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**Wrong Choices, Missed Chances:
The Motivations of Opposition Politicians and the Ensuing
Failures at Regime Change in Venezuela, 2013-2022.**

A thesis presented

by

Daniel Santos Ramírez

to

The Political Science Department

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for Honors in Political Science

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Acknowledgments

I dedicate this thesis to Venezuela, the place of my birth & the resting place for my hopes and dreams. May this work serve as a demonstration of my unmistakable belief in its bright, democratic future. And let it serve as proof of my unshaken commitment to help turn that future into a reality over the course of my lifetime. The challenge ahead is great, but the character of our brave People is even greater.

¡Que Viva Venezuela!

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

1. Abstract

The following thesis will argue that regime change and democratization have not taken place in Venezuela since Nicolás Maduro became president in 2013 because of the incentives that opposition actors have to be in politics and the poor decision-making that those incentives produced. This work shows that while there have been clear moments of opportunity for regime change to take place, that those moments have been wasted by sub-optimum strategic and coordination choices by opposition actors and that these choices were informed by the motivations of actors themselves.

My argument is based around the critical juncture framework. According to it, there are a series of key elements that go into producing an opportunity for path divergence (i.e., regime change) within a political space or a broader social arena. The first one is permissive conditions, or those factors which loosen structural constraints for change and enhance the agency of actors. The second is productive conditions, or those factors which materialize path divergence once a window of opportunity has been opened by permissive conditions. The third is the critical antecedent, or an exogenous factor which is independent from permissive conditions and has a causal effect over productive conditions.

For this study, permissive conditions will take the form of structural factors that uphold the political status quo in Venezuela – that is, the incumbent rule of the Maduro regime (e.g., oil wealth). Productive conditions will take the form of the strategic and coordination choices that opposition actors take during windows of opportunity for regime change (e.g., a high degree of formal coordination). Finally, the critical antecedent will take the form of the motivations of opposition actors to be in politics.

The study focused on the presidency of Nicolás Maduro (who has been in power since 2013) as well as on the mainstream parties who make up the core of the opposition – commonly known as the “G4”. To show the relation between opposition actors’ motivations and the non-occurrence of regime change in Venezuela, I first conducted a review of grey literature to show that there have been moments of opportunity for regime change. Once these moments were identified, the study relied on further grey literature review to determine the strategic preferences and coordination levels among opposition parties during those potential critical junctures. Finally, the study made use of interviews with members of opposition parties to determine the motivations of opposition politicians and the ways in which they influenced their decision-making.

I have found that there were at least three moments with sufficiently permissive conditions to allow for a critical juncture to take place: the opposition victory in the 2015 parliamentary elections and subsequent takeover of the National Assembly in 2016, the nationwide street protests of 2017, and the Interim Government of Juan Guaidó in 2019. I have also found that in each of these windows of opportunity, the decision-making of core opposition parties was sub-optimum due to insufficient levels of coordination among parties, ineffective strategies, or a combination of the two. Such sub-optimum performance had a negative effect on the capacity of the opposition to achieve regime change during these potential critical junctures. Finally, I found that the motivations of opposition actors held significant influence over their coordination and strategic preferences – speaking to the effects of incentives upon the occurrence of regime change.

From a theoretical perspective, this work is relevant because it offers a bridge between the structural and agency-related causal factors often considered when discussing regime change. By applying the critical juncture framework to the issue of regime change, this study shows the interaction between agency and structure to shape the occurrence of these unique political

events: structural factors provide the ripe conditions and a window of opportunity, while agency serves as the catalyzer for the materialization of regime change. Furthermore, this study proposes a new variable that shapes the agency of opposition actors in authoritarian contexts: the motivations of opposition politicians. From a practical perspective, this study is relevant because it provides insight into the Venezuelan case – one of the most prominent examples of democratic backsliding and authoritarian consolidation in the world. By pointing to the rare nature of opportunities for regime change and the potential issues in the decision-making of opposition actors, this work also seeks to contribute to the hard-fought efforts to democratize Venezuela.

