

For the sake of Venezuela: Power-Sharing mechanism challenges and opportunities

Por el bien de Venezuela: oportunidades y retos del mecanismo del poder compartido

Francisco Salvador Barroso Cortés¹

Universidad Loyola Andalucía (España)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9143-2391>

Recibido: 28-12-2023

Aceptado: 12-02-2024

Abstract

This essay examines Venezuelan political elite behavior and how decision-makers might contemplate power-sharing as a means to restore the nation-state. The article delves into the challenges and prospects of adopting power-sharing as a strategy not only for peacekeeping but also, crucially, peace-making processes. Starting with an overall assessment of Venezuelan democracy, the paper identifies factors that may hinder consociational democracy. It then analyzes sociopolitical elements favoring autocracy and partitocracy before discussing current challenges and opportunities for effective power-sharing. It highlights the role of Venezuelan elites and the persistent issue of elite non-circulation as critical factors in the ongoing political deadlock. Additionally, it explores the relationship between democracy, state-building, and the impact of autocratization.

Keywords: Power-Sharing, Venezuela, Populism, Democratization, Nation-Building.

¹ (fsbarroso@loyola.es). Associate Professor in the Department of International Studies at Loyola University Andalusia (Seville, Spain). He has been the Director of the Higher Institute of Political and Administrative Sciences of the School of Law and Political Sciences at the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik (USEK), Lebanon. Barroso holds a Ph.D. in Philosophy with a specialization in the field of Security and Defense studies. His areas of focus include security and defense policies, critical geopolitics, geostrategy, insurgency, para-diplomacy, foreign policy analysis, political violence, and the Transformation of the Military and Security fields. Dr. Barroso is the author of several peer-reviewed papers and chapters in books on the Geopolitics of Lebanon and the Middle East. His most recent publications include “Lebanon Confronts Partition Fears: Has Consociationalism Benefitted Minorities?”, *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, Vol. 5, n.1, 2019, pp. 5-29; “The Practice of Corruption in Lebanon”, *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 27, 2020, pp. 119-135; “The Lack of Circulation of Elites in Lebanon: Towards Communitocracy and Autocratization”, *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, Vol. 10, n.1, 2023, pp. 9-30.

Resumen

Este ensayo examina el comportamiento de la élite política venezolana y cómo los decisores políticos podrían considerar el poder compartido como un medio para restaurar el Estado nación. El artículo profundiza en los desafíos y perspectivas de adoptar el poder compartido como estrategia, no solo para el mantenimiento de la paz, sino también, crucialmente, para los procesos de construcción de la paz. Comenzando con una evaluación general de la democracia venezolana, el documento identifica los factores que podrían obstaculizar la democracia consociacional. Después analiza elementos sociopolíticos que favorecen la autocracia y la partitocracia antes de discutir los desafíos y oportunidades actuales para un efectivo poder compartido. Se destaca el papel de las élites venezolanas y el persistente problema de la no circulación de élites como factores críticos en el estancamiento actual político. Además, se explora la relación entre la democracia, la construcción del Estado y el impacto de la autocratización.

Palabras-clave: Poder compartido, Venezuela, Populismo, Democratización, Construcción nacional.

1. Introduction

The headlines of major international newspapers highlight the unpromising state of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. The severe fragmentation and polarization in politics raise concerns that the country might be on the brink of a crisis instead of regaining democracy. The recent negotiations between the Venezuelan government and the opposition in Mexico, intended to initiate a political opening, ended without success. Although there were expectations for the negotiation process to reinstitutionalize the country, the government withdrew, annulling the results of the election in Barinas. This marks the latest unsuccessful attempt at democratic reinstitutionalization in Venezuela (Trak 2022).

The case study of Venezuela presents a clear opportunity to verify or refute the premise that underlies Lijphart's theory that potentially antagonistic population segments can peacefully coexist if governed by a system that preserves cultural diversity and political influence through the separate although equal representation of the groups (Brooks Kelly 2019:19). The father and master of this theory, Arend Lijphart, stated that "in a consociational democracy, the centrifugal tendencies inherent in a plural society are counteracted by the cooperative attitudes and behavior of the leaders of the different segments

of the population. Elite cooperation is the primary distinguishing feature of consociational democracy” (1977: 1). Bearing in mind the significant role displayed by Elites, the theory of consociationalism has sparked an interesting academic debate where scholars bet on liberal consociationalism while others prefer corporatist consociationalism (McGarry and O’Leary 2007).

The future of Venezuela hangs in the balance, oscillating between a united, diverse nation and one divided and potentially destroyed. To salvage the nation-state, Venezuelan political elites should seriously consider implementing the power-sharing mechanism. The survival of the state relies on breaking free from the zero-sum politics prevailing between the executive led by Nicolás Maduro and the opposition-controlled Assembly. Transitioning from the dynamics of power duality to power-sharing is crucial. The materialization of interparty agreements based on negotiation and consensus is indispensable for any political system’s survival. The imposition of rigid positions hampers negotiations and agreements essential for the country’s salvation. Therefore, key actors, both individual and collective, must prioritize the broader interests of Venezuela and its people, adopting a constructive position that negotiates conflict resolution while considering the interests of all, not just narrow groups. Analyzing the adaptability of the power-sharing mechanism becomes crucial for the elites to ensure not only peacekeeping but also the peace-making process (Keil and McCulloch 2021: 258). In this context, Sisk notes that power-sharing systems aim to accommodate democratic competition rather than discard it, within appropriate boundaries (Sisk, 1996: 33). Power-sharing regimes grant importance to elites in the decision-making process, particularly in the context of plural societies. This organizational approach finds its most practical application in diverse societies. It ensures that leaders from all key factions have a guaranteed role in national or regional government, especially in divided societies. This structure incentivizes politicians to collaborate with rivals, temper their demands, and encourages community leaders to foster reconciliation among their supporters. Actively involving community leaders in the legislature and government to safeguard their interests enhances the perception that each community’s voice is significant (Norris 2008: 23-26).

