (Disallowed)	11	1			2			3			1			2			2
7.30.17 Constituent Assembly	7	1			2			1			1			1			1 Yes
10.15.17 State governors	14				1		1	1	2		2	1	1	3	1	1	1 Partial
12.10.17 Municipal	4			1	1		1							1			1 Yes
5.20.18 Presidential	5				3					1							1 Partial
Total	61	4	0	2	11	0	1	6	8	2	9	2	2	8	1	5	
Total chavista era, 1999-2018	117	9	6	6	19	5	5	7	12	3	15	2	5	12	2	9	

Notes:
 Blue = Legacy irregularity: a change that compromised the electoral system into the future.
 Yellow = Election-specific irregularity: a violation of electoral principles that affected that particular election.
 Red = Opposition boycott.
 Source: Author.

Several empirical observations can be made based on Table 1: 1) Electoral irregularities occur from the very beginning, suggesting that the regime wasted no time in tinkering with the electoral system. 2) Almost every electoral process has featured at least one irregularity. 3) With time, irregularities multiplied. 4) We seldom see reversals of legacy irregularities; once in place, they linger. 5) Irregularities expand significantly in two periods: 2003-2004 and under Maduro, 2013-2018. 6) At the end of the process, the cumulus of irregularities was substantial: as of 2018, the total number of irregularities reached 117, and the 2018 presidential election in particular was conducted with the greatest cumulus of irregularities ever. 7) In line with Lührmann and Lindbergh (2019), the process of democratic backsliding is gradual rather than binary, meaning, we see a gradual rise in irregularities, rather than an abrupt breakdown of electoral democracy (on/off switch), which was the traditional way in which electoral democracy used to collapse under previous forms of authoritarianization. 8) The 2004 recall referendum emerges as an inflection point: the number of legacy and election-specific irregularities expanded significantly. 9) Large sectors of the opposition boycotted several electoral moments: the 2005 legislative election, and all elections starting in 2017. A solid theory of elec-

toral irregularities ought to be able to explain some of the above patterns and its impact on the opposition.

Explaining irregularities: different context, pace, and reactions

Although in Venezuela the expansion of irregularities was incremental and steady, a review of the data shows that irregularities occurred under, and were motivated by, different political contexts. The pace of the irregularities and the reaction of the electorate differed depending on the context.

Early stages / honeymoon

In the early stages – the honeymoon period – the proliferation of electoral irregularities, if they occur, tend to be narrow in scope and perhaps, somewhat ambiguous, meaning, they are hard for the electorate as a whole to notice or become too bothered by them. Only a small fraction of the electoral system is affected. The government's popularity is too high for these changes to become controversial, and the opposition may be too demoralized to play an active role in stopping the irregularities.

In Venezuela, the focus during the honeymoon (1999-2000) was a narrow (though still consequential) domain: getting the new constitution approved. Getting a new constitution entailed a number of electoral irregularities: organizing a referendum (which was an electoral process that did not exist in the constitution), conducting an election for a Constituent Assembly (which had never been done in the country), using a new electoral system for the Constituent Assembly (that was not approved by Congress and which violated the system of proportionality required by the constitution), conducting a second referendum to approve the constitution (which was done too hastily), and organizing a new set of elections for all offices under the new constitution (which was also done too rapidly and out of sequence with the regular timetable for elections). All of these processes were irregular, but because both the goal and the president were popular, the majority of the public did not mind the irregularities. Only parts of the opposition minded, but the opposition at this point was too fragmented and demoralized (Corrales & Penfold 2015; Morgan 2011; Seawright 2012; Myers 2007) by its recent electoral defeats to do much to stop them. It had no option than to go along, however grudgingly.

