



Venezuelan regional elections, democratic backsliding, and autocratization in the 2010s

John Polga-Hecimovich

To cite this article: John Polga-Hecimovich (2022): Venezuelan regional elections, democratic backsliding, and autocratization in the 2010s, *Regional & Federal Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/13597566.2022.2063846](https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2022.2063846)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2022.2063846>



Published online: 17 Apr 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Venezuelan regional elections, democratic backsliding, and autocratization in the 2010s*

John Polga-Hecimovich 

Political Science Department, United States Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland, USA

ABSTRACT

While explanations of democratic backsliding in Venezuela have focused on a host of national-level processes, few scholars have considered subnational drivers of democratic decay. This paper explains how Venezuelan leaders used electoral manipulation in regional elections, targeted punishment of subnational authorities, and creation of parallel subnational political-administrative bodies to undermine democracy and aid in the consolidation of authoritarianism in the 2010s. During the presidency of Hugo Chávez, the government sought to win elections under relatively free conditions but pursued highly partisan attacks on opposition governors and mayors, limiting their autonomy and authority, while centralizing power. Then, as the Nicolás Maduro government faced threats to its hegemony at the ballot box, electoral manipulation gave way to outright fraud. The study highlights novel forms of subnational control and shows how regional elections and center-subnational relations helped push Venezuela from an electoral democracy in 2010 to an electoral authoritarian regime by decade's end.

KEYWORDS Democratic erosion; Subnational elections; Electoral fraud; Electoral authoritarianism; Chavismo; Venezuela

In October 2012, Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez (1999–2013) won a fourth term in office with a resounding 55% of the national vote. In regional elections held just two months later, the governing Socialist Party of Venezuela (*Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela*, PSUV) won 20 of 23 governorships with 54.5% of the popular vote, a result nearly identical to that of the presidential race. In both cases, the president's candidacy and the PSUV's regional electoral performance were bolstered by generous social spending—made possible in part by the high price of oil, which averaged US\$108 per barrel throughout the year (OPEC 2021)—and a state apparatus that turned

CONTACT John Polga-Hecimovich  polgahec@usna.edu  Political Science Department, United States Naval Academy, 589 McNair Road, 21402-5030, Annapolis, Maryland, USA

*The views expressed in this report are solely those of the author and do not represent the views of or endorsement by the United States Naval Academy, the Department of the Navy, the Department of Defense, or the United States government.

 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2022.2063846>.

out government supporters to the polls. The government was popular, but it also undermined democracy by cleverly manipulating the existing electoral rules to disproportionately represent itself (Brewer-Carías 2019). Following these contests, the government weakened the power of opposition governors by delaying constitutionally mandated fiscal transfers and by creating parallel political structures, called *protectores*, which administered their own budgets (“Maduro nombra “protectores” para estados con gobernadores de oposición” 2017).

Conditions were even more restrictive for the next cycle of regional elections. Chávez passed away in 2013, and his unpopular successor, Nicolás Maduro (2013-present), struggled to govern amidst low oil prices, economic crisis, and social unrest. The political opposition had earned a majority in the 2015 legislative elections and was on the verge of using those same electoral rules to gain a disproportionate control of regional governments in 2016. To prevent this from happening, the government-controlled National Electoral Council (*Consejo Nacional Electoral*, CNE) prevented several high-profile candidates from running for office, postponed the elections, and then ratified unfair conditions to help the PSUV win 18 governorships; the following year, amidst an opposition boycott, the government won more than 96.5% of state legislative seats. Undoubtedly, these regional elections and government interference with opposition governors’ authority directly contributed to Venezuela’s backsliding from an electoral democracy in 2010 into an authoritarian regime by decade’s end.

The experience of subnational elections and center-subnational relations is critical for understanding democratic backsliding, especially in federal systems where regional authorities can provide at least a symbolic counterweight to the central government’s power. Still, analyses of Venezuelan backsliding tend to focus on national-level features like the concentration of power in the executive and weakening of the separation of powers system (Corrales and Penfold-Becerra 2011), polarization (Mallén and García-Guadilla 2017), bureaucratic politicization (Polga-Hecimovich *Forthcoming*), the dismantling of judicial independence and the rule of law (Corrales 2015); control and censorship of the internet (Puyosa 2015), restrictions on civil liberties (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2019), and clientelism (Penfold-Becerra 2007). However, as evidence from Russia, Central Europe, and other countries attests, interference in subnational politics can also enable single-party consolidation and exacerbate authoritarian tendencies in eroding democracies (Jakli and Stenberg 2021; O’Dwyer and Stenberg 2021). Would-be authoritarians have incentives to weaken subnational institutions and autonomy to erode opposition parties’ organizational bases, frustrate the emergence and consolidation of opposition leaders, constrain the emergence of bottom-up political pressure, and centralize power.

I argue that regional elections and center-subnational relations have contributed significantly to Venezuela's democratic decay and autocratization. Government manipulation of electoral processes and responses to opposition victories illustrate the increasing malleability of institutional rules and the degree to which the central government effectively captured regional authorities which only putatively enjoyed autonomy from Caracas. The increasingly authoritarian government's tactics also shifted. The manipulation of electoral rules and degree of fraud it was willing to commit to retain control over the levers of power were a function of its own strengths and weaknesses: the less popular approval the central government enjoyed, the more likely it was to limit subnational electoral freedoms and restrict the policymaking ability of opposition governors.

This study makes a few contributions to the scholarly literature. First, its description of the role of subnational elections in Venezuela's democratic erosion is valuable since, with few exceptions (e.g. Corrales 2020; Mazzaro 2020), little has been written about this critical relationship. Second, the analysis reveals different contributing factors to democratic backsliding than those identified in other countries (e.g. Golosov 2011), specifically the abuse of fiscal decentralization by federal authorities as well as attempts to limit self-rule via the imposition of a parallel political-administrative structure. Third, it supports scholarship that shows authoritarian leaders can use subnational elections as a tool for electoral management strategies that can shape subsequent national elections (e.g. Smyth and Turovsky 2018).

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section considers the role of center-subnational relations in democratic backsliding. The second then lays out Venezuela's subnational political organization, unpacking the country's highly centralized federalism, multilevel election frequency, and electoral systems. The third section provides an overview of the country's democratic trajectory since the late 1990s and evaluates the decline of regional electoral integrity and centralization. It shows how the government manipulated electoral conditions in 2012, placed restrictions on opposition governors, and then appointed parallel pro-government administrations in opposition-led states. It then issued the controversial *Carnet de la Patria* (Homeland Card) and engaged in more flagrant electoral manipulation of the 2017 gubernatorial and 2018 state council elections. The conclusion reflects on how subnational elections contributed to Venezuela's democratic decay and autocratization.