In essence, this form of government is recommended for plural societies where majoritarianism is deemed an unfair and unrealistic option, making it challenging to achieve peace. It brings together representatives from various cultural groups that were previously in conflict to jointly govern the country. This system is characterized by inclusiveness, cooperation, and compromise, earning it the label of a power-sharing democracy. Consequently, power-sharing entails the broad participation of all segments of society in decision-making, particularly at the executive level. It provides an opportunity for majorities, as opposed to the majority, to have influence, control, and a voice

in the decision-making process (O'Leary 2005: 11). Contrary to majoritarian democracies, consociational democracies view the majority as a minimum requirement and strive to maximize the inclusion of diverse groups (Lijphart, 1999: 2). In essence, consociational democracies aim for comprehensive representation and participation, particularly emphasizing minority groups. The primary objective is to establish broad agreements on national policies that the government must adopt, ultimately fostering stability and democracy within a fragmented society. This political system is designed to move away from zero-sum games and promote positive-sum games, ensuring that all involved parties benefit, even if the distribution of benefits is unequal among them (O'Leary 2013: 2). Moreover, its strategy revolves around maintaining the unity of the state, avoiding any plans of exclusion, partition, or power monopolization. Scholars, including Brendon O'Leary, consider power-sharing democracy as the optimal remedy for deeply divided places often prone to actual or potential civil unrest and political disorder (2013: 6). However, for a political system to be classified as a full-fledged consociational democracy, it must incorporate specific institutional arrangements encompassing four fundamental power-sharing devices: a grand coalition government at the executive level, segmental autonomy in either territorial or non-territorial form, proportionality as both an electoral system and a process for civil service appointments and resource allocation across various segments, and mutual vetoes to protect the vital interests of minority groups (Lijphart, 1977: 25). A consociation can be seen as a strategy of elite cooperation where no single party exclusively controls the agenda or excludes others from participation. As the term implies, it ensures that all policies are openly negotiated, and national decisions are mutually agreed upon by those sharing power. It functions as an association of communities (McGarry and O'Leary 2004: 262), accommodating the demands and interests of all societal segments. Special emphasis should be placed on the role of cartel elites in this democracy type. Elites play a crucial role in maintaining the system, as their behavior is a key determinant of the success or failure of consociational democracy. The central feature of consociation lies in elites avoiding decision-making by a majority and instead seeking to address political conflicts through compromise or amicable agreement (Andeweg 2000: 511). Power-sharing democracy involves cooperation among segmental leaders, despite the sharp social cleavages that separate these segments. This implies that elites demonstrate a commitment to democratic practices and maintaining the country's unity. Without horizontal communication among rival elites, there is a significant risk that the carefully constructed system may become trapped in political deadlocks and total immobilism, escalating tensions among rival subcultures and leading to political disorder (Tsebelis 1990: 5). The game rules in a power-sharing democracy demand consensus among leaders of various

segments, requiring elites to perform a delicate balancing act by adopting a cooperative attitude rather than a competitive one (Lijphart 1977: 53).

Traditional elites in Venezuela have struggled to implement effective state management techniques, leading to a lack of cohesion in the state. To recover democracy, there is a growing interest in the power-sharing mechanism. This article contends that power-sharing holds significant potential to address sociopolitical dysfunctions and foster much-needed social peace. The Venezuelan case study provides a valuable opportunity to examine the adaptability of such a political mechanism. Despite the absence of a solid consociational culture, Venezuela serves as an excellent case for reflecting on the factors that give rise to consociational systems, the functioning of this political mechanism in deeply divided plural societies, and the evolution, adaptation, and conclusion of these consociations (Keil and McCulloch 2021: 257). Venezuela's challenging situation heightens its vulnerability to external interference, increasing the penetrability of Venezuelan society. Interestingly, the United States has proposed power-sharing as a means to restore social peace, institutional order, and political stability. This proposal comes with the condition of lifting specific economic sanctions, forming a type of embargo that has significantly impacted the harsh reality in Venezuela.

The analysis begins with a broad evaluation of Venezuelan democracy, aiming to grasp the elements impeding the consociational democracy option. It then delves into sociopolitical factors favoring autocracy and partitocracy. Subsequently, it evaluates contemporary challenges and opportunities for power-sharing, emphasizing the role of Venezuelan elites and the issue of leadership stagnation. The connection between democracy, state-building, and the repercussions of autocratization is explored in the subsequent section. The conclusion highlights Venezuelan elites' mismanagement amid the challenges posed by democracy and national building.

2. Ideological cleavages and populism: assessment of Venezuelan democracy

The Venezuelan regime remains the last stronghold of the "Pink Tide of South America." Indications suggest the end of the social democratic wave, with progressive ideologies losing ground (Ellner 2019). The Bolivarian revolution, initially tied to direct democracy, shifted to a hegemonic project led by the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). Democracy's demise occurred gradually through institutional erosion masked by elections, establishing an authoritarian system under Nicolas Maduro (Trak Vásquez 2020). Venezuela experienced a transition from a hybrid regime to an authoritarian one, influenced

by the tradition of military governments, giving rise to a form of governance termed dark governance, where authority dictates life and death (Mbembé and Meintjes 2003: 11-40).

The Venezuelan democracy suffered from “elite and mass defections, leadership failure, organizational rigidities, institutional immobilism and inefficacy, declining legitimacy, and the limited capacity of new movements to consolidate into viable political alternatives” (Levine 2002: 248). In addition, and in this regard, it should be considered that the manipulation of legislative power and the rule of law would allow the political elite to manipulate the law to implement policies qualified as necropolitics which is perceived as a sort of dark governance where the authority determines who can live and who must die (Mbembe 2019). Such norms would present the most damaging features of authoritarianism against societal security.

Venezuela could be classified not only as a plural society but as a deeply divided society. This type of society would be configured “when a large number of conflict group members attach overwhelming importance to the issues at stake or manifest strongly held antagonistic beliefs and emotions towards the opposing segment, or both” (Nordlinger 1972: 9). In this sense, it cannot be overestimated the ideological factor in the protest movement. It is not about choosing between right and left or between socialism and neoliberalism, but rather about the provision of basic services by the state (Pozzebon 2020). Thus, considering Venezuela as a failed state would not be risky at all.