2. Literature review

Focus of the literature review

The literature review will focus on the main hypotheses explaining the durability of Venezuela's authoritarian regime, headed by Nicolás Maduro, and the possibility of regime change between 2013 and 2022. The essay will first consider two major schools of thought in the literature regarding regime durability and regime change in Venezuela: structure-focused arguments and actor-focused arguments. The latter school of thought can be further divided into incumbent and opposition-related arguments (including strategies and forms of coordination employed by each). This will be followed by a critical review of both schools of thought, paying particular attention to potential gaps in the literature in their explanation of regime change dynamics in Venezuela. Finally, I discuss how my thesis expands the literature by suggesting a new explanatory variable to the durability of the Maduro regime, in the form of motivations to participate in politics for opposition actors.

Structure-focused arguments

It is logical to think that the durability of an authoritarian regime and the possibilities for said regime to change are connected to State capabilities available to incumbents: they concentrate most of the decision-making power and are limited by no checks and balances. This is reinforced by the broad swath of resources that incumbents often have at their disposal vis-à-vis dissidents and opposition groups.

In Venezuela, the most important resource for incumbents is control of the oil industry and its rent. Benjamin Smith discusses the effects of said control and argues that oil wealth has a positive correlation with the durability of incumbent regimes. Smith claims that leaders in oil-rich authoritarian regimes invest wealth accumulated during oil booms to develop institutions and organizations that allow them to survive economic hardships and the ensuing social unrest during oil busts (Smith, 2004).

Wright, Frantz and Geddes seek to expand this argument by offering causal mechanisms that explain the strengthening of regime survival in oil-rich countries: they show how autocrats use oil wealth to increase military spending and ensure the loyalty of the armed forces – diffusing potential coups that could lead to either a transition to democracy or a new authoritarian regime (Wright et al., 2015).

In addition to domestic sources, incumbents also have foreign resources at their disposal. Incumbents in Venezuela have particularly benefitted from and made use of their international alliances around the world. Rendón and Fernández claim that the Maduro regime has survived largely thanks to the support of its five key international allies: China, Russia, Cuba, Iran, and Turkey. They describe how these countries have provided incumbents in Venezuela with different degrees of economic, diplomatic and intelligence support – collectively

counterbalancing the influence of U.S. interests in the country and the region (Rendon & Fernandez, 2020).

Popular support is also key for the survival of incumbents: political regimes that reach or maintain power through force alone rarely last for long periods of time (i.e., decades). This is because the absence of popular legitimacy becomes a source of instability in the long run. Some authoritarian regimes deal with this by sustaining a “managed democracy”, in which elections take place in the country but succession and the electoral process is tightly controlled by the regime to predetermine outcomes. The legitimacy of a regime, of which incumbent popularity may be an indicator, is relevant for incumbent regimes who are faced with difficult policy decisions. Measures to deal with economic hardship, for example, are hard to sell to the public if they see incumbents as undesirable – or worse: illegitimate (Gaidar & Bouis, 2007).

Another way in which authoritarian regime sensitivity to popular support is seen in their attempt to control information flows that the public has access to. This takes the form of a steady stream of government propaganda and the stifling of critics and independent journalism, which reveals that authoritarian regimes try to maintain public support for incumbents (Geddes & Zaller, 1989). Such measures reveal that authoritarian regimes, even if not reliant on public support to remain in power, are still keen to maintain it.

While structural factors that favor incumbents in Venezuela can be seen as a sort of constant, structural factors that favor the opposition have largely varied over time throughout the Maduro presidency. Particularly, one could argue that these factors progressively accumulated in favor of the opposition since the contested election of Maduro in 2013 and peaked during the establishment of the Interim Government of Juan Guaidó in 2019. Inefficient policymaking and economic struggles turned public opinion against the Maduro regime, which fueled public support for the opposition. This could be seen in both institutional and non-institutional

settings, such as the high opposition vote in the 2013 presidential election and the nationwide protests of 2014 and 2017. The opposition also developed its organizational strength through the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD, in Spanish). In 2015 they capitalized upon these electoral and organizational strengths by winning the parliamentary elections and taking control of the legislative branch (Victoria, 2014). This is what essentially constituted the resource availability of the opposition between 2016 and 2019: majoritarian public support and significant institutional access.