The role of subnational politics in democratic backsliding

Democratic backsliding is a process of institutional change which can end in the weakening of existing democratic institutions or complete democratic breakdown. Bermeo (2016) argues that contemporary backsliding often

occurs through ‘executive aggrandizement’, the loss of checks on executive power through a series of institutional changes that obstruct opposition forces to challenge executive preferences, as well as the long-term strategic harassment and manipulation of elections. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) highlight other critical ingredients in the process, including actors who enable executive takeovers, attacks on democratic norms, and executives’ subversion of institutional rules to tilt the playing field in their favour. Scholarly discussions of how dominant-party regimes are constructed and consolidated typically focus on mechanisms by which dominant parties cement their control at the national level, from court packing to politicization of government to the discretionary use of legal instruments to undermine civil liberties (Levitsky and Way 2010).

Although they are less studied than national processes, regional and local politics may play a role in democratic aperture as well as backsliding and authoritarian consolidation. Scholars show how regional elections can help deepen citizen engagement in emerging democracies and provide templates for national-level democratization (Lindeke and Wanzala 1994; Sadiqi 2015). These processes may generate confidence in the electoral apparatus, contribute to institution-building, and encourage the organization of civil society. Moreover, for opposition parties, mayoralties and governorships provide opponents opportunities to demonstrate political competence, to project power and unity, and for politicians to cultivate political support and national profiles. Local electoral victories may spur voter mobilization and represent a steppingstone to successful challenges of the dominant party in national-level races. It is no surprise that in Venezuela, the major opposition presidential candidates between 2000 and 2018 –Francisco Arias Cárdenas (2000), Manuel Rosales (2006), Henrique Capriles (2012, 2013), and Henri Falcón (2018)– were former governors.

Conversely, subnational elections can also be instruments of political control rather than devices of liberalization. A victorious dominant party can close off avenues for contestation, extend its appeal to the electorate, and change institutional rules, enabling single-party consolidation and exacerbating authoritarian tendencies. Would-be authoritarians have incentives to weaken subnational institutions and autonomy to reduce opposition parties’ organizational bases, frustrate the emergence of strong opposition leaders, and diffuse bottom-up political pressure (Jakli and Stenberg 2021; O’Dwyer and Stenberg 2021). This is especially true of federal systems where governors and regional politicians possess at least some fiscal and administrative autonomy and enjoy independent electoral bases which may pose a threat to national leaders unwilling to share power. In an analysis of Venezuela’s Maisanta land-reform initiative, for example, Albertus (2015) finds that the distribution of benefits was strongly conditioned by the partisanship of state governors. Pro-Chávez governors facilitated land grants

targeting and signalled that their states were politically deserving, while opposition governors inhibited land distribution. In the 2010s, central government interference with and marginalization of opposition governors grew substantially.

Subnational electoral competition can be a particularly vital component of democratic backsliding or resilience. This is because any electoral contest represents the possibility of change in the status quo and a threat to the dominant party's hold on power. Gubernatorial or state legislative elections provide a referendum on the governing party and can be barometers of the prevailing public mood. This can affect government legitimacy. Cross-national evidence, for example, suggests that dominant parties seek victories to minimize potential threats to the regime—especially in cities of greater size or high political importance (Stenberg 2021). This allows the dominant party to restrict opportunities for the opposition to build or mobilize its electoral base to challenge the regime. In her analysis of Venezuelan subnational elections, Mazzaro (2020) finds that differences in the political opposition's strength at the local level incentivized the government to use media restrictions to demobilize opponents where they are strongest, target marginal districts during local elections, and maintain dominance in their strongholds. This range of actions aimed at subnational governments weakened opposition electoral efforts as well as democracy.

Lastly, some scholarship shows how autocratic regimes develop 'menus of electoral manipulation' in subnational elections that allow them to more effectively control national contests (Smyth and Turovsky 2018). These tools could range from forms of ballot design to the introduction of auxiliary institutions to turnout manipulation. One example in Venezuela is the introduction of the *Carnet de la Patria* in the 2017 regional elections before its use in subsequent electoral processes. The state also used the results of subnational elections to its advantage. In the 2010s, the government began to systematically bar successful governors and mayors from the electoral arena, including Leopoldo López (mayor of Chacao municipality and head of the *Voluntad Popular* party), Capriles (two-term governor of Miranda and head of the *Primero Justicia* party), Rosales (governor of Zulia and head of the *Un Nuevo Tiempo* party), Pablo Pérez (governor of Zulia), Liborio Guarulla (governor of Amazonas), Luis Lippa (governor of Apure), Antonio Ledezma and Ramón Muchacho (both mayors of Caracas), and more).¹ Lastly, the government banned from national elections parties which did not compete at the local level in 2017 elections.

Subnational political organization and elections in Venezuela

The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela comprises 23 states, two federal territories, one federal district, and 72 federal dependencies. The country is

further broken into 335 municipalities which are in turn divided into parishes. States are ruled by governors, which have been elected since 1989, while municipal government and administration are entrusted to mayors who serve as the highest local civil authority (República Bolivariana de Venezuela 1999: Article 174). Each state has its own constitution which establishes its administration of justice and municipal autonomy, as well as the scope and content of its institutional, political, administrative, and financial systems. Nonetheless, the country remains among the least decentralized federal systems in the world: it is not territorially bicameral, and governors possess little borrowing autonomy and have minimal influence on the national legislature (Monaldi 2010, 184).

As established in the constitution, each state must have a legislature as part of its civil government. These 23 unicameral chambers are known as state legislative councils (*consejos legislativos estatales*). Among their main functions, the legislative councils guarantee that governors' annual budgets are properly executed, and ensure that the amount assigned by area corresponds to that stipulated in the planning ("Ley 2001. Ley Orgánica de los Consejos Legislativos de los Estados" 2001). At the municipal level, legislative functions are entrusted to a council comprised of elected councilpersons.

The number of legislators per state council is set using a fixed scale established in the Organic Law of Electoral Processes (*Ley Orgánica de Procesos Electorales*, LOPE), which requires no fewer than seven and no more than 15 legislators per state based on population ("Ley Orgánica de Procesos Electorales" 2009, Article 12). Consequently, the total number of representatives in the regional chambers is not permanent. For example, due to population growth, the CNE increased the number of deputies in seven states between 2012 and 2018 (see Table 1). The LOPE also sets the number of members comprising a municipal council between five and 13, depending on population ("Ley Orgánica de Procesos Electorales" 2009, Article 13). Moreover, the LOPE provides for indigenous representation at the national (Article 179) and subnational level (Articles 183 and 184), establishing districts for indigenous state legislators and municipal councilors in eight states.