The Venezuelan sociopolitical crisis has been significantly influenced by populism. The case study challenges the fundamental tenets of populism as a political ideology, manifesting in two distinct facets depending on the type of political system. In authoritarian systems, populism emerges as an anti-democratic element, whereas in representative systems, it is viewed as a fundamental democratic component (López Aranguren 2021: 52). The challenges in this context revolve around issues of pluralism, the role of the state, and the evaluation of political elites. The fundamental problem lies in the inability to foster a shared national construction and identity project capable of overcoming the excessive influence of ideological populism. Chavismo can be considered a populist phenomenon in political terms. This type of populism can be understood “as the presence of a charismatic mode of linkage between voters and politicians, and a democratic discourse that relies on the idea of a popular will and a struggle between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’” (Hawkins 2003: 1138). Political populism results in the politicization of groups, undermining the nation-state-building process. Consequently, the adaptability of the power-sharing mechanism emerges as a promising resource to mitigate the adverse effects of populism.

Venezuela exemplifies the phenomenon of autocratization through elections, evolving from a delegative democracy after Hugo Chávez's initial victory in 1998 to a hybrid regime and transitioning to an authoritarian regime since 2016 (Jiménez 2021; Corrales 2020). The Venezuelan socio-political landscape grapples with a persistent asymmetrical duality of power since the rise of Chavismo, where the Maduro government, with control over key state institutions and the armed forces, engages in an ongoing power struggle with no clear victor. This duality of power structures has led to a lack of mutual recognition between the Chavista regime and the opposition bloc, resulting in a game of double irresponsibility in which spaces for negotiation are conspicuous by their absence. For ideological purposes and after Hugo Chávez came to power, the logic of compromise gave way to the logic of confrontation. Chavismo has been perceived quite differently. Indeed, for some, it is a revolutionary process that represents a break from the past through a change of elites that puts an end to a party democracy based on pactism. Some even consider it the most original political and social alternative to capitalism that exists in Latin America and the Caribbean in the 21st century (Tirado Sánchez 2019: 16). A mixture of democratic socialism, socialist patriotism, and Marxism-Leninism versus liberal positions. Others have understood this process as a militaristic populism that vacillates between democratic commitment and authoritarian temptation (Hirst et al. 2019). Since 1999, there have been signs of political polarization based on electoral manipulation and sectarian practices, suggesting that the political order proposed by the "Punto Fijo Pact" has come to an end. The ideas of Bolivarianism, for instance, were articulated by Hugo Chávez in the first half of the 1990s, however, it is difficult to trace their origin - and given the available evidence. This can only be said to have taken place at the same time as the deterioration of the institutional framework of this pact. The emergence of Bolivarianism was the product of friction between the liberal order dominant throughout the "Punto-Fijo Pact," and a leftist and nationalist order that existed synchronously - albeit as a subsidiary and largely impotent set of ideas - in 1998. The Venezuelan left, even though marginalized throughout the existence of such a pact, became the reference for a progressive ideology, which found its opportunity in the institutional vacuum that appeared in Venezuelan politics after 1989, and whose effectiveness was also facilitated by the riots that shaken the capital in 1989. Despite the ideological battle between privatization and nationalization, the Chavistas face challenges in reconciling the liberal bias inherent in Bolívar's thought with socialist principles (Sanoja 2009: 408). The adaptive nature of populism is evident in Chavez's promotion of democratic socialism through the nationalization process in Venezuela (Miltimore, 2020). The "Third Way" was his initial thesis. He envisioned capitalism with a human face, combining "as much market as possible with as much state as necessary"

(Rodríguez et al. 2018: 125). Maduro seems to be pursuing an alternative course of action, emphasizing reforms that revolve around three primary axes: dollarization, modest short-term inflation control, and selective privatization in areas where expropriation had previously taken place (Berg 2022).

Maduro would have to countenance real economic reforms that would put his regime and Chavismo as a ruling ideology—at significant risk of losing its grip on power. Instead, the regime has chosen half-measures that increase state control and may entice more private sector investors with the prospect of a higher return on investment than the previous abysmal baseline. Chavez declared a struggle against misery and exclusion, corruption and privatizations, foreign debt, and denationalization in his “Alternative Bolivarian Agenda” (1996) (Chávez Frías 2014). These goals unified the aspirations of Venezuela’s exploited, oppressed, and marginalized people, rallying them under Chavez’s leadership. In contrast, Maduro acknowledges the advantages of privatization. The key distinctions revolve around differing views on state property. To address the economic decline, Maduro is reprivatizing state assets, transferring them to private entities, including local companies and investors from government-aligned nations. To overcome the legal framework established for Chavez in the 1990s, the privatization option must find certain legal loopholes, and, in certain cases, must go against the own Constitution. As a result, Maduro brought up the option of soft-line Chavismo because they called for the purging of old structures. Soft-line Chavistas consider the new parallel structures complementary to the old ones (Ellner 2005). The two lines (revolutionary opportunity and non-revolutionary transformation), both advocating radical changes, emerge within populist movements due to the high expectations set by populists for significant changes, coupled with a lack of ideological clarity, established goals, and a class perspective. The Chavista movement seems to signal a gradual shift away from the revolutionary path, with the power-sharing mechanism aiding in this transition. Parallel structures could help manage differences between the two wings of Chavismo. This promotes political struggle akin to a Gramsci approach, where existing structures are penetrated and dominated instead of being directly challenged or eliminated (Ellner 2005: 186).