Stoetman and Zeverijn talk about the final stage and highest level of resource availability for the opposition: following the fraudulent presidential election of 2018, the United States recognized Juan Guaidó as interim president, implemented economic sanctions and even threatened with military intervention to overthrow the Maduro regime, strengthening the hand of the opposition domestically (Stoetman & Zeverijn, 2020). Economic sanctions have become one of the most widespread forms of international pressure against authoritarian regimes in modern times. For example, 85% of the sanctions unilaterally imposed by the United States by 2001 were aimed at non-democratic countries (Escribà-Folch & Wright, 2010). However, there is little consensus about the effectiveness of economic sanctions aimed at weakening authoritarian regimes and promoting democratization. Escribà-Folch and Wright try to bridge the field by arguing that the effectiveness of economic sanctions depends on the structure of the authoritarian regime, with personalist dictatorships tending to be more susceptible to sanctions while one-party rulers and military regimes tend to be more immune (Escribà-Folch & Wright, 2010).

To better understand the effects that economic sanctions may have on regime survival, it is also relevant to consider how authoritarian regimes respond to the imposition of economic sanctions against them. Authoritarian regimes whose treasury is not severely affected by sanctions, for example, may increase spending towards those sectors of the dominant coalition most

necessary to stay in power (e.g., the military). Alternatively, regimes heavily affected by sanctions due to cuts in trade and foreign aid may resort to increased repression to prevent any uprisings (Escribà-Folch, 2009). Dynamics such as these may either hinder or accelerate the emergence of potential critical junctures where regime change could take place.

In terms of the potential effectiveness of international sanctions, the Venezuelan case could be seen as a hybrid between the personalistic regimes where they are effective and the single party/militaristic regimes where they are not. On one hand, the treasury was heavily affected by sanctions (particularly those placed upon the oil industry), which affected the patronage networks that the Maduro regime has been heavily reliant upon. In response, they resorted to deepening repression tactics as a response – all features associated with more personalistic regimes (Jiménez, 2022). On the other hand, the internal structure of the dominant coalition was reformed following the death of Hugo Chávez in 2013. This new setup was no longer led by a single hegemon but factions who made strategic decisions through consensus-building, with both the party and the military becoming more prominent (Corrales & Penfold, 2015).

Actor-focused arguments.

Over the near ten years since Nicolás Maduro became president, Chavismo has changed their political strategies numerous times to remain in power. Between the contested election of Maduro in 2013 and the 2015 parliamentary elections, they continued to engage in a hybrid strategy maintained since the presidency of Hugo Chávez and often seen in competitive authoritarian regimes – with policymaking aimed at maintaining their social base and submitting themselves to certain institutional boundaries, while also curtailing certain political and civic freedoms (Corrales & Penfold, 2015a).

In 2015 Chavismo suffered a loss of popular support that resulted in defeat at the parliamentary elections that year. According to Jiménez, Chavismo responded by “limiting the opposition’s capacity to...shape political outcomes” (Jiménez, 2021). They have done this by preventing competitive elections; banning or hijacking opposition parties; imprisoning, or exiling opposition figures; persecuting civil society; effectively dissolving the opposition-controlled National Assembly; and employing methods of social control over vulnerable communities and those dependent on state-run programs (Rosales & Jiménez, 2021). But this strategy brought about significant international backlash, namely economic sanctions, and the recognition of the interim government of Juan Guaidó by Western countries.

Chavismo has sustained this recent international pressure partly by pursuing economic reform. Such approach has been studied before: Corrales argued that the Castro regime in Cuba survived through the 1990s by turning the State into a “gatekeeper” that continued to dominate society and prevent a democratic transition by placing itself as the key decider of who could access liberalized industries, increasing its power by rewarding loyalists with access and punishing dissidents with ostracism (Corrales, 2004). Rosales and Jiménez demonstrated that Chavismo engages in a similar strategy, where they pursue an uneven economic liberalization with “pockets of unregulated markets” through which new economic elites have emerged and consolidated – rewarding loyalist groups (Rosales & Jiménez, 2021).