Vertical and horizontal simultaneity of multilevel elections

Elections are held at the national level for president every six years and for the unicameral legislature, known as the National Assembly (*Asamblea Nacional*), every five years. Regional and local elections, responsible for the selection of governors, state legislative councils, mayors, and municipal councils, were introduced following the work in the 1980s of the Commission for the Reform of the State and are supposed to take place every four years. From the establishment of democracy in 1958–1989, governors and mayors were

Table 1. Legislative Council Seats by State (2012/2018).

State	Nominal seats	Nominal districts	Nominal M = 1	Nominal M = 2 or 3	List seats	Indigenous seats	Total seats
Amazonas	4	2	1	1	2	1	7
Anzoátegui	11	7	3	4	3	1	15
Apure	4	3	2	1	2	1	7
Aragua	12	8	4	4	3	0	15
Barinas	7/8	4	1	3	2/3	0	9/11
Bolívar	11	8	5	3	3	1	15
Carabobo	12	11	10	1	3	0	15
Cojedes	5	3	1/2	2/1	2	0	7
Delta Amacuro	4	3/2	2/1	1	2	1	7
Falcón	7/8	5	3	2	2/3	0	9/11
Guárico	7	5	3	2	2	0	9
Lara	12	8	4/5	4/3	3	0	15
Mérida	7	5	3	2	2	0	9
Miranda	12	8	4	4	3	0	15
Monagas	6/7	6	6/5	0/1	2/3	1	9/11
Nueva Esparta	5	4	3	1	2	0	7
Portuguesa	7/8	4	1/0	3/4	2/3	0	9/11
Sucre	6/7	6	6/5	0/1	2/3	1	9/11
Táchira	8/10	6	4/2	2/4	3	0	11/13
Trujillo	7	6	5	1	2	0	9
Vargas*	5	5	5	0	2	0	7
Yaracuy	5/7	5	5/3	0/2	2	0	7/9
Zulia	11	11	11	0	3	1	15
Total	175/184	133/132	92/86	41/46	54/59	8	237/251

Source: Venezuelan National Electoral Board, National Office of Electoral Infrastructure

*Name changed from 'Vargas' to 'La Guaira' on June 13, 2019.

appointed by the president, while voters were given the ability to choose municipal councilors beginning in 1979.

There was limited vertical simultaneity among local, regional, and national elections in the 2010s. Prior to this time, regional and municipal elections were held on the same day in 1989, 1992, 1995, 2000, 2004, and 2008. However, the *Ley Orgánica del Poder Público Municipal* (2010) separated municipal and regional elections. Table 2, below, shows the panoply of

Table 2. Elections in Venezuela (2010–2021).

	Municipal	Gubernatorial	State Legislative	National Legislative	Constituent Assembly	Presidential
2010	Dec 5	Dec 5	Dec 5	Sep 26		
2011						
2012		Dec 16	Dec 16			Oct 7
2013	Dec 8					Apr 14
2014						
2015				Dec 6		
2016						
2017	Dec 10	Oct 15			Jul 30	
2018	Dec 9		May 20			May 20
2019						
2020				Dec 6		
2021	Nov 21	Nov 21	Nov 21			

elections that took place throughout the 2010s. Despite presidential and regional votes both occurring in 2012, municipal and presidential elections in 2013, and regional and constituent assembly elections in 2013, none fell on the same day. The only exceptions were 2010, when for idiosyncratic reasons, a special election was called on December 5 to elect two state governors and eleven mayors, and 2018, when presidential and state legislative council elections took place on May 20.

As the table shows, elections have rarely adhered to the mandated timing. Since the approval of the 1999 Constitution, governors and the state council legislators were selected concurrently on five occasions (July 30, 2000; October 31, 2004; November 23, 2008; December 16, 2012; November 21, 2021). Contests for these offices were separated in 2017, with gubernatorial elections taking place October 15, 2017, and state councilor elections on May 20, 2018. This represents a cumulative delay of 15–22 months over the course of the five regional electoral processes.

The governing political parties, the Fifth Republic Movement (MVR, *Movimiento Quinta República*) from 1998 to 2007 and then the PSUV from 2007 to the present, have dominated subnational politics since first coming to power in 1999. At the state level, the MVR and then the PSUV won a majority in 15 of 23 legislative councils and 16 governorships in 2000, 18 councils and 21 governorships 2004, 20 councils and 18 governorships in 2008, 22 councils and 20 governorships in 2012, all 23 councils and 18 governorships in 2017/2018, and 20 councils and 19 governorships in 2021.

Electoral systems

The president, governors, mayors, and indigenous representatives are elected via single-round simple plurality or first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral rules, while candidates for the National Assembly, state legislative councils, and municipal councils are selected through a mixed member majoritarian (MMM) system. While the uninominal offices have consistently used FPTP, the electoral system for plurinominal offices has evolved. After democratization in 1958, the country initially utilized closed list proportional representation (PR). However, in 1993, it abandoned PR in favour of a mixed-member proportional (MMP) setup in which voters would cast two votes: one nominal vote for individuals elected via FPTP rules, and the second for a national party list, with seats allocated proportionally to correct any distortions created at the FPTP level (Crisp and Rey 2001). The initially design maintained a 50–50 balance in representation between the FPTP and party list tiers, although subsequent changes intended to favour the governing party shifted the balance toward the nominal tier.

Article 63 of the 1999 Constitution enshrined proportional representation as a political right, stating that, ‘the law shall guarantee the principle of

personalization of suffrage and proportional representation’ (República Bolivariana de Venezuela 1999). However, politicians were able to game the system and undermine the proportionality of MMP by using two party lists, a trick known as *las morochas* (Venezuelan slang for ‘twins’). In national legislative elections in 2000, Yaracuy state governor and opposition politician Eduardo Lapi ran two different parties for office in an alliance. One of the allied parties presented its candidates only on the party list, while the other party ran candidates only on the FPTP level. This allowed the alliance to win four of the five party list seats with 40% of the vote, and six of the seven nominal list seats with 53% of the vote. Based on this success, the governing MVR adopted the *morochas* strategy in the 2005 legislative elections (although its victory was already assured by the opposition’s abstention). It then repeated this maneuver to great effect in the 2008 regional elections.

In 2009, the CNE and National Assembly passed the aforementioned LOPE, reducing the party list proportion to 30% and formalizing the *morochas* strategy by completely separating the district vote and the party list votes and creating a ‘parallel’ MMM system (“Ley Orgánica de Procesos Electorales” 2009: Article 8). Instead of the party list serving as a compensatory mechanism to guarantee national level proportionality between vote shares and seat distribution, the reform reinforced the strength of the largest party by favouring overrepresentation at the nominal tier as well as a full proportional share at the list tier (Monaldi, Obuchi, and Guerra 2010). Additionally, the reform gerrymandered some districts, concentrating heavy opposition support in fewer places with higher margins, and creating more PSUV-leaning districts with lower margins. This system has endured despite only partially satisfying the personalization of suffrage and violating the guarantee of proportional representation established in the constitution (Lander 2016).