Competitiveness

The second context in which irregularities can emerge is, paradoxically, in contexts when the ruling party is becoming electorally competitive. In Venezuela this applies to the period between 2005 and 2012 (see Table 1), when Hugo Chávez achieved and maintained high approval ratings, far above any other leader or party of the opposition. Irregularities in the context of competitive-

ness seem paradoxical, because one would think that the ruling party would not need them to win elections. To understand why they emerge, it helps to specify more clearly the pattern of irregularities in this context. Normally, irregularities in this context tend to be piecemeal and mixed. They are piecemeal in that the introduction of irregularities is gradual and covers a few, rather than all, dimensions of the system. It is mixed in that the ruling party often introduces some reforms to accommodate the opposition. For instance, in Venezuela during this period, while irregularities were increasing (e.g., the increase in voting registry far outpaced the increase in population growth), the CNE introduced opposition-demanded reforms, such as increasing the number of polling stations to be audited, more transparency in the electronic voting system, allowing observers to be present during vote counting, and printing out a record of voters cast (see Corrales & Penfold 2007; Hidalgo 2009; Carter Centre 2007).

Norris (2014, 2017) claims that the reaction to irregularity is, after a certain threshold, widespread disaffection. I would qualify this assessment by saying that the reaction is instead asymmetrical. For the opposition, the irregularities are too obvious, and the corrections are at best insufficient or partial, and at worst merely cosmetic (Corrales & Penfold 2015: 31-33). For government supporters, in contrast, corrections are signs that the government is making real democratic enhancements. Consequently, the opposition becomes divided, confused, and prone to abstentionism, while the ruling party's rank and file unites in their belief that the government is committed to democratic reform.

Now we can understand better the logic behind mixed irregularities. They produce a double insurance for the ruling party: 1) Create an uneven playing field (Levitsky & Way 2002), which helps the government win big and convey invincibility to the opposition, while simultaneously; 2) encourage divisions across the opposition, with some groups feeling placated by the concessions, and other groups feeling irate and thus opting out. This asymmetrical reaction becomes reinforced in systems that are already highly polarized.

In polarized environments, as in Venezuela after 2001 (Corrales 2005, 2011), it is very difficult for the opposition to convince voters on the other side that the government is cheating, because the pro-government side mistrusts the opposition more than it mistrusts the institutions created by the incumbent (Quarcoo & Carothers 2020; McCoy et al. 2018). If anything, piecemeal and mixed irregularities have the potential of exacerbating polarization and expanding its scope. Polarization will now cover not just differences about type of democracy preferred (participatory versus liberal democracy), or cleavages across classes (as García-Guadilla & Mallen 2019, and Ellner 2008 argue), but cleavages about beliefs regarding minimal democracy. Government supporters see electoral openness, while detractors see continued unfairness. And this entrenchment, paradoxically, has different effects in terms of unity: pro-government forces align strongly behind their president, but opposition forces become disunited about how to confront irregularities.

Non-competitiveness

Electoral irregularities also emerge in the context of non-competitiveness, that is, when the ruling party is not popular and thus faces the risk of losing elections. In the literature, this is the most familiar context leading to irregularities, so it is not essential to expand on the theory. Suffice it to say that under conditions of non-competitiveness, the president panics. Helmke (2017) has demonstrated that when presidents feel politically threatened or insecure, they tend to deploy institutional assaults: they lash out at congress or manipulate courts. Likewise, I argue they are also tempted to manipulate electoral systems. Irregularities that emerge in this context of presidential insecurity tend to occur at a greater speed and go deeper than at any other context.

Irregularities become widespread, bold, and even overtly extra-legal. The aim of irregularities in this context is to allow the ruling party to survive in office. At this moment, the reaction of the opposition is no longer to debate whether irregularities are occurring or not, but whether to participate in elections or opt out. The defection option tends to have the upper hand. More specifically, the impact on the opposition is two-fold: it increases the tendency to opt out, including the possibility of a boycott, but the boycott then incentivizes the opposition to split, with some groups estimating that they can nonetheless compete electorally and win.

In short, there are at least two broad causes of electoral degradation, if by causes one means the context under which the Executive carries out the irregularities: capability and threat. Capability occurs when the ruling party feels secure in office, normally as a result of a sweeping election, and has obtained some degree of control of institutions. The executive enjoys what Stoyan (2020) describes as “mobilizational” and “institutional” leverage. The former is the ability to rally popular support; the latter, the ability to convince the judiciary, electoral authorities, and other institutions to support the reform. The other cause is when the ruling party panics electorally (non-competitive context). In this context, the ruling party lacks mobilizational capacity but enjoys institutional leverage. It uses its institutional leverage to introduce some of the boldest forms of irregularities. This process of rapid autocratization leads to splits in the opposition between boycotters and willing contenders.