Assessing Chavismo internally is difficult due to opaque information flows under authoritarian regimes. But the literature suggests that Maduro maintained unity by establishing a process of consensus-building among factions. According to Corrales and Penfold, Maduro compensated for his lack of personal charisma vis-à-vis Chávez and significantly lower economic resources by forming a “collective government” in which factions negotiated to reach agreements. This setup initially took the form of a troika made up of Diosdado Cabello (then-president of the National Assembly) and the military & business interests; Rafael Ramírez (then-Energy

Minister) and the technocratic, oil industry interests; and Maduro representing political and party interests (Corrales & Penfold, 2015a).

While this political arrangement worked to overcome the succession crisis following the death of Chávez, by the end of 2014 Maduro decided to break the troika and displace the technocratic faction led by Ramírez. The military emerged as a new faction in its own right and the United Socialist Party has become the epicenter of decision-making (Corrales & Penfold, 2015b). This is relevant, for Wright and Escribà-Folch have found that strong authoritarian parties make transitions to democracy more likely because they are effective at distributing power internally and protecting incumbent elite interests during a democratic transition (Wright & Escribà-Folch, 2012).

Incumbent coordination had an unprecedented challenge in the Interim Government of Juan Guaidó. This became evident during the failed military rebellion of April 30th, 2019 - with the alleged involvement of the Chief Justice; defense minister; the directors of all major national intelligence agencies; and 300 military officers. The rebellion called for the Supreme Court to disavow Maduro and delegate power to a Junta led by Guaidó. But the plan failed due to information leaks that forced conspirators to move the rebellion ahead without securing all the internal support needed. This rebellion showed an unprecedented degree of internal division within the regime (Caracas Consulting, 2019). Still, the current internal setup of the Maduro government has sufficiently withstood the pressure and survived the challenging years of the interim government.

Opposition strategies and coordination, on the other hand, have varied significantly over time. Engaged in radical, extra-institutional means in the early years of Chavismo, by 2013 the opposition had embarked in a strategy of peaceful, electoral, and institutional instruments to confront the regime. This, Barry Cannon argues, is because political actors became

predominant and displaced the less institutionally oriented social actors that initially dominated the opposition. The opposition focused on developing unified candidacies at all levels and a common policy platform, which paid off in the form of a continuously improving electoral performance between 2008 and 2015 (Cannon, 2014).

After 2015 the opposition lost its strategic focus. Different political actors were divided on the paths for political action and the expediency of regime change they were seeking. Resulting in uncoordinated political actions between 2016 and 2019. Some were institutional, like the failed attempt to trigger a recall referendum in 2016. Others were extra-institutional, like the nationwide protests of 2017. Some were reformist, like the 2018 negotiation rounds in the Dominican Republic. Others were revolutionary, like the armed insurgencies and assassination attempt against Maduro in 2018. Low formal coordination has been attributed to both a significant increase in repression by the regime and to the dilution of the MUD as a space for coordination (Jiménez, 2022). This dispersion has been observed as a reason for the incapacity of the opposition to achieve regime change.

Finally, between 2019 and 2021 the opposition once again shifted its strategic course by implementing a novel strategy around the setup of the Interim Government led by Juan Guaidó and the challenge to the constitutional legitimacy of Nicolás Maduro to force a break of the dominant coalition. This strategic shift was not the result of a return to coordination between domestic political actors, but to the fact that this strategy promoted by some domestic actors had the support of the U.S.-led international community (Rosales & Jiménez, 2021).

In an authoritarian context, opposition coordination has a significant influence on their capacity to achieve regime change. Javier Corrales compared the transition to democracy that took place in Venezuela in the 1950s with the overthrow of the Batista regime in Cuba and analyzed why similar regime change dynamics led to very different democratization outcomes. Corrales

claimed that the key explanatory variable for this difference was the presence of strong, well-organized, competitive political parties in Venezuela that enhanced the capacity of civil society to undermine the regime while convincing incumbent political elites that a political liberalization could be achieved rationally (Corrales, 2001). Jiménez has also made contributions on this issue. She developed a framework to argue that opposition actors display greater coordination when confronted with moderate levels of repression - as opposed to low repression where there are little incentives to coordinate or high repression where risk drives opposition actors away from coordinating or into informal, clandestine coordination (Jiménez, 2021).