Subnational elections and autocratic consolidation in the 2010s

The integrity of Venezuela’s regional elections in 2012, 2017, and 2018, as well as the government’s response to limited opposition victories were critical elements of the country’s long democratic erosion. At least three types of subnational political maneuvering contributed to the backsliding: 1) the promotion of unfair electoral conditions in the pre-electoral and electoral phases; 2) delays in constitutionally mandated fiscal transfers to opposition governors, and 3) the creation of parallel administrative structures headed by government allies in opposition-held states and cities. They made up part of a much larger process of autocratization (Brewer-Carías 2019).

Although Venezuela’s representative democracy began to erode before he came to office, Hugo Chávez accelerated the process. As president, Chávez accumulated power and eliminated checks on his authority: he packed the courts, filled the ranks of the military with loyalists and integrated the

armed forces into politics, systematically dismantled independent media, and, in the wake of a general strike in 2002–2003 aimed at removing him, replaced opponents within the state-owned oil company, *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A.* (PDVSA), with supporters (Corrales and Penfold-Becerra 2011; Taylor 2014). After 2005, the president used a legislative supermajority to take control of other public institutions, making appointments to the CNE, Supreme Court, and other independent powers including the Attorney General, Comptroller General, and Ombudsman. The Supreme Court issued rulings widely seen as sympathetic to the government, jailed government allies who spoke out against government policies, and banned many opposition leaders from running for political office (Brewer-Carías 2019).

Under Nicolás Maduro, Venezuela has become an authoritarian regime marked by restricted civil liberties, widespread repression of political opposition, and electoral fraud. This is reflected in Figure A1 in the online appendix, which shows a notable fall in the already weak electoral and liberal democracy scores around the time Maduro took office. In October 2016, the government postponed regional elections and suspended an opposition-driven recall referendum against Maduro, and in March 2017 the president attempted to dissolve the National Assembly through the Supreme Court. After the latter move failed, Maduro called for drafting a new constitution under a handpicked National Constituent Assembly (*Asamblea Nacional Constituyente*, ANC), ostensibly to re-write the country's 1999 Political Constitution, but in reality, to create a pro-government legislative body to supersede the opposition-controlled National Assembly (McCoy and Pantoulas 2019).

Electorally, Maduro barred most major opposition candidates from running for office and likely committed outright fraud in 2017. In the ANC elections, which the political opposition boycotted, the government claimed that 8.5 million people participated, a number which independent analysts and Smartmatic, the company in charge of the electronic voting machines, say was inflated by at least one million votes. Despite being broadly unpopular, Maduro was reelected in May 2018 in a process absent international electoral observers and tainted by accusations of coercion and vote rigging.

This pattern of democratic erosion and autocratic consolidation has been just as stark at the subnational level, where flawed but moderately democratic elections gave way to nearly authoritarian ones. During this time, government transgressions ranged from violations of constitutional law to manipulation election scheduling, voting infrastructure disruptions, lack of voting booth transparency, and violations of international standards for clean elections. Figure A2 in the online appendix shows how the country's subnational electoral integrity drops sharply from 1995 to 2020, falling moderately from when Chávez took power in 1999 to the mid-2010s. After 2016,

however, the score falls precipitously, reflecting systematic and widespread irregularities that restricted the conditions and outcome of the 2017 regional contest.

2012 regional elections: weak electoral democracy

The campaign for the December 16, 2012, regional elections for governors and state legislative councils began on November 1, following a fourth term electoral victory for Chávez in the October presidential election. The president, who was dying of cancer in Cuba, was intent on reversing a trend of falling support for the PSUV in several states before his next term began and ahead of the April 2013 municipal elections. As an electoral vehicle, Chávez created an alliance of the PSUV with smaller far-left parties called the Great Patriotic Pole (*Gran Polo Patriótico*, GPP) and then handpicked its gubernatorial candidates. The opposition Democratic Unity Roundtable (*Mesa de la Unidad Democrática*, MUD) coalition, meanwhile, chose its gubernatorial candidates via primaries. Centralized candidate choice was the president's attempt to consolidate his command ahead of a more radical phase of his government's transition towards socialism, focused on expanding the role of communal councils and creating new regional authorities at the expense of the existing elected state and municipal powers.

At the council level, several formal changes in the pre-electoral period favoured the GPP. First, 2012 marked the first regional elections under the LOPE and the MMM electoral system—a change that disproportionately favours the largest party. Second, the electoral management body aided the GPP by increasing the number of councilors elected via the nominal tier, from 127 legislators to 175, representing an increase from 54.5% of 233 seats in 2008 versus 74% of 237 seats in 2012—another change that benefited the largest party and also detracted from proportionality (*Mas de una década de dominio oficialista en los Consejos Legislativos* 2021). Third, the CNE redrew districts, creating 133 constituencies—92 uninominal and 41 plurinominal, as shown in [Table 1](#)—at the nominal tier. In doing so, the body gerrymandered these areas to concentrate support for the MUD in few districts with high margins, disproportionately rewarding the GPP (Lander 2016). Furthermore, converting uninominal districts into plurinominal ones helped to overrepresent the government.

The GPP earned a dominating victory, with 54.5% of the aggregate vote compared to 44.8% for the MUD. As shown in [Table 3](#), PSUV candidates won 20 governorships, keeping the 16 the party held and winning an additional four previously controlled by the MUD (Carabobo, Nueva Esparta, Táchira, Zulia). The GPP also recovered Monagas state from José Briceño, who had been governor with the PSUV since 2004 but left the party in March 2012. Meanwhile the MUD suffered a major setback. Although

Table 3. 2012 and 2017 Gubernatorial Results.