It remains to be seen whether the mechanism of power-sharing could convert identity populism (right-wing and exclusionary) into vindictive populism (left-wing or inclusive). In the end, what it is about is nothing other than uniting the largest segments of society and granting them the permanent option of power-sharing. Therefore, it would contribute to promoting a process of reforms necessary to achieve the long-awaited objective of peace and stability in Venezuela. Concerning the figure of the state, populism would bet on ensuring that the state is strengthened as much as possible so that the

elites of the central power are the ones who assume the management of the public sphere, relegating the opposition groups to a residual and foreign role to the decision-making process. The Manichaean dynamic of separating society into two homogeneous and antagonistic entities (the purity of the people against the corrupt elite) would have a place in the case at hand. Thanks to the governance system known as *partitocracy*, which is understood as the government of the people, by the parties, for the parties (Coppedge 1994: 2, 15 - 17-22), the representatives and authorities of each community, whether that of the Bolivarian regime or the opposition group, would perceive this dynamic in terms of accepting the legitimacy of the leaders of their corresponding community, but considering the elites of the other bloc as potential enemies, and competitors with whom there would be no room for mutual trust. In this atmosphere of distrust and mutual delegitimization, the ideological factor reaches its peak in terms of manipulation. The ideologies of each bloc, shaping political perspectives and legislative frameworks, are manipulated to intensify inter-community rivalry. Populism is also considered a political ideology influenced by external interference, with each main bloc having an external sponsor supporting its elites and enabling competition with opposing political and social forces at the inter-group level.

According to Professor López-Aranguren, populism would be defined as a “political movement led by the people for social change through democratic means towards a free, egalitarian and supportive society, through a strong and active state that defends and promotes the interest, and the general will against the political, economic and financial elite that intends to maintain their privileged positions of wealth and power” (López Aranguren 2021: 55-56). The idea is that each leader would present himself to his corresponding community as a kind of messiah through the implementation of charismatic and manipulative leadership. To sustain leadership, the current leader must consolidate and centralize a majority of socio-political power, relegating the opposition group to a marginalized and secondary role in decision-making. Populism in Venezuela is a reaction to the ongoing representation crisis and social injustices, stemming from a weak state lacking institutions capable of meeting the basic needs of the population.

The parliamentary elections of December 6, 2020, and due to the results achieved by the opposition side, MUD, brought with them an increase in terms of the autocratization process. Venezuela, among other countries within the region, could be affected by what has come to be known as the third wave of autocratization, which would be defined as the “substantial de facto decline of core institutional requirements for electoral democracy” (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019). In this vein, it could be mentioned that the erosion of democratic factors can be labeled as *backsliding*, defined as a “state-led weakening or

elimination of any of the political institutions sustaining an existing democracy” (Bermeo 2016). For instance, the opposition group in charge of the Assembly suffered persecution and imprisonment of deputies, armed assaults on the plenary sessions, budget cuts, blockade of all constitutional powers, and even the kidnapping of parliamentary powers for the appointment of the authority electoral. This is the largest authoritarian deployment against a functioning parliament in Latin America in recent decades (Rodríguez-Franco 2020).

Grosso modo, it could be indicated that the opportunity for democratic transit has been lost. Said elections represented an electoral process without voters or winners. Participation only reached 30.5%, assuming an approximate reduction of 44% of the electorate. Given the facts, there are no reasons, and in this paradigmatic case, it could be highlighted that three out of ten Venezuelans voted in said elections. In addition, it could be possible that two of these three are public officials who were forced to vote due to said condition. As a result, the Maduro regime won 93% of the seats, creating a kind of single-color parliament, eliminating not only the plurality in the said institution but also the value of the vote as an instrument of social transformation (Kneuer 2022).

3. Challenges and opportunities of Power-Sharing system in Venezuela

Given this critical scenario, it is imperative to contemplate alternatives regarding the structure and form of government. In this context, an examination of the possibilities presented by the consociational system is warranted. It is pertinent to inquire whether the power-sharing political mechanism can address the primary dysfunctions of the Venezuelan socio-political system and restore minimal democratic standards. Additionally, it is essential to assess whether such a system can alleviate the pervasive resentment within the opposition, stemming from a sense of continual exclusion from leadership roles. The persistent political marginalization of groups often sparks conflict, and consociation, by ensuring groups have a say in politics, aims to mitigate this grievance.

The power-sharing mechanism could be used to overcome this catastrophic stalemate. Conflict resolution must be preceded by conflict prevention measures as the crisis has become so protracted and confrontational (Congressional Research Service 2022). During a time when democracy is not only under tutelage, but losing ground to authoritarianism, the power-sharing mechanism could revitalize confidence in dialogue, compromise, and negotiation. This mechanism could therefore represent a space that could facilitate minimal and gradually emerging concordances. The co-decision process would be made more inclusive, where the opposition bloc would not be excluded, the abuse of power by the Chavista regime would not be encouraged, and the main institutions, such as the National Assembly, would be able to regain their legitimacy. Recovery of state capacity in

terms of inclusivity and representativeness would thus facilitate the coexistence of different identities (McCulloch and McEvoy 2018: 469) and antagonistic political positions. By fostering mutual recognition among the primary actors in the prevailing power duality, such a mechanism has the potential to break the catastrophic deadlock. This could be achieved through comprehensive negotiations leading to the full resolution of the ideological confrontation. The mechanism holds promise for reducing political polarization and addressing the issue of non-neutrality. The prevalent lack of trust among Venezuelans in key state institutions (government, army, and judiciary) could be mitigated by implementing the power-sharing mechanism, enhancing transparency, and ensuring greater control over power abuse and various forms of corruption affecting Venezuelan society. The inclusion of political opponents in an executive coalition government not only resolves the impasse and mistrust between political elites but also safeguards the supremacy of the general interest over specific ones.

It is important to mention that the first experience of power-sharing took place in 1958 under the name of the Punto Fijo Pact. During this pact, the two most influential political parties and the most influential representatives of Venezuelan society agreed on the principles of the political system and the methods of avoiding effective rivalry between the left and the right. Although AD and COPEI ruled until 1989, the political system since then can be described as a multiparty democracy. Various social groups, such as peasant organizations and labor unions, received social and economic support from parties with access to state resources through a party-mediated clientelist system. Venezuela, after a brief experience of democratic government from 1945 to 1948, had to face the dictatorial experience. In 1958 the dictator General Marcos Pérez Jiménez was overthrown. The pact was signed by the leaders of the three main parties, Rómulo Betancourt (Acción Democrática), Jovito Villalba (Unión Republicana Democrática), and Rafael Caldera (Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente) to prevent another coup d'état. In addition, the pact, which was the first experience of power-sharing, aimed to defend constitutionality, establish a government of national unity, and implement a political program called the Common Minimum Programme, which included a series of political, economic, and social goals shared by the signatory parties.