Jiménez then reviewed the varying degrees of opposition coordination throughout the Maduro regime: from 2013 to 2015, the opposition demonstrated a degree of coordination achieved through the setup of the MUD in 2009. But incentives to coordinate changed after 2015, namely due to a rise in repression that increased costs and raised barriers to formal coordination, combined with a strengthened perception after the parliamentary election results that the Maduro regime was vulnerable – which made it acceptable for opposition actors to move away from formal coordination. Instead, opposition actors decided to coordinate through the institutional spaces National Assembly, but these spaces were more informal and allowed individual interests of opposition actors to supersede collective interests (Jiménez, 2022). This work seeks to expand upon previous studies on coordination choices such as these by providing an explanation on why opposition actors made these choices in the first place – with the key factor shaping their choices being the motivations of opposition actors themselves.

3. Methodology

General aspects

The focus of this study on the effect of incentives on opposition performance, and incidentally regime change, will be a single case: Venezuela from 2013 to 2022, under the rule of Nicolás Maduro. The study will focus on the Venezuelan opposition and particularly the “G4” parties at the core of the mainstream opposition: *Primero Justicia* (PJ), *Voluntad Popular* (VP), *Acción Democrática* (AD), and *Un Nuevo Tiempo* (UNT).

The study will first determine if there were moments when a critical juncture was possible during this period to assess whether the decision-making of actors is relevant to understanding regime change or the lack thereof as a political outcome. Once these moments of loose constraints on agency have been found, the study will then explore the connection between the incentives of opposition members to be in politics and the performance of opposition parties, as measured by their capacity to achieve regime change.

As such, this methodology section will contain a section on how to assess critical junctures, followed by sections on the conceptualization and measurement of independent, intervening, and dependent variables. Finally, the section will conclude with a discussion on why focus on opposition actors in general and the Venezuelan case in particular, possible limitations to the study and its potential for external validity.

Choice of focus, limitations, and external validity

It would be reasonable for the reader to question the focus of the study on opposition actors or the Venezuelan case. The former reflects the desire to frame this study within the literature of democratization. As such, the author was interested in analyzing critical junctures from the

perspective of actors who have a transition to democracy as their desired outcome. Given this general interest, the Venezuelan question gains relevance as it represents one of the worst cases of democratic backsliding in the 21st century. Today, Venezuela stands as the most authoritarian country in the entire Western Hemisphere and one of the four remaining authoritarian regimes in Latin America alongside Cuba, Nicaragua, and Haiti (EIU Democracy Index, 2021). This is even more significant when put into historical context: up until the 1990s, Venezuela had been one of the oldest and strongest democracies in all Latin America. It is in the interest of both democratization scholars and pro-democracy activists to understand not only how Venezuela got itself into this situation, but also how to overcome it.

Both academic and non-academic conversations have placed great weight on the unlevelled playing field that favors the Maduro regime. But, in spite of such imbalances, the critical juncture framework has proven useful in demonstrating that there have been significant chances to achieve regime change in Venezuela. By proving that there were occasions with sufficient permissive conditions to allow a critical juncture, the absence of path divergence shows that there have been missed opportunities to grasp a transition to democracy because of insufficient productive conditions – that is, the right level of coordination and the right strategy on the side of the Venezuelan opposition.

One significant limitation in this study is the fact that the scope may be too narrow: by only focusing on the G4 parties or the period between 2013-2022, the analysis may be missing important dynamics at other times or within other political organizations that would help to better understand the relation between the incentives and performance of opposition actors. Another issue may be that since that regime change has not been observed in Venezuela, there is no way to empirically demonstrate that the combination of permissive and productive conditions described previously would have led to path divergence – limiting the study to discussing why this has not taken place up until now. Finally, by focusing on a single case, the

study may propose a theoretical relationship and show sufficient connections but not prove a causal relation.