State	2012	2017
Amazonas	Liborio Guarulla (MPV)*	Miguel Rodríguez (PSUV)
Anzoátegui	Aristóbulo Istúriz (PSUV)	Antonio Barreto Sira (AD)*
Apure	Ramón Carrizales (PSUV)	Ramón Carrizales (PSUV)
Aragua	Tareck El Aissami (PSUV)	Rodolfo Marco Torres (PSUV)
Barinas	Adán Chávez (PSUV)	Argenis Chávez (PSUV)
Bolívar	Francisco Rangel Gómez (PSUV)	Justo Noguera Pietri (PSUV)
Carabobo	Francisco Ameliach (PSUV)	Rafael Lacava (PSUV)
Cojedes	Érika Farías (PSUV)	Margaud Godoy (PSUV)
Delta Amacuro	Lizeta Hernández (PSUV)	Lizeta Hernández (PSUV)
Falcón	Stella Lugo (PSUV)	Víctor Clark (PSUV)
Guárico	Ramón Rodríguez Chacín (PSUV)	José Manuel Vásquez (PSUV)
Lara	Henri Falcón (AP)*	Carmen Meléndez (PSUV)
Mérida	Alexis Ramírez (PSUV)	Ramón Guevara (AD)*
Miranda	Henrique Capriles Radonski (PJ)*	Héctor Rodríguez (PSUV)
Monagas	Yelitza Santaella (PSUV)	Yelitza Santaella (PSUV)
Nueva Esparta	Carlos Mata Figueroa (PSUV)	Alfredo Díaz (AD)*
Portuguesa	Wilmar Castro Soteldo (PSUV)	Rafael Calles (PSUV)
Sucre	Luis Acuña (PSUV)	Edwin Rojas (PSUV)
Táchira	José Gregorio Vielma Mora (PSUV)	Laidy Gómez (AD)*
Trujillo	Henry Rangel Silva (PSUV)	Henry Rangel Silva (PSUV)
Vargas	Jorge Luís García Carneiro (PSUV)	Jorge Luís García Carneiro (PSUV)
Yaracuy	Júlio León Heredia (PSUV)	Júlio León Heredia (PSUV)
Zulia	Francisco Árias Cárdenas (PSUV)	Juan Pablo Guanipa (PJ)*Omar Prieto (PSUV)

Party key: *Acción Democrática* (AD), *Avanzada Progresista* (AP), *Movimiento Progresista de Venezuela* (MPV), *Primero Justicia* (PJ), *Partido Socialista de Venezuela* (PSUV)

*State where government appointed a ‘protector’ to run the parallel administration

Henrique Capriles managed to win reelection as governor of Miranda, the country’s second-largest state, other contenders faltered. The only other two MUD candidates to win, Henri Falcón in Lara and Liborio Guarulla in Amazonas, were re-elected on the MUD ticket after having first won power as pro-Chávez politicians.

In the gerrymandered state legislative council elections, the GPP enjoyed a similarly lopsided victory, with its candidates winning 77% of all seats (183 of 237) and a majority in 22 of 23 states, cementing its control at state level. As Table 4 shows, the MUD failed to win a single legislative council seat in six states and only managed to gain a majority in Amazonas.

The elections themselves were largely free and unencumbered by electoral-related violence. Audits from voting machine company Smartmatic indicated a clean contest (“Regional Election. Venezuela 2012” 2013), and it was monitored and recognized by the opposition—with the notable exception of gubernatorial candidate Andrés Velásquez who called for a recount in the state of Bolívar. Nonetheless, several pre-electoral restrictions proved deleterious for the MUD. In addition to media restrictions on opposition candidates (Mazzaro 2020), the 2009 LOPE undermined the proportionality imbued in the constitution and overrepresented the PSUV. Second, the contest itself was clean, but the government came away with 87% of governorships and council majorities in all but one state on the back of around

Table 4. 2012 and 2018 State Legislative Council Results.

	2012			2018		
	GPP	Other	Total	GPP	Other	Total
Amazonas	1	6	7	6	1	7
Anzoátegui	13	2	15	14	1	15
Apure	7	0	7	7	0	7
Aragua	10	5	15	15	0	15
Barinas	6	3	9	11	0	11
Bolívar	11	4	15	14	1	15
Carabobo	12	3	15	15	0	15
Cojedes	6	1	7	7	0	7
Delta Amacuro	7	0	7	7	0	7
Falcón	7	2	9	10	1	11
Guárico	9	0	9	9	0	9
Lara	9	6	15	14	1	15
Mérida	6	3	9	9	0	9
Miranda	8	7	15	15	0	15
Monagas	8	1	9	11	0	11
Nueva Esparta	5	2	7	7	0	7
Portuguesa	9	0	9	11	0	11
Sucre	7	2	9	11	0	11
Táchira	7	4	11	12	1	13
Trujillo	9	0	9	9	0	9
Vargas/La Guaira	7	0	7	7	0	7
Yaracuy	6	1	7	9	0	9
Zulia	12	3	15	15	0	15
TOTAL	183	54	237	245	6	251

Source: *Consejo Nacional Electoral* (CNE)

55% electoral support. These disproportionate victories severely curtailed subnational pluralism.

Punishment of subnational opposition strongholds

Following these elections, the government weakened the power of the few opposition politicians who had managed to get elected. Among other tactics, Chávez began a practice of delaying fiscal transfers to opposition governors as set by law and created a series of parallel bureaucratic bodies in opposition-controlled cities and states to circumvent their authority. This reflected an attempt to centralize power and silence dissenting voices.

Venezuelan federalism is underpinned by the Decentralization Law (*Ley de Situado Constitucional*) which stipulates the share of revenue allotted to each state in proportion to their own respective incomes and populations. This mechanism, which devolves authority to the subnational level, also ensures a measure of political pluralism, since the central government is constitutionally mandated to transfer fiscal resources to regional and local governments regardless of their political affiliation. In practice, roughly 70% of each state's revenue comes via central government as established in the *situado*

(González del Yerro Beiras 2003). For an increasingly authoritarian regime, then, the *situado* represented an obstacle to the consolidation of national authority.

To evade this requirement, the government deliberately withheld or delayed payment of constitutionally obligated funds for opposition-administered states and municipalities while boosting PSUV-held districts with extra off-budget funds at its discretion. These delays effectively hurt opposition leaders' attempts at governance. For example, in the year following his election, prominent MUD leader and governor of Miranda state, Capriles, claimed that the federal government owed his office roughly US\$425 million, or over half the state's ordinary budget (LatinNews Daily Report 2013). In another case, when Táchira state governor and anti-PSUV politician César Pérez Vivas sent in heavy machinery to repair the road between the state capital and the Colombian border, the National Guard intervened to prevent the maintenance, asserting that responsibility lay with the federal government (Contreras 2011; La Patilla 2011). Roads remained unrepaired until the election of PSUV-affiliated José Vielma Mora. That election year, Pérez Vivas also accused the central government of hoarding constitutionally mandated budget funds meant for the regions, with opposition states being the worst affected.