The opposition’s electoral performance under electoral irregularities

Venezuela’s electoral irregularities were designed with the intention of helping the government obtain an electoral edge and create obstacles for, and divisions across, the opposition. Regarding the first goal, the most important study using statistical electoral forensics, Jiménez and Hidalgo (2014: 1), suggests that it was met: “all the tools [of electoral forensics] uncover anomalous statistical patterns, which are consistent with election fraud from 2004 onwards.” For these authors, the recall referendum was a turning point in the integrity of the

Venezuelan elections (see also Hausmann & Rigobon 2011). But my focus is the second goal – impact on the opposition. In the literature review, I argued that the impact of irregularities on the opposition varies depending on the context. In competitive contexts, when the ruling party is competitive vis-à-vis the opposition, irregularities stimulate the desire of many voters to abstain. If the opposition leadership decides to combat this abstentionism, it has a chance of narrowing the competitive advantage of the ruling party. In non-competitive contexts, irregularities become too drastic and bold. This stimulates disunity across the opposition parties: many choose to boycott elections, and a few opt to contend the elections. The evidence from Venezuela supports these claims.

The 2005 boycott

In the case of Chávez, the best example of rapid expansion of irregularities occurred during efforts to prevent and then survive his recall referendum (2003-2004). Chávez's popularity in 2002 was at its lowest point, below 35 percent. The opposition was highly mobilized and demanded a recall referendum. Chávez responded with some of the boldest irregularities of his administration. CNE authorities were replaced again, this time with more experienced experts, but also more partisan figures. Three of the five new *rectores* were openly aligned with the ruling party, and two with the opposition (Álvarez 2009). The CNE denied the people's request for a presidential recall referendum twice. The first time, they did so on the grounds that the signatures necessary for this request were collected too early, before Chávez had completed half of his term; the second time, they deemed that the number of signatures collected was insufficient to meet constitutional requirements (Human Rights Watch 2008). The names and signatures of all who petitioned for said referendum were collected and made public on a website by a pro-Chávez member of the National Assembly, Luis Tascón, thus violating the principle of secrecy of the vote; the Tascón list became a political blacklist, used by the government to deny access to government services, jobs, and contracts (Jatar 2006; Hidalgo 2009).

A total of 38 new rules and procedures to verify signatures were created after the signatures had already been collected; 44 percent of the collected signatures were deemed invalid, and the process of signature validation generated a 184 day-long delay (Martínez 2016a, 2016b, 2016c). The following year, the so called Bolivarian Circles, pro-government citizen groups created by the government, took an active role in managing social services, creating political conditionalities in the provision of services (Myers 2012). On the day of the voting, polls were kept open longer than was scheduled, giving the ruling party the possibility to bus people to polls. After the results were revealed, the few CNE authorities who were not pro-government stated that they were denied access to electoral data and were excluded from deliberations regarding the first announcement (Álvarez 2009). Furthermore, international observers were

not allowed to review the internal process (Carter Centre 2005). Official results contradicted various exit polls, prompting claims of fraud. The CNE conducted a non-random and insufficient audit that covered less than one percent of the ballots. Independent reports found irregularities, mainly in the electoral units that favoured Chávez. Independent reports also found suspicious patterns in the voting report, based on comparisons with prior votes and national surveys (Delfino & Salas 2011; Hausmann & Rigobón 2011). Another forensic study found irregularities in the vote distribution mainly in electoral units that favoured Chávez (Jiménez & Hidalgo 2014).