The scope limitation is open to interpretation: it is arguable that the worst period of democratic deterioration in Venezuela came under the presidency of Nicolás Maduro – so it would be relevant to study his tenure as the main unit of analysis. And while there are many opposition parties outside of the G4, these parties have usually been the main protagonists of major political developments in the country over the last decade (e.g., elections, street protests, the interim government). The limitation claims around the non-occurrence of regime change and the single case nature of the study are much more legitimate and invite to a potential future extension of the literature beyond the scope of this study: the theoretical framework presented in this work could be used to analyze other case studies and further test its validity in a case where regime change did take place.

Finally, concerning the issue of external validity, one potential contribution would be expanding the applications of critical junctures. By showing that the Venezuelan case could be studied with this framework, the study demonstrates how path dependence theory can be used to better understand regime change and political dynamics under authoritarian regimes elsewhere. Using critical juncture theory, I show that the Venezuelan case represents a typical example of authoritarian survival – for even when permissive conditions have been presented to allow for a critical juncture, they have not been met with sufficient productive conditions to catalyze said juncture and produce a path change. The study also offers a deeper understanding of strategic and coordination choices as variables that are jointly necessary to have a high-performing opposition that could achieve regime change. Finally, the study offers a theoretical contribution to the literature in the form of incentives as an explanatory variable for variation in said coordination and strategic choices .

Assessing critical junctures.

Not all conditions during a critical juncture are the same. Permissive conditions allow for a historical juncture to be critical and offer bounds to its start and end. They change the underlying conditions and increase the influence of agency. Yet, they are at most a necessary but insufficient condition for critical junctures to occur - they simply offer a window of opportunity where divergence may occur (Soifer, 2012, pp. 1572–1574).

Productive conditions shape the outcomes that emerge after permissive conditions have disappeared and the critical juncture ends. Most of the time, productive conditions are “locked in” by structural elements. But when permissive conditions score high values, the constraints on productive conditions are loosened and become capable of shaping divergence in outcomes. When alone, productive conditions are also necessary but insufficient (Soifer, 2012, pp. 1574–1576)

Finally, an important additional element of critical junctures besides permissive and productive conditions is the critical antecedent. This is a condition that has a causal effect on the divergence of outcomes by existing autonomously before the critical juncture brought about by permissive conditions and by influencing productive conditions and thus the in-juncture divergence (Slater & Simmons, 2010).

One way in which these three elements can be better understood is through an illustrative example: ascertaining the capacity of a State to wage war with another country. In this case, permissive conditions would be represented by the State’s material capabilities to wage war (e.g., size of the army, military equipment, war economy dynamics, etc.). While permissive conditions have a low value most of the time, the window of opportunity for a critical juncture (i.e., the outbreak of war) would be created by an increased material and operational capability

to wage war. Given that the country *can* wage war, it is important to also assess whether the country *will* wage war – and here is where productive conditions become relevant: this would be a set of events that create the build-up to war, namely the interactions between the subject state and the hostile nation (e.g., signaling, diplomatic efforts, threats, troop deployments, etc.).

Finally, the critical antecedent would have to be a variable that is independent from permissive conditions and holds a causal effect over productive conditions. In this case, one could select the executive authority of the Head of State to make unilateral decisions: given that the options available to the Head of State are defined by the Constitution and not by the material capabilities of the country, this could be seen as independent from permissive conditions. And because the Head of State is the main decision-maker in the policy-making process, this could be seen as having a causal effect over the productive conditions (i.e., inter-state interactions).

Applying this framework to the case in point, structural factors will be considered as permissive conditions, strategic and coordination choices by opposition parties as productive conditions, and the incentives of its members as the critical antecedent. The first step in determining whether critical junctures have taken place in the past is to assess if there have been sufficient permissive conditions. Given that this study is focused on the perspective of the opposition, permissive conditions are those that loosen constraints on the capacity of opposition parties to achieve regime change (i.e., a path divergence in the political space).

Assessing permissive conditions: structural factors that sustain a potential critical juncture.

Four permissive conditions have been selected for analysis: oil wealth, the popularity of Maduro, foreign economic sanctions and public demonstrations of dissent within the dominant coalition. The justification for choosing these conditions and the analysis itself will be further described in Chapter 3. But identifying a series of factors as permissive conditions is not

enough to assess the potential occurrence of a critical juncture: the analysis also requires selecting indicators to measure the variation of these permissive conditions over time. These benchmark indicators will be described in more detail in this section.