The government also circumvented and coopted the power of elected opposition governors and mayors by creating parallel political and administrative structures, especially through the figure of 'protectors' (*protectores*). Chávez first created these types of offices, which administered budgets superior to those managed by their respective governors or mayors, in 2009 when the president's candidate lost the mayoralty of metropolitan Caracas to opposition leader Antonio Ledezma. Just months later, Chávez created the new job of Head of the Government of the Capital District and appointed ally Jacqueline Faría to the position. Faría took over the physical office space Ledezma had been using and assumed many of his responsibilities, including education, emergency response, and civil protection (Ore 2013).

Chávez expanded this practice after the 2012 regional elections. He created the office of protector in the three states where opposition governors had prevailed (Amazonas, Lara, Miranda; see Table 3), appointing the losing candidates as protectors and placing them in charge of new state-run corporations –CorpoAmazonas, CorpoLara, CorpoMiranda– to administer development projects. Similarly, after the 2013 local elections, office holders in the 49 mayoralties that passed from the PSUV to the opposition complained about efforts by Maduro's central government to strip them of their powers through parallel organizations, including in the country's largest cities of Caracas, Maracaibo, and Valencia (Scharfenberg 2013). So, although the government was victorious in most states and municipalities without

engaging in systematic fraud, it subsequently incapacitated opposition leaders and their ability to govern.

2017/2018 regional elections: electoral authoritarianism

The death of Chávez in 2013, the concurrent onset of profound political and economic crisis, and the opposition's subsequent electoral success in the 2015 National Assembly elections radically altered the government's strategy. The PSUV, which had been wildly successful for 15 years and faced few real prospects of loss at the ballot box, was forced to confront a new reality. However, instead of risking the real possibility of losing power at multiple levels of government, the party opted for a deepening of the country's authoritarianism. Regional elections provided the opportunity to put these restrictions into action.

In October 2016 the CNE postponed the electoral process and suspended the long-running opposition-driven recall referendum against Maduro, closing an institutional channel for his removal. Then, in late March 2017, Maduro attempted to dissolve the opposition-controlled National Assembly. This gambit failed amidst pushback from some key allies, but Maduro soon invoked presidential privilege to convene the ANC, a legislative body that would allow him to circumvent the National Assembly. In protest of these actions, the opposition boycotted the July 2017 ANC designations, the first in a series of unfree elections marred by protests and violence.

The 2017–2018 round of regional elections provided a template for subsequent electoral manipulation. For one, it incorporated the use of the *Carnet de la Patria*, a Chinese-manufactured identity card dating with a personalized QR code, which was first issued in early 2017. The card's stated purpose is to classify individuals' socioeconomic statuses to streamline the rationing of food and social services through the country's missions and local committees of supply and production (*Comité Local de Abastecimiento y Producción*, CLAP). However, opposition politicians and voters accused the government of using the card as a method of social control as well as coercion and vote buying that began during the December regional elections. They argued, among other things, that scanning the card at voting booths allowed the government to monitor their party affiliation and whether they had voted (Castro 2017). After its apparent utility to the government, the card was used in subsequent national-level contests (España 2020).

Furthermore, the government was able to get away with myriad irregularities, encouraging the government to engage in ever more brazen fraud during the 2018 presidential contest. Corrales (2020) finds 14 different types of electoral irregularities for the 2017 gubernatorial elections, ranking it the least free and fair of the 25 Venezuelan elections measured. Gubernatorial and state legislative council elections were not held simultaneously.

Although they were both originally scheduled for December 2016 and then postponed, one of the ANC's first acts was to move forward the delayed state gubernatorial elections from December to October 15, favouring the more unified government bloc. Meanwhile, the CNE shifted council elections multiple times before they were finally set for May 5, 2018, to coincide with election for president.

As shown in [Table 3](#), the gubernatorial election predictably resulted in a decisive victory for the GPP, which won 18 of 23 governorships, including the longtime opposition stronghold of Miranda. Despite an aggregate vote share of 45%, the MUD won only five states (Anzoátegui, Mérida, Nueva Esparta, Táchira, Zulia). As in 2012, there was controversy in Bolívar, where MUD candidate Andrés Velásquez once again lost, this time to the PSUV's Justo Noguera by just 0.3%. The MUD refused to accept the results, denouncing fraud and calling for a full audit of the electoral process with international oversight. The opposition coalition maintained that it had seen evidence that its candidates were winning in states such as Bolívar before the full preliminary results were released and demanded the renewal of the entire electoral system and the re-staging of elections.

Other irregularities abounded. One of the more notable ones was the abrupt relocation of 270 of the country's 13,599 voting centres some 48 hours before the election, a well-worn technique known in other parts of Latin America as *ratón loco* and which affected an estimated 700,000 voters. The CNE also refused to eliminate the names of ineligible opposition candidates who had been defeated in the MUD's internal primaries and included on ballots, a measure that further diluted the opposition vote, and for the first time eliminated the use of indelible ink to mark votes (Buxton 2018). In a statement, the MUD denounced other things, including damaged voting machines preventing or hindering more than one million voters from voting in opposition-leaning districts; poll violence and intimidation; coercion and blackmail of public employees and beneficiaries of social programmes forcing them to vote with the aid of PSUV leaders; irregular extensions after the time of the legal closure at some precincts; and obstacles to citizen verification audits ("MUD exige "auditoría total, cuantitativa y cualitativa" de todo el proceso electoral" 2017). Countries throughout Latin America called for an independent audit of the results the U.S. Department of State classified the elections as neither free nor fair.

One week later, the government-controlled ANC swore in four of the five MUD governors-elect, despite pledges among parties of the MUD to not recognize the body. The four said that they had accepted the humiliation of being sworn-in by the ANC so as not leave their seats vacant and their communities abandoned. But all four were members of *Acción Democrática* (AD), and their decision was lambasted by other MUD leaders and effectively splintered the opposition (Buxton 2018). The one holdout was in Zulia, where the

PSUV-controlled legislature declared the governorship vacant and called for new elections after Juan Pablo Guanipa refused to be sworn-in. This election was re-run on December 10, concurrent with mayoral elections that the MUD boycotted, and PSUV candidate Omar Prieto was victorious. Meanwhile, the government used the main opposition parties' boycott as an excuse to prohibit them from presenting candidates in the 2018 presidential contest (Watson 2017). As with 2012, Maduro subsequently created five new protectorates in the states where the government lost and named four former pro-government candidates and another PSUV ally as new protectors of the entities won by the opposition ("Maduro nombra "protectores" para estados con gobernadores de oposición" 2017).