The effect on the opposition was to encourage opt out options subsequently. The irregularities were so bold that the opposition entered a state of dismay. The opposition was demoralized, not only by its surprising defeat, but by the instability, unfairness, and coercive elements of the electoral process used to conduct the recall. Thinking that it could force the government to remedy the irregularities, the opposition responded by opting out: levels of abstentionism increased (59 percent in the municipal elections of August 2005) and the opposition called for a generalized boycott of the legislative elections of December 2005. The decision to opt out proved to be a mistake. The government introduced some electoral reforms in response to the 2005 boycott, but not enough to fix the system. More devastatingly for the opposition, the government refused to redo the election, thus accepting the electoral results. This meant that the state ruled free from legislative opposition from 2006 to 2010.

The opposition learns, 2006-2015

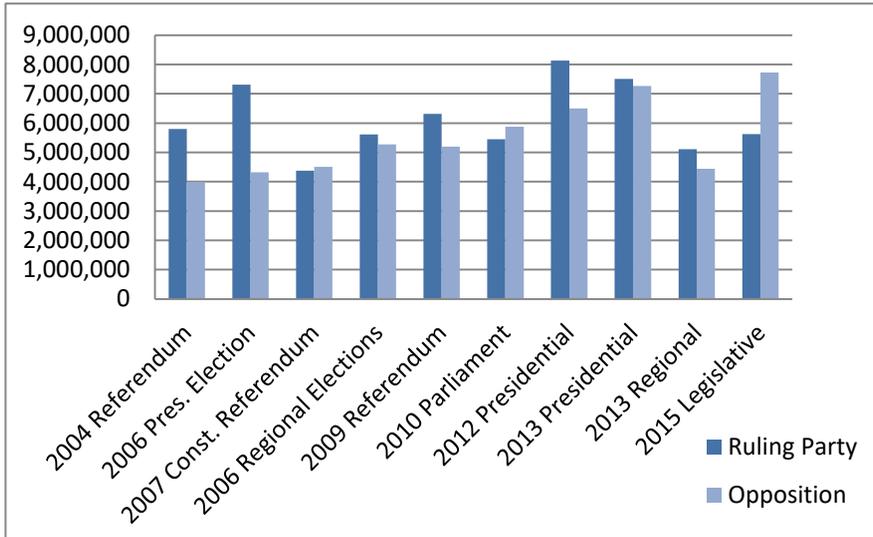
After the 2005 opt-outs, the opposition changed its response to electoral irregularities. This was the result of a change in scope and pace of electoral irregularities. Because the context changed from non-competitiveness to competitiveness, the pace of irregularities became more piecemeal and mixed. In response, rather than promote boycotts, the opposition deployed a three-pillar approach: 1) Continue to denounce irregularities, and pressure the state to introduce reforms. 2) Combat abstentionism, that is, fight the tendency among voters and leaders to opt out of politics altogether by arguing that despite the electoral disadvantages, it was still important to demonstrate to the regime that the opposition enjoyed electoral strength. 3) Seek unity among multiple parties, most importantly, by forming an electoral coalition (whose name after 2008 became Mesa de la Unidad Democrática, MUD), aiming to ensure that there was one candidate representing the whole opposition for every seat being contested.

Seeking unity was perhaps the hardest challenge, for two reasons. First, the parties came from very different backgrounds: ideological (ranging from the right to the centre-left), origins (some parties dated from the 1940s; others emerged after the 1990s), presence across the country (some parties had a nationwide presence, others were more urban, and still others were more region-specific). Second, deciding which party would present which candidate for

which contested seat was difficult to settle, requiring parties to make important sacrifices. But in the end, the MUD was able to settle these differences and present mostly unified candidacies until at least 2015.

The new post-2005 strategy paid off electorally. The opposition’s share of the votes increased steadily after 2005 (Table 2). The opposition actually prevailed in the election for the constitutional referendum of 2007. In 2010, the opposition, no longer boycotting elections, managed to re-enter the National Assembly through legislative elections.