In Venezuela, the rule of law and the separation of powers that were once the pillars of a solid democracy seem to have become a memory of the past or aspirations for the future (Dastis 2017). Venezuela has the potential to set an example for Latin America by demonstrating that coalition governments can contribute to stability rather than political instability. The benefits of the power-sharing mechanism could significantly mitigate the impact of populism, as it signifies a firm commitment to political pluralism. Among various advantages, society would gain clearer insights into government actions, and governmental authority would demonstrate increased responsiveness to people's demands. This heightened transparency could enhance citizen engagement in politics, diminishing

both disaffection and political demobilization. These positive changes would, in turn, contribute to overall democratic health (Reniu Vilamala 2014). Likewise, the introduction of power-sharing would significantly influence the political role of the military in suppressing dissidents, coercing the opposition, and interacting with key civil actors in society. The authority of the military institution would be evenly exercised, allowing for both objective and subjective oversight. The presence of opposition-affiliated officers within this crucial organization would diminish its partisan and biased utilization. This rationale could be extrapolated to other components of the state security and defense apparatus, as well as various paramilitary groups operating within Venezuela.

In connection with the fragmentation of the opposition, it is foreseeable that the power-sharing mechanism could incentivize different opposition groups to unite. The advantages in negotiating, deliberating, and making crucial decisions in the sociopolitical and economic realms could transform the opposition into a cohesive force capable of proposing an alternative governance system. Additionally, the concept of autocratic legalism, denoting the adept manipulation of electoral and constitutional mandates by the president and ruling party, supported by the judiciary to dissolve the separation of powers, should be considered. Regarding autocratic legalism, it is notable that between 2005 and 2015, the Supreme Court issued 45,474 judgments, none of which opposed the central government. For the Maduro regime, the effective strategy to perpetuate its power and enhance executive authority through judiciary manipulation has focused on dismantling the rule of law. Such a regime could, among other things, bypass an opposition-controlled legislature through an unconstitutional National Constituent Assembly, exercise absolute control over electoral authorities, ban political parties, and allow security agencies and the prosecution to repress, imprison, and prosecute social and political leaders when necessary (Penfold 2021). This would significantly mitigate the impact of corruption, especially political corruption, as the judiciary could be manipulated to shield specific members of the UPSVD. This, in turn, would have a significant impact on political clientelism. The appropriation of public resources to fulfill private, sectarian, or partisan interests could be curtailed through the implementation of the power-sharing mechanism. Its application would entail representation and influence for the opposition group in key judiciary institutions, potentially resolving the issue of double standards.

In the Venezuela case study, a crucial consociational element is the grand coalition, essential for reducing polarization and political extremism. This involves the executive inclusion of all potentially conflicting groups, going beyond the limited representation seen in many consociational models that include only a few representatives from major ethnic groups. The grand coalition is vital for eliminating the fear of political exclusion and ensuring the participation of all representative groups. Consequently, the implementation of a governance system promoting medium and long-term stability can only be assured through the grand coalition.

The Venezuelan case would suffer from an unstable balance of powers in presidential systems. The clash between the legislative power and the executive power would take place with more virulence because they are antagonistic forces that control each of them. The PSUV would control the Presidency, while the MUD would control the Assembly. The increase in political polarization encourages sectarian positions that weaken the institutional nature of the system. The latter, moreover, would contribute to generating a kind of resentment in which each side, be it the ruling party (PSUV) or the opposition (MUD), would become an active part of a dynamic of confrontation in which each of these blocks seeks to be recognized as superior (Fukuyama 2018). Similarly, it might alleviate dysfunction by transitioning from presidentialism with parliamentary nuances to embracing a decisively hegemonic form. This presidential system is characterized by the president's concentrated power, encompassing direct election, free appointment, dismissal of government members, possession of a legislative veto, and a lack of political accountability to the legislature. To address these issues, Venezuela should consider transitioning to a parliamentary presidential system. This system would establish dual political responsibilities for the cabinet and ministers, both accountable to the president and the legislative body. The power-sharing mechanism, in this context, signals optimism as it reflects agreement on diverse issues, from electoral perceptions to institutional design. Differences between blocs extend beyond ideology to include positions on regional integration models. In plural societies, granting autonomy over cultural affairs and satisfactory political representation encourages potential antagonistic groups to coexist in the long term. These incentives are crucial for consociation, offering an alternative to the oppression or assimilation of permanent political minorities (Brooks Kelly 2019: 348). Analyzing the impact of this mechanism becomes essential for consolidating both the democratization and state-building processes.

4. Democratization and Nation-Building in Venezuela: the impact of the Power-Sharing mechanism

Analyzing the processes of democratization and decentralization involves considering the elements outlined in the 1989 Organic Law of Decentralization, Delimitation, and Transfers of Public Power. Understanding the impact of decentralization and the influence of elite stagnation requires examining Article 137 of the 1961 Constitution, which allows two-thirds of Congress (current National Assembly) to assign certain national competencies to states and municipalities. As a decentralized federal state, Venezuela must enhance the formation and development of powers delegated to federated entities. The power-sharing mechanism could facilitate this task, bolstering the state's institutional and democratic resilience. Consequently, Venezuela

has the potential to embody a democratic and social state of law and justice, in alignment with Article 2 of the 1999 National Constitution (Peña Guerra 2017: 11).

In this context, the significance of “Comunas” (López Maya 2018) needs to be emphasized. Various self-governing organizations serve as platforms for developing, implementing, and overseeing public management, including initiatives related to security, defense, and various territorial, political, economic, social, cultural, and ecological aspects. States and municipalities could transfer resources, functions, administration, service control, and project execution to these Communes. They could serve as an ideal testing ground for the essential components of consociational democracy, such as the grand coalition, veto power, segmental autonomy, and proportional representation. Examining their effectiveness at the Commune level could provide insights into their potential extension to the broader institutional and administrative framework of the state.