The government's success in this flawed process paved the way for opposition abstention in 2018 and outright coercion, fraud, and vote rigging in the May 20, 2018, elections. At the presidential level, Maduro's victory was never in doubt, and the GPP won more than 97% of all seats (245 of 251) at the state legislative council level (Table 4). Even with an opposition intent on abstention, electoral rules that overrepresent majorities, and restrictive voting conditions, these results reflected an authoritarian electoral process.²

In sum, regional elections in 2012 then contributed to the country's competitive authoritarianism, with ample pre-electoral manipulation but limited same-day irregularities. This was followed by crackdowns on opposition governors via delayed fiscal transfers and the appointment of state protectors, undermining regional power and pluralism. However, in response to economic collapse and growing popular opposition, the government resorted to electoral manipulation in the 2017 and 2018 contests, undermining what little space for democratic competition remained. Finally, to emphasize its hegemonic control, the government again appointed new *protectores* in the five states it had lost.

Conclusions

Explanations of democratic backsliding in Venezuela have focused on the national-level processes of executive aggrandizement while often overlooking the subnational drivers of democratic decay. This paper shows how Venezuelan leaders used flawed regional elections, the targeted punishment of subnational authorities, and the creation of parallel subnational political-administrative bodies to undermine democracy and consolidate authoritarianism in the 2010s. In doing so, it contributes to and complements the ample scholarly literature on democratic erosion in Venezuela, but through a subnational lens. Moreover, the analysis highlights tactics such as the blocking of fiscal transfers by federal authorities as well as attempts to limit self-rule via the imposition of *protectores* that are different from those commonly recognized in other countries. While the piece focuses on politics, it also

suggests that the convergence of fiscal, administrative, and political re-centralization offers a potentially rich vein of future research to understand processes of autocratization.

The paper also argues that government manipulation of regional elections in Venezuela in the 2010s was rational response from a government not committed to democratic rule, reflecting shifting electoral fortunes. Although the governing party was dominant in regional contests in both the 2012 and 2017/2018 electoral cycles, the means to those victories were quite different. In 2012, at the end of a period of economic boom, a popular Hugo Chávez was re-elected for a fourth term. On the back of that popularity and institutional rules manipulated to disproportionately reward the PSUV, Chávez's party was able to win 20 of 23 governorships and majorities in 22 of 23 state legislative councils. Electoral processes were not outright fraudulent, although manipulation of electoral rules and playing field conspired to undermine citizens' faith in the electoral process. Moreover, the government responded to limited MUD victories by not just undermining the relative authority of governors and state legislative councils through recentralization and targeting of opposition governors but by further limiting electoral openness in subsequent elections. With the death of Chávez and the onset of economic crisis in 2013, the government became more unpopular and more authoritarian. Unable to risk defeat in the scheduled 2016 contest, the National Electoral Council first delayed regional elections, disallowed opposition candidates, and then helped the government carry out the process in a manner that was neither free nor fair. As before, it subsequently appointed *protectores* to govern the handful of states won by the opposition.

The result is that Venezuela at the beginning of the 2020s is an authoritarian regime. Far from yielding to the circumstances, beleaguered president Nicolás Maduro tightened his grip on power by blocking or impairing legal avenues for dissent and prospective political change. His government has jailed members of the political opposition, fired state employees who speak out against the government, and militarized large parts of the public security apparatus. Most importantly, supposedly independent branches of power, especially the judiciary and the national electoral authority, have reliably gone out of their way to support the government, often at clear odds with obvious interpretations of the constitutional and legal framework. Things are not much better at a subnational level. Despite political negotiations aimed at providing electoral guarantees for the country's regional and municipal elections on November 21, 2021, they still took place in a fundamentally uneven playing field, and pro-government candidates won 19 out of 23 governorships and 205 out of 332 mayoralties.

The restrictive state of elections and limited possibility for opposition politicians to compete in a meaningful way bode poorly for the chances of Venezuela's re-democratization. This is because even in an authoritarian regime,

slight differences in electoral context can make a significant difference in the likelihood of regime liberalization. Comparative research shows that hegemonic authoritarian regimes, where the incumbent or ruling party enjoys overwhelming electoral dominance (>70 or 75% of the vote), are much less likely to transition to democracy than competitive authoritarian regimes, where opposition parties pose greater electoral challenges and garner a larger share of votes (Brownlee 2009; Roessler and Howard 2009). Perhaps renewed negotiations will pave the way for the possibility of a freer electoral process and eventual re-democratization. As with the process of autocratization, even limited electoral aperture at the subnational level can help liberalization efforts on a broader scale.

Notes

1. Rosales and Lippa's candidacies were reinstated for the 2017 and 2021 elections, respectively.
2. Official state legislative council results from 2018 are not available from the official website of the Venezuelan CNE at the time of writing. Data used here are based on local media coverage of the elections or the swearing-in ceremonies of the councils.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

John Polga-Hecimovich  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0711-6255>

References

- Albertus, Michael. 2015. "The Role of Subnational Politicians in Distributive Politics: Political Bias in Venezuela's Land Reform Under Chávez." *Comparative Political Studies* 48 (13): 1667–1710. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414015600457>.
- Bermeo, Nancy. 2016. "On Democratic Backsliding." *Journal of Democracy* 27 (1): 5–19. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012>.
- Brewer-Carías, Allan R. 2019. *Proyectos constitucionales del chavismo para dismantelar la democracia y establecer un estado socialista en Venezuela (Del principio al fin: 1999-2019)*. Caracas: Editorial Temis S.A.
- Brownlee, Jason. 2009. "Portents of Pluralism: How Hybrid Regimes Affect Democratic Transitions." *American Journal of Political Science* 53 (3): 515–532. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2009.00384.x>.
- Buxton, Julia. 2018. "Venezuela: Deeper Into the Abyss." *Revista de Ciencia Política* 38 (2): 409–428. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4067/s0718-090x2018000200409>.
- Castro, Maolis. 2017. "'Con el carné de la patria sabemos quiénes están con la revolución.'" *El País*, December 11.