Table 2. Venezuelan electoral results, 2004-2015 (source: CNE, various years)



Furthermore, abstentionism declined in 2006 and stayed low until 2013 (Table 3). It seems that abstentionism during this period became more a problem for chavismo: in elections where abstentionism rose (2007 referendum and 2010 parliamentary election), *chavismo* experienced declines in vote share (Sucre & Briceño 2016). In many ways, it could be argued that after various failed attempts, the opposition in Venezuela in the 2005-2015 learned a lesson on how best to address rising irregularities: denounce and pressure for reform, fight abstentionism, and seek unity in fielding candidates. But the opposition was not the only actor responding to electoral trends. As the opposition’s electoral performance improved, the government also responded by developing new forms of electoral irregularities. In many ways, with every improvement in the performance of the opposition, the government would decide to raise the bar even higher, or turn the playing field even more uneven.

This discussion helps understand the shock of the 2015 legislative elections, which will go down in history as the moment after which the regime probably became fully authoritarian. The government went to the polls with the largest number of irregularities in the books ever. The government was using many of the inherited irregularities, and producing new ones. Everything was designed

to favour the government (Cyr 2019). For instance, the CNE took long to announce the official date of the elections, giving little time for the opposition to get organized. One day after the opposition released its list of candidates, but before the government party released its own list of candidates, the CNE announced a new electoral regulation requiring 40 percent of each party's candidates to be female (Castillejo 2015). Only 11 of the 110 opposition candidates were women. Furthermore, multiple opposition candidates were arrested and/or barred from running (Stolk 2015; Latin American Herald Tribune 2015). The Supreme Court intervened in one of the major political party's internal affairs in an attempt to appoint more pro-government leaders (Transparencia Venezuela 2015). Former *chavista*, now-opposition parties were banned from presenting candidates, also thanks to the gender-parity law (El Estímulo 2015). Some traditional parties of the opposition were also banned. In a clear display of nepotism, Cilia Flores, former member of parliament and wife of Nicolás Maduro, was allowed to run for a state in which she did not hold a 4-year residency, contravening article 188 of the Constitution (Transparencia Venezuela 2015). Data showed that broadcast TV hardly covered the campaign activities of the opposition (Corrales & von Bergen 2016). At the same time, Maduro made 25 public appearances in campaign rallies for party candidates (von Bergen 2015). Public rallies, however, were banned in 58 key districts, including 26 swing districts. The government engaged in uneven gerrymandering.

And yet, the opposition managed to score a resounding victory. The government went into a panic mode. Not only did it lose control of a major branch of government the National Assembly, but it also realized that not even with irregularities could it win elections. One reason for the government's defeat is that going overboard with irregularities (and autocratization in general) can backfire: these steps can strengthen the incentives by parties in the opposition to coordinate strategies, lessen their differences, and focus on designing a unified electoral strategy such as offering single candidates per seat contested (Cyr 2019).

The return of boycotts and disunity, 2016-2018

The electoral context changed again, back to non-competitiveness, under president Nicolás Maduro. Following his close (and questionable) win in the 2013 presidential election, Maduro acted quickly and boldly to autocratize and repress (United Nations 2019), a process which also included bold assaults on the electoral system. For instance, the government called for a quick election to a Constituent Assembly, designed to replace the National Assembly. The timing was directly disadvantageous to the opposition: elections took place in the midst of pre-existing widespread protests and government repression. For these elections, the government violated the principle of one-person one-vote (Pardo 2017): the government created new types of voters unbound to the territory. The government created sectors that would each elect their own representa-

tives: indigenous, students, peasants and fishermen, business people, people with disabilities, communal councils, and communes and workers. Only voters deemed by the government to belong to those sectors could vote for those representatives. This allowed the government a buffer of seats that would secure its victory even if the opposition decided to participate in the election. There was evidence of fraud: an official from the IT company that provides the platform used by Venezuela’s electronic machines claimed that there was manipulation of data (BBC Mundo 2017). Moreover, the election gave the government an excuse to replace the heads of institutions who refused to recognize the new Constituent Assembly, such as the elected governor of Zulia, Juan Pablo Guanipa, who was stripped out of his post.