The chosen indicator for oil wealth will be the quarterly price of the “Brent” barrel of oil. Brent is one of the more commonly used indicators to analyze average prices in the oil market and is based on the sales price of crude oil extracted off the coast of Norway. The historic data on the Brent oil barrel price was extracted from the Federal Reserve Economic Data (FRED), administered by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, Missouri (in the United States).

The chosen indicator for public support of incumbents will be the approval rate of Nicolás Maduro as president of Venezuela. Since Maduro was publicly appointed by Hugo Chávez as his successor, and he has served as the main figure and spokesperson of the regime since, it is possible to interpret the perception of public opinion on his rule as extended to the broader senior leadership of Chavismo. The historic data on the approval rate of Maduro was extracted from the “Omnibus Poll” conducted by the Venezuelan socioeconomic analysis firm Datanálisis. This firm is considered one of the most consistent and reliable public opinion research firms in the country, with a long-standing history of studying collective preferences in Venezuela.

The chosen indicator for external pressure on the regime by international actors will be the determination of whether economic sanctions have been imposed on senior regime leaders and/or the Venezuelan economy. Rather than measuring the variation in data over time, this indicator will instead consist of assessing whether sanctions are present or not at any given point in time between 2013 and 2022. This assessment will be based upon a review of grey literature, with special focus on official government sources and news outlets.

Finally, the chosen indicator for the internal cohesion of the dominant coalition will be public expressions of dissent with Maduro and Chavismo by senior members of the regime. A public expression of dissent counts as any action that clearly signals a break from the party line of incumbents (ranging from a statement to an executive order). Senior members of the regime are those in the leadership of any branch of government, the national board of the party or the military high command. Since authoritarian regimes curtail free flows of information and cultivate the perception of internal cohesion, it is difficult to assess the internal dynamics of regime factions at any point in time. Therefore, any public statements that attempt to break this perception of internal cohesion should be interpreted as demonstrating a high disposition to break apart from the convention of the dominant coalition. However, not all expressions of dissent will be weighted equally: military dissent will be seen as a much stronger sign of losses in cohesion, since they often serve as a last line of defense for the regime and will only act if they believe that the environment is favorable for it within the political or civilian leadership. Like when assessing foreign pressure, this indicator will be measured through a review of grey literature, with a particular focus on policy papers and recent literature on Chavismo.

To assess variation in permissive conditions, every year since Maduro has been in office will be divided into quarters. This results in a total of 40 time periods, stretching from the first quarter of 2013 (I-2013) to the fourth quarter of 2022 (IV-2022). Permissive conditions will then be analyzed at each period and rated with one of three values for every quarter: “High”, “Medium” or “Low”. The idea is that a quarter showing permissive conditions with mostly “High” values is one where the likelihood of a critical juncture (i.e., regime change) is greater, while quarters showing permissive conditions with mostly “Low” values is one with distant probabilities of a critical juncture taking place.

For oil wealth, high values as a permissive condition would be shown by a quarterly oil price below \$51.44 per barrel (this is equivalent to more than 1 standard deviation below the 15-year

average), medium values would be shown by a quarterly oil price between \$51.44 and \$93.88 per barrel and low values would be shown by a quarterly oil price above \$93.88 per barrel (more than 1 standard deviation above the 15-year average).

For popular support, high values as a permissive condition would be shown by Maduro having a quarterly approval rate below 40%, medium values would be shown by Maduro having a quarterly approval rate between 40% and 60%, and low values would be shown by Maduro having a quarterly approval rate above 60%.

For economic sanctions, high values as a permissive condition would be shown by the presence of economic sanctions imposed upon senior regime leadership *and* the overall Venezuelan economy, medium values would be shown by the presence of economic sanctions imposed solely against senior regime leadership, and low values would be shown by the absence of economic sanctions.

For signs of internal dissent, high values as a permissive condition would be shown by actions or statements of dissent by senior civilian leadership *and* military officers, medium values would be shown by actions or statements of dissent solely by senior civilian leadership, and low values would be shown by the absence of actions or statements of dissent.