- Contreras, Mariana. 2011. "Tachira. Se paralizarán obras del Ejecutivo regional." *Consejo Comunal el Placer*, May 28, 2011.
- Corrales, Javier. 2015. "Autocratic Legalism in Venezuela." *Journal of Democracy* 26 (2): 37–51. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2015.0031>.
- Corrales, Javier. 2020. "Democratic Backsliding Through Electoral Irregularities: The Case of Venezuela." *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 109: 41–65. <https://doi.org/10.32992/erlacs.10598>.
- Corrales, Javier, and Michael Penfold-Becerra. 2011. *Dragon in the Tropics: Hugo Chávez and the Political Economy of Revolution in Venezuela*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
- Crisp, Brian F., and Juan Carlos Rey. 2001. "The Sources of Electoral Reform in Venezuela." In *Mixed-Member Electoral Systems: The Best of Both Worlds?*, edited by M. S. Shugart, and M. P. Wattenberg, 173–193. New York: Oxford University Press.
- España, Luis Pedro. 2020. "De las misiones sociales al carnet de la patria 2015-2020. La actual política social en Venezuela." In *Venezuela en la encrucijada: Radiografía de un colapso*, edited by S. Gratiús, and J. M. Puente, 223–246. Caracas: Abe Ediciones.
- Golosov, Grigori V. 2011. "The Regional Roots of Electoral Authoritarianism in Russia." *Europe-Asia Studies* 63 (4): 623–639. doi:10.1080/09668136.2011.566427.
- González del Yerro Beiras, María del Carmen. 2003. Análisis del situado constitucional en Venezuela (1998–2002), Políticas Públicas, Universidad Torcuato di Tella, Buenos Aires.
- Jakli, Laura, and Matthew Stenberg. 2021. "Everyday Illiberalism: How Hungarian Subnational Politics Propel Single-Party Dominance." *Governance* 34 (2): 315–334. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12497>.
- Lander, Luis Enrique. 2016. "La representación proporcional y la personalización del sufragio." In *El sistema electoral venezolano: reflexiones a la luz de las parlamentarias 2015*, edited by I. Ávalos Gutiérrez, L. E. Lander, and C. Medina, 113–129. Caracas: Observatorio Electoral Venezolano.
- La Patilla. 2011. "Pérez Vivas: 'Ante emergencia del Táchira Gobierno Nacional se hace de la vista gorda'." *La Patilla*, April 18, 2011.
- LatinNews Daily Report. 2013. "Venezuela: Deputy 99 ready to 'enable' Maduro." *LatinNews Daily Report*, October 30, 2013.
- Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan A. Way. 2010. *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. *How Democracies Die*. New York: Crown.
- "Ley 33. Ley Orgánica de los Consejos Legislativos de los Estados". 2001. *Gaceta Oficial de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela*. Caracas: Asamblea Nacional de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela.
- "Ley Orgánica del Poder Público Municipal". 2010. *Gaceta Oficial de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela*. Caracas: Asamblea Nacional de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela.
- "Ley Orgánica de Procesos Electorales". 2009. *Gaceta Oficial de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela*. Caracas: Asamblea Nacional de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela.
- Lindeke, William A., and Winnie Wanzala. 1994. "Regional Elections in Namibia: Deepening Democracy and Gender Inclusion." *Africa Today* 41 (3): 5–14.
- "Maduro nombra 'protectores' para estados con gobernadores de oposición." 2017. *Diario las Américas*, October 24.
- Mallén, Ana L., and María Pilar García-Guadilla. 2017. *Venezuela's Polarized Politics: The Paradox of Direct Democracy Under Chávez*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- Mas de una década de dominio oficialista en los Consejos Legislativos. 2021. Observatorio Electoral Venezolano 2016 [cited 2021]. <https://oevenezolano.org/>

- 2016/08/mas-de-una-decada-de-dominio-oficialista-en-los-consejos-legislativos-infografias/.
- Mazzaro, Kyong. 2020. "Orchestrating Silence, Winning the Votes: Explaining Variation in Media Freedom During Elections." *Electoral Studies* 66: 102172. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2020.102172>.
- McCoy, Jennifer, and Dimitris Pantoulas. 2019. "Venezuela: An Unstable Equilibrium." *Revista de Ciencias Políticas* 32 (2): 391–408. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4067/S0718-090X2019000200391>.
- Monaldi, Francisco. 2010. "Decentralizing Power in Latin America: The Role of Governors in National Policymaking." In *How Democracy Works: Political Institutions, Actors, and Arenas in Latin American Policymaking*, edited by C. Scartascini, E. Stein, and M. Tommasi, 177–216. Washington, DC: Inter-American Development Bank.
- Monaldi, Francisco, Richard Obuchi, and Alfredo Guerra. 2010. "Las elecciones legislativas de 2010 en Venezuela: Cuando dos más dos no son cuatro." *Temas de Coyuntura* 62: 37–77.
- "MUD exige "auditoría total, cuantitativa y cualitativa" de todo el proceso electoral." 2017. *Runrunes*.
- O'Dwyer, Conor, and Matthew Stenberg. 2021. "Local-Level Democratic Backsliding? The Consolidation of Aspiring Dominant-Party Regimes in Hungary and Poland." *Government and Opposition*, 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2021.12>.
- OPEC. 2021. *OPEC Basket Price*. Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries 2021 [cited. https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/data_graphs/40.htm].
- Ore, Diego. 2013. "'Parallel governments' stoke polarized politics in Venezuela." *Reuters*, December 23.
- Penfold-Becerra, Michael. 2007. "Clientelism and Social Funds: Evidence from Chávez's Misiones." *Latin American Politics and Society* 49 (4): 63–84. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-2456.2007.tb00392.x>.
- Polga-Hecimovich, John. *Forthcoming*. "Functioning and Dysfunctional Bureaucracies in Latin America: Colombia vs. Venezuela." In *The Politics of Public Administration*, edited by A. Ladner, and F. Sager. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Puyosa, Iria. 2015. "Control político de internet en el contexto de un régimen híbrido Venezuela 2007–2015." *Teknokultura* 12 (3): 501–526. https://doi.org/10.5209/rev_TK.2015.v12.n3.50392.
- "Regional Election. Venezuela 2012." 2013. London: Smartmatic.
- República Bolivariana de Venezuela. 1999. *Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela*. Caracas: República Bolivariana de Venezuela.
- Roessler, Philip G., and Marc M. Howard. 2009. "Post-Cold War Political Regimes: When Do Elections Matter?" In *Democratization by Elections*, edited by S. I. Lindberg, 101–127. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Sadiqi, Fatima. 2015. *Morocco's Emerging Democracy: The 2015 Local and Regional Elections*. Washington, DC: The Wilson Center.
- Scharfenberg, Ewald. 2013. "Maduro nombra "alcaldes paralelos" en municipios que la oposición ganó." *El País*, December 10.
- Smyth, Regina, and Rostislav Turovsky. 2018. "Legitimising Victories: Electoral Authoritarian Control in Russia's Gubernatorial Elections." *Europe-Asia Studies* 70 (2): 182–201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2018.1436697>.
- Stenberg, Matthew. 2021. *Subnational Consolidation in Single-Party Dominant Regimes: Evidence from Hungarian Mayoral Elections*. Berkeley: University of California.

- Taylor, Matthew M. 2014. "The Limits of Judicial Independence: A Model with Illustration from Venezuela Under Chávez." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 46 (2): 229–259. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X14000017>.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. 2019. *Human Rights in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela*. New York: United Nations.
- Watson, Katy. 2017, December 11. "Venezuela Opposition Banned from Running in 2018 Election." *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-42304594>.