The process of rapid electoral irregularities continued for the 2018 presidential election. This election was conducted with the largest number of legacy irregularities in the history of *chavismo* (see Table 1). In addition to banning candidates and parties (Martínez 2018) and manipulating information, the government created polling centres near where people could receive free packages containing food and household items – this encouraged many people to vote for the ruling party in fear of not receiving humanitarian assistance (Rodríguez 2018). There was also evidence of outright cheating: inconsistencies in the *actas* from the state of Bolívar showed a narrow victory for the MUD candidate, Andrés Velázquez, and not the PSUV candidate ultimately proclaimed by the CNE. The results were rejected by all members of the opposition.

Overall, Maduro inherited all of Chávez’s legacy irregularities and made them worse by adding reinforcing irregularities to each. In addition, he introduced two new legacy irregularities: 1) Timing of elections became consistently irregular and unpredictable; and 2) powers of elected posts become contingent on what the Constituent Assembly determines, and thus, subject to permanent, discretionary change. Maduro has also made far more frequent use of election-specific irregularities than Chávez.

Table 3. Summary of electoral irregularities in Venezuela (source: author)

	Chávez	Maduro
Period	1999-2013	2013-2018
Years in office	14	5
Total electoral irregularities	56	61
<i>Comprised of:</i>		
Legacy irregularities	33	34
Election-specific irregularities	24	27
Average no. of irregularities per year	4.0	12.2
Average no. of irregularities per electoral event	3.29	7.63

In short, the average number of irregularities per year and per election are much higher under Maduro than under Chávez (see Table 3). The result of this rapid assault on minimal democracy was the return of the opt-out response. The opposition boycotted the election for the Constituent Assembly in 2017 (see Table 1). The most important parties of the opposition, except Avanzada

Progresista, boycotted the 2018 presidential elections as well. These were the first boycotts in elections for state office in 12 years.

Abstentionism for the presidential election surged to 54 percent, almost as high as for the 2005 legislative election, and the highest of any presidential elections under *chavismo* (Table 4). Although massive immigration and continued problems with the voter registry contributed to this high abstention rate, most of it was accounted by voters taking cues from opposition party leaders (Subero 2018).

Table 4. Abstention rate in presidential elections (source: CNE, various years)

2000	43.4
2006	25.3
2012	19.5
2013	20.4
2018	54.0

The decision to boycott is the most extreme act of the opposition, and carries risks for the opposition. First, boycotts clear the way for the ruling party to win; second, they can threaten the opposition's unity. For instance, as mentioned, for the 2018 election Avanzada Progresista left the MUD. And in 2019, Avanzada was joined by another defecting MUD party, Movimiento al Socialismo, along with other small parties, to form an alternative coalition willing to make a pact with the government for a new round of dialogues (Martínez 2019). Essentially, the decision to boycott, prompted by huge electoral irregularities, led to disunity.

In short, electoral irregularities are designed to weaken the opposition. But in the context of electoral competitiveness, irregularities can backfire. Irregularities can compel the opposition to form a united front. If the opposition adopts the three-prong strategy of engaging in denunciation, fighting abstentionism, and fielding candidates strategically and in unity, it can actually compete electorally. The problem in Venezuela was that once the opposition became good at playing this game (in 2015), the government changed the game altogether. Once the ruling party became non-competitive, irregularities became too bold and too far-reaching. The government ended the little that was left of electoral democracy, resorting instead to full-blown attacks on institutions, repression of citizens and organizations, and possibly cheating at elections. At that point, the opposition chose to boycott, even though this also created incentives for defections among some parties, and of course, greater electoral opportunities for the governing party.

The international reaction

Before closing, it is also important to consider not just domestic reactions, but also international reactions to irregularities. Why did the international commu-

nity allow this expansion of irregularities for as long as it did? The tarnishing of Venezuela's electoral system went unsanctioned by international actors at least until 2015. One reason for this tolerance was that the process was for the most part gradual, especially during the competitiveness period. Because irregularities were introduced gradually, it was hard to achieve a consensus in the international community that the irregularities were weighty enough to merit a hard-line response. Another reason is that there were many ideological sympathizers governing other countries or leading international organizations during most of the 2000s willing to grant the Chávez administration a pass. Yet another reason is that international observation ended in 2006, making it harder to make effective assessments of conditions on the ground (on electoral observation as a mechanism for stopping democratic backsliding, see Lust & Waldner 2015).