In the present-day scenario in Venezuela, there appears to be a trend resembling a form of de-consociationalism driven by the proliferation of populist policies aimed at addressing external challenges. The impact of these external shocks is evident across various domains, including electoral, parliamentary, executive, and interest group/state relations (Helms et al. 2019). Consequently, it can be argued that the recent developments represent a shift from consociational democracy to centripetal democracy. The latter is marked by “a highly fragmented party system (...); a highly polarized party system with large ideological divides between the major parties on the left and right; (...) a segmented society; and (...) expressly competitive-conflictual elite behavior between political camps, thereby hindering compromise” (Vatter 2016: 62). Therefore, this type of democracy would promote partisan modes of political representation in the context of multifaceted electoral and direct democratic voting opportunities (Lacey 2017). What is taking place through an intersectorian game of alliances is the so-called “vote pooling”, which occurs “when political leaders seek support outside their own group to win elections and voters exchange votes across group boundaries” (Bogaards 2019: 520). Therefore, proportional representations are undermining consociational power-sharing and opening the door to the establishment of electoral and political dominance (Bogaards 2019: 525).

If Venezuela chooses to pursue the implementation of power-sharing, it’s crucial to note that it would be a semi-consociational system rather than a fully-fledged consociational one. In the current Venezuelan context, we would be dealing with a semi-consociational system that maintains requirements like proportionality and segmental autonomy but lacks a grand coalition and veto powers. The said system would be characterized by the “*concentration of*

executive powers in the presidential or prime ministerial office, the presence of a communal hegemon in the system with the ability to subordinate other groups, and finally communal control of the armed forces” (Aboultaif 2019: 109). To rectify such dysfunctions, the power-sharing mechanism emerges as a crucial solution. In this discourse, the case study of Venezuela becomes an optimal ground for testing the fundamental assumptions of consociationalism, especially regarding its democratic qualities. Critics have emphasized, on one hand, the nature of negotiations among elites from various sub-cultures, highlighting concerns about secrecy and summit diplomacy, which may deviate from participatory democracy. For instance, if compromises were publicly disclosed or leaked, it could exacerbate tensions and deepen divisions among rival segments. On the other hand, critics have questioned the anti-competitive nature of consociational politics and the lack of opposition in grand coalition governments. This argument is rooted in the belief that the role of the opposition becomes challenging within a power-sharing democracy due to the principle of inclusion (O’Leary 2013: 37).

A significant challenge is the opposing views on Venezuela’s foreign role. It is crucial to recognize Venezuela as part of the complex system in Latin America, facing common issues like contested sovereignty, identity disputes, and persistent governance challenges. These issues create a challenging cycle. Venezuela shares the same problems as others in the region, and continuing with an ineffective semi-consociational system is no longer viable. Time cannot be wasted in this regard.

The power-sharing mechanism could enhance democracy’s procedural aspects in Venezuela, focusing on the rule of law, electoral and inter-institutional accountability, competition, and participation. It also affects the results dimension, addressing the government’s responsiveness to citizens’ demands (Morlino 2020). While this could influence state-building positively, it remains challenging to claim that power-sharing alone can eradicate political clientelism, as it may still foster non-transparent client relationships within civil society segments. Similar challenges persist concerning the negative effects of the neo-patrimonial state.

The power-sharing mechanism might include elements that hinder the consolidation of the state’s institutional framework and democracy. It becomes challenging to establish the state as a credible institution if non-dominant social groups are excluded from the political decision-making process. The consolidation of the state entity is difficult when certain social segments lack participation in social responsibility. Power-sharing, as currently configured, may not incentivize them to compete for political positions, maintaining the infringement of certain individual rights (Bochsler and Juon 2021). Regardless, in the current context, we need to consider the implications of the power-

sharing mechanism for the very conception of sovereignty. The notion of shared sovereignty becomes noteworthy, viewing sovereignty not merely as a unitary right but as a collection of authority and functions that could be temporarily shared among the state, sub-state entities, and international institutions (Hooper and Williams 2003: 357). This concept offers an ideal way to alleviate tension and political violence, restoring order and preventing potential armed conflicts. Moreover, it allows the international community more time to assist the emerging state entity in establishing operational self-government institutions. The goal is to create a governance system that respects and protects human rights and minority rights. Moreover, it emphasizes the need for democratic institution development, restoration of the rule of law, and promotion of regional stability (Hooper and Williams 2003: 367). Nevertheless, it has been demonstrated that the viability and effectiveness of the power-sharing mechanism depend significantly on the consensus and commitment it cultivates among national elites, rather than being determined solely by external imposition (Keil and McCulloch 2021: 264). What remains to be ascertained is whether the effectiveness of this political mechanism will hinge on the consensus it can generate regarding necessary democratic reforms and the circulation of Venezuelan elites. Considering the existing political deadlock in Venezuela, a pessimistic scenario may arise regarding the adoption and implementation of certain public policies requiring consensus and commitment from different elites.

The principles of representation and participation, integral to representative democracy, can be scrutinized through the implementation of power-sharing mechanisms. It's important to note that in Venezuela, neither a genuine decentralization process nor the realization of true federalism has occurred. Concerning decentralization, the "Organic Law of People's Power" restricts states and municipalities from transferring powers to freely organized communities. In terms of federalism, there has never been autonomy for states or provinces. Instead, a process of administrative centralization under the government or executive power has unfolded, resulting in a hybrid system termed a centralized federation (Peña Guerra 2017: 17). Consequently, in the Venezuelan context, a political party is seen undermining democracy by eroding its representativeness, leading to chaos and de facto dominance by prominent economic groups, awaiting the intervention of a dictator and presenting a form of partisan autocracy (Touraine 1995: 6).

This partisan autocracy becomes apparent when considering that the Chavista ideology is at odds with representative democracy. While democracy is typically justified procedurally, aiming for equality among the masses, Chavismo might discard it if representative democracy doesn't achieve this goal through its channels. This prompts a debate between populism and

democracy. If the Chavista agenda cannot be realized through representative democracy and instead opts for a unique form of direct democracy, it risks turning into a dictatorship of the majority. This majority mandate could compromise minority rights, leading to instability and inter-governance issues, given that the Chavista regime has co-opted the state's primary institutions. The power-sharing mechanism offers a solution by proposing formal institutions that represent all people without exclusion. This approach could mitigate the impact of populism by fostering participatory democracy, political pluralism, and respecting citizens' political freedoms.