Perhaps the most important reason is that international observation of elections tends to focus on only one type of irregularity: voting day irregularities. No doubt, voting day irregularities exist under *chavismo*, even before Maduro, but they have been far less frequent (and serious) than the other irregularities catalogued in this article. International organizations are not designed to punish, or even identify these alternative types of irregularities. Thus, the state in Venezuela was able to compromise the electoral system, and still pass muster, because it opted for irregularities that international observers are more likely to tolerate, if they even notice them at all.

Conclusion

This article made various theoretical and empirical contributions. Theoretically, this article embraced the idea that it is possible to study democratic backsliding by examining the evolution of electoral irregularities. Second, to study such evolution, it is fruitful to classify electoral irregularities by type, and specifically, by institutional duration (e.g., legacy versus election-specific irregularity). Third, context (early stages, competitiveness, and non-competitiveness) helps explain the scope of irregularities and their impact on the party system. In the early stages, irregularities tend to be narrow. The opposition is usually too weak to react, so irregularities are difficult to stop, and the opposition plays along. In a competitive context, the scope of irregularities increases, even if the state still offers concessions to the opposition. The effect is to divide the opposition on whether to abstain or play along, while persuading incumbent supporters that the ruling party is democratic. That is, irregularities can lead to asymmetrical party fragmentation. The challenge for the opposition in this context, despite its fragmentation, is to fight abstentionism within its rank and cultivate electoral unity across all parties, with each party making important sacrifices about candidacies. In non-competitive contexts, in contrast, the scope of irregularities expands significantly, rapidly, and without concessions. The effect is to increase the upper-hand of sectors in the opposition preferring an opt-

out solution – abstention and boycotts. It also carries the risk of producing defections across party coalitions.

The article also made empirical contributions regarding Venezuela under *chavismo*. The regime showered Venezuela with an expanding list of electoral irregularities. The process of tarnishing the electoral system was mostly steady, conforming to Diamond’s (2017, 2019) idea of “creeping authoritarianism:” under democratic backsliding processes, authoritarianism moves in incremental stages, and there is no fixed sequence that all such instances must traverse. Some irregularities affected a particular election alone. Others left a legacy effect. Once a legacy irregularity was introduced, it was seldom corrected. By the time Chávez died in 2013, the system was thus plagued with irregularities.

Maduro surpassed Chávez in terms of number, frequency, and severity of irregularities. However, he did not start from a blank slate. Maduro compounded the irregularities he inherited from the Chávez era – he increased the number of legacy irregularities and created new election-specific irregularities. A turning point was the unexpected legislative election of 2015, in which the opposition was able to score a large victory using rules designed to favour the ruling party. This electoral outcome prompted Maduro to turn a government-biased electoral system into an even more unreliable electoral system that comes nowhere near meeting conventional standards of stability, freedom and fairness.

Finally, this empirical analysis helps us understand both the regime crisis of 2018-2019 and the difficulty of a democratic transition in Venezuela going forward. When Venezuela held its 2018 presidential election, the electoral system was so irregular that it was easy, in fact, unavoidable, for the opposition to cry foul. This allowed the National Assembly in 2019 to not recognize Maduro’s re-election, declare that Maduro had “usurped” the office of the presidency, declare vacant the office of the presidency, and thus invoke the constitutional stipulation that whenever the presidency is vacant, presidential powers are assumed by the president of the National Assembly, in this case, opposition leader Juan Guaidó.

Venezuela’s electoral system is so tarnished that it is now an obstacle to a democratic transition. It is no longer possible to imagine conducting free and fair elections using the current system. A major overhaul is necessary. This overhaul would involve revamping institutions (the CNE), rules and their enforcement, electoral records, and supervisory mechanisms. For the opposition, the issue is no longer whether to conduct elections or not, but whether to conduct elections or not using the system in place. The government has no incentives to reform the system, and yet, unless the system is reformed, any electoral process in Venezuela is likely to be rejected by large sectors of the opposition, blocking the possibility of a peaceful transition to democracy.

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