This analysis makes noteworthy contributions to the theory of power-sharing in several ways. It delves into the advantages of such a mechanism in mitigating the politicization of specific social groups in profoundly divided societies. Additionally, it enriches the ongoing academic discourse on the viability of power-sharing provisions in contexts marked by high political instability, extending beyond post-conflict scenarios. Furthermore, the analysis underscores the potential of consociational democracy and its political power-sharing mechanism as valuable tools for conflict management and resolution in comparative terms.

5. Final considerations

Democracy entails considering the interests of all, not just those of a majority or a hegemonic group. Neglecting history increases the risk of repeating mistakes. The Venezuelan case serves as a compelling study to further explore the reflective effort required for establishing a vertical power-sharing arrangement conducive to lasting peace. As previously highlighted, the sociopolitical marginalization of a significant portion of Venezuelan society underlies domestic conflicts. Political populism and partitocracy exacerbate these issues by polarizing Venezuelan society along party lines, fostering radicalization, extremism, and political gridlock. Consociationalism, as demonstrated, holds potential for managing violent conflicts by promoting cooperation among elites at the intercommunity level. However, despite the potential exhibited by the power-sharing mechanism, it may not effectively contribute to conflict transformation by fostering a common shared identity.

The recovery and improvement of democracy in Venezuela are achievable through the power-sharing mechanism, though it represents a challenging yet feasible endeavor. The journey toward Venezuela's re-democratization inevitably requires ending the resentment among opposition groups, stemming from their continued exclusion from the political decision-making process. Democratization mandates a protracted negotiation process, leading to free

and fair presidential elections and the reconstruction of democratic institutions. This transformation must be rooted in a coexistence agreement among all political actors, including Venezuelan civil society. To achieve this goal, the current regime must cease coopting and manipulating democratic institutions, prioritizing national interests over individual agendas. Governing a fraction of the population and territory through institutional duplicity only deepens citizen confusion, apathy, and political demobilization, eroding trust in the political class amid constant power struggles for dominance and influence.

Venezuelan politics must pivot towards honest dialogue and commitment. Failing to give a voice to those with different perspectives and expectations for their homeland perpetuates a political deadlock, increasingly resembling a civil and political confrontation that could escalate into the worst-case scenario, a civil war. Consequently, before this dire outcome becomes inevitable, elites on both sides have a final opportunity to avert catastrophe and secure lasting peace. Implementing consociational democracy through power-sharing emerges as a strategic option, offering a chance for the deeply divided and conflicted Venezuelan society to gradually reclaim its democratic essence. The elites must contemplate the advantages of this political mechanism, emphasizing trust and compromise as pivotal elements to instill a renewed sense of hope for a shared, improved future before it is too late.

References:

- Aboultaif, E. W., "Revisiting the semi-consociational model: Democratic failure in prewar Lebanon and post-invasion Iraq", *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 41, n.1, 2019, pp. 108-123.
- Andeweg, R. B., "Consociational Democracy", *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol.3, n.1, 2000, pp. 509- 536.
- Berg, R. C., "Parsing fact and fiction in the Maduro Regime's Narrative of Economic Recovery", *Center for Strategic International Studies*. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/parsing-fact-and-fiction-maduro-regimes-narrative-economic-recovery>
- Bermeo, N., "On Democratic Backsliding", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.27, n.1, 2016, pp. 5-19.
- Bogaards, M., "Consociationalism and Centripetalism: Friends or Foes?". *Swiss Political Science Review*, Vol. 25, n.4, 2019, pp. 519-537.
- Bochsler, D. and Juon, A., "Power Sharing and the Quality of democracy". *European Political Science Review*, Vol. 13, n.4, 2021, pp. 411-430.
- Brooks Kelly, B., *Power-Sharing and Consociational Theory*, Palgrave MacMillan, Swarthmore, 2019.
- Congressional Research Service, Venezuela: Political Crisis and U.S. Policy, *Congressional Research Service*, 2022.
- Coppedge, M., *Strong Parties and Lame Ducks Presidential Partyarchy and Factionalism in Venezuela*, Stanford University Press, Standford, 1994.
- Corrales, J., "Democratic backsliding through electoral irregularities: The case of Venezuela". *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, n. 109, 2020, pp. 41-65.
- Chávez Frías, H., *Agenda Alternativa Bolivariana*, Ministerio del poder popular para la comunicación y la información, Caracas, 2014.
- Dastis, A., Venezuela: la democracia burlada. *El Mundo*, 2017. Available at: <https://www.elmundo.es/opinion/2017/08/04/59834eb7468aebaf7b8b468c.html>
- Ellner, S., "Revolutionary and Non-Revolutionary Paths of Radical Populism: Directions of the "Chavista" Movement in Venezuela", *Science & Society*, Vol. 69, n.2, 2005, pp. 160-190.
- Ellner, S., *Latin America's Pink Tide. Breakthroughs and Shortcomings*, Rowman & Littlefield, Maryland, 2019.
- Fukuyama, F., *Identity. The Demand for Dignity and The Politics of Resentment*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2018.
- Hawkins, K., "Populism in Venezuela: the rise of Chavismo", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 24, n.6, 2003, pp. 1137-1160.

- Helms, L., Jenny, M. and Willumsen, D. M., “Alpine Troubles: Trajectories of De-Consociationalism in Austria and Switzerland Compared”, *Swiss Political Science Review*, Vol. 25, n.4, 2019, pp. 381-407.
- Hirst, M., Lujan, C., Romero, C. and Tokatlian, J. G., *Venezuela: Paz y Seguridad. Hacia una solución política y pacífica*. Nueva Sociedad, NUSO (May). Available at: <https://nuso.org/articulo/venezuela-paz-y-seguridad/>
- Hooper, J. R. and Williams, P. R., “Earned Sovereignty: The Political Dimension”. *Denver Journal of International Law and Policy*, Vol. 31, n°3, 2003, pp. 355-372.
- Jiménez, M., “Contesting Autocracy: Repression and Opposition Coordination in Venezuela”, *Political Studies*, Vol. 7, n.1, 2021, pp. 47-68.
- Keil, S. and McCulloch, A., *Power-Sharing in Europe, Federalism and Internal conflict. Past Practice, Present Cases and Future Directions*, Palgrave McMillan, Switzerland, 2021.
- Kneuer, M., “Exporting the Chavista Model: The Venezuelan Case for Autocracy Promotion in the Region”, *Bulletin of Latin American*, Vol. 41, n.1, 2022, pp. 123-140.
- Lacey, J., *Centripetal democracy: democratic legitimacy and political identity in Belgium, Switzerland, and the European Union*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017.
- Levine, D. H., “The Decline and Fall of Democracy in Venezuela: Ten Theses”, *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, Vol. 21, n.2, 2002, pp. 248-269.
- Lijphart, A., *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1977.
- Lijphart, A., *Patterns of Democracy: Government forms and performance in thirty-six countries*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1999.
- López Aranguren, E. (2021). *El Populismo y la ideología populista*. Madrid: Editorial Popular.
- López Maya, M., *Socialismo y comunas en Venezuela*. Nueva Sociedad, NUSO 274 (March – April 2018). Available at: <https://nuso.org/articulo/socialismo-y-comunas-en-venezuela/>
- Lührmann, A. and Lindberg, S. I., “A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it?”, *Democratization*, Vol. 26, n.7, 2019, pp. 1095-1113.
- Mbembé, A. and Meintjes, L., “Necropolitics”, *Public Culture*, Vol. 15, n.1, 2003, pp. 11-40.
- Mbembé, A., *Necropolitics*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2019.
- McCulloch, A. and McEvoy, J., “The international mediation of power-sharing settlements”, *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 53, n.4, 2018, pp. 467- 485.
- McGarry, J. and O’Leary, B., *The Northern Ireland conflict: Consociational engagements*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004.

- McGarry, J. and O’Leary, B., “Iraq’s Constitution of 2005: Liberal consociation as political prescription”, *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, Vol. 5, n°4, 2007, pp. 670–698.
- Miltimore, J., “*Venezuelan Industries Hugo Chavez Nationalized (Besides Oil)*”, Foundation for Economic Education (FEE), Atlanta, GA, 2020. Available at: <https://fee.org/articles/8-industries-hugo-chavez-nationalized-besides-oil-on-venezuelas-road-to-serfdom/>
- Morlino, L., *Equality, Freedom, and Democracy. Europe after the Great Recession*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2020.
- Nordlinger, E. A., “*Conflict regulation in divided societies*”, *Center for International Affairs* 29, Harvard University, Cambridge, 1972.
- Norris, P., *Driving Democracy. Do Power-Sharing Institutions work?*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008..
- O’Leary, B., “Debating consociational politics: Normative and explanatory arguments”, in *From power-sharing to democracy: Post-conflict institutions in ethnically divided societies* (ed. N. Sid), McGill-Queens University Press, 2005.
- O’Leary, B., “Power sharing in deeply divided places: An advocate’s introduction”, in *Power Sharing in deeply divided places* (ed. J. McEvoy, and B. O’Leary), University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013.
- Penfold, M. A., *La Democratización de Venezuela: Nuevos Senderos para el Cambio Político*, Wilson Center, Latin American Program, 2021. Available at : https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/La%20Democratizacion%20de%20Venezuela_Nuevos%20Senderos%20para%20el%20Cambio%20Politico_Julio%202022_0.pdf
- Peña Guerra, M., “Democracia representativa y participación ciudadana en Venezuela (1958-2015)”, *TELOS, Revista de Estudios Interdisciplinarios en Ciencias Sociales*, Vol. 19, n.1, 2017, pp. 3-26.
- Pozzebon, S., “What the West gets wrong about Venezuela: it doesn’t need ideology; it needs urgent care”, *The New Statesman*, 2020. Available at: <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2019/02/what-west-gets-wrong-about-venezuela-it-doesn-t-need-ideology-it-needs-urgent-care>
- Reniu Vilamala, J. M., *El desafío del poder compartido en escenarios de gobierno dividido*, Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2014. Available at: <https://archivos.juridicas.unam.mx/www/bjv/libros/8/3677/10.pdf>
- Rodríguez-Franco, X., La consumación del último vestigio democrático en Venezuela. *Latinoamérica*, n°21, 2020. Available at: <https://latinoamerica21.com/es/la-consumacion-del-ultimo-vestigio-democratico-en-venezuela/>

- Rodríguez, I. L., Caroso, A., Bracamonte, L. and Vargas, I., *Chavismo: genealogía de una pasión política*, CLACSO, Buenos Aires, 2018.
- Sanoja, P., “Ideology, Institutions and Ideas: Explaining Political Change in Venezuela”. *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, Vol. 28, n°3, 2009, pp. 394-410.
- Sisk, T. D., *Power Sharing and International Mediation in Ethnic Conflicts*. Washington: United States Institute of Peace -USIP Press, 1996. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/publications/1996/09/power-sharing-and-international-mediation-ethnic-conflicts>
- Tirado Sánchez, A., *Venezuela: más allá de mentiras y mitos*, Ediciones Akal, Madrid, 2019.
- Touraine, A., *¿Qué es la Democracia?*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, México D.F, 1995.
- Tsebelis, G., “Elite interaction and constitution building in consociational democracies”, *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, Vol. 2, n°1, 1990, pp. 5-29.
- Trak Vásquez, J. M., “¿Apertura Truncada? El Fallido Intento De Reinstitutionalización Democrática en Venezuela 2021”, *Revista de Ciencia Política*, Vol. 42, n°2, 2022, pp. 461-488.
- Trak Vásquez, J. M., “¿Cómo ayudar a la democracia en Venezuela?”, *Política Exterior*, 2020. Available at: <https://www.politicaexterior.com/ayudar-la-democracia-venezuela/>
- UNHCR, UNHCR Venezuela Situation Fact Sheet, June 2022. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/venezuela-bolivarian-republic/unhcr-venezuela-situation-fact-sheet-june-2022>
- Vatter, A., “Switzerland on the Road from a Consociational Democracy to a Centrifugal Democracy?”, *Swiss Political Science Review*, Vol. 22, n°1, 2016, pp. 59-74.