Finally, it is important to point out that the study will focus its analysis of the independent variable (i.e., incentives), intervening variables (i.e., strategic and coordination choices) and the dependent variable (i.e., opposition performance) on moments where permissive conditions have been high. Determining the existence of such moments is, once again, what provides validity to the rest of the analysis. Otherwise, structural factors would be too rigid and prevent any critical juncture (favoring incumbent stability). Once the study has assessed the variation in permissive conditions between moments with low values and moments with high values, the rest of the work will focus on the latter and assume permissive conditions to be constant (i.e.,

present, with high values).

Assessing the independent variable: incentives

Based on the framework described previously, the incentives of opposition members to be in politics are not only the independent variable of this study but also the critical antecedent: they predate the alignment of permissive conditions that allow for critical junctures, and they influence the productive conditions that lead to path divergence (i.e., strategic and coordination choices). As described in the theory section, this study concentrates on three types of incentives: those of party leaders, those of low-ranking members and those shaped by mechanisms of internal democracy.

To measure the existence of these incentives in the thinking and decision-making of opposition members, I relied on personal interviews with opposition party members. I picked my sample of interviewees through a “snowball” method, reaching out to members with which I had an established connection and then asking for referrals from more members. This approach facilitated access to interviewees that may not have agreed to participate in the study if I had contacted them without referral.

One potential bias stemming from this method is that it lends the sample to similar profiles or perspectives to the first party members contacted, making the sample non-random. Another challenge was that party members would be easier to access in the capital city of Caracas. To confront this potential bias, I conducted interviews with party members from Mérida, in the Andean region. These interviews provided a non-Caracas perspective, but there are still other regions of the country that are underrepresented in the sample.

I crafted my questions with a prior understanding of what types of incentives were being looked for and how they affected the decision-making of opposition members. However, questions

were designed in a way that they were sufficiently broad and open-ended as to capture potential dynamics not considered in the theory section. Such dynamics could include different types of incentives from the ones proposed or alternative factors that shape strategic and coordination choices. Ten party members belonging to four opposition parties were interviewed. These members had different levels of seniority, from low-ranking members to members of the national board of their party. Due to personal security concerns related to their operational environments, as well as their busy agendas, party members were only interviewed once.

Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and an hour. The interview had four distinct parts, depending on the types of questions asked. The first, brief section included identification questions like whether the interviewee is a member of a political party, which one, since when and what role do they play. The second section had questions about the motivations of high-ranking leaders of the interviewees' party and other major opposition parties to be in politics. The third section had questions about the interviewees' impressions of what motivates rank and file members of their party to join politics. The fourth and last section included questions about the internal functioning of the interviewees' party, specifically referred to internal democracy, the election of authorities and whether there are spaces for renovation and new leaders to grow within their party.

To assess the motivations of politicians as the critical antecedent, the responses of party members with respect to their incentives, as well as those of other parties and their leaders, will be classified into one of the categories described below. The goal of analyzing and classifying different motivations is to identify categories or types of motivation that conduce party members to pursue the most effective courses of action as members of the opposition – given that effectiveness is understood for the purpose of this study as the capacity of the opposition to achieve regime change. In other words, the categorization should provide types that conduce towards formal coordination and hybrid strategic approaches – the efficient-maximizing

alternatives for opposition parties. It is worth noting, however, that this judgement of outcome is being made after the fact, while decision-making happens in real time under the cloud of uncertainty about future outcomes.

Based on the interview responses, types of personal incentives include three categories for senior leaders, depending on what is their greatest drive:

- **Material motivation:** leaders moved by a desire to achieve money, prestige and/or holding public office. These leaders are projected to prefer cohabitational or hybrid strategies, formal coordination within the electoral-institutional arena and informal coordination otherwise.
- **Policy motivation:** leaders moved by a desire to craft policy changes, generate national impact and help people. These leaders are projected to prefer any of the strategic approaches (cohabitational, hybrid or Jacobin) as long as it advances policymaking, as well as formal coordination.
- **Revolutionary motivation:** leaders moved by a desire to upend the political status quo, remove incumbents and establish a new political order. These leaders are projected to prefer hybrid or Jacobin strategies, formal coordination only if they perceive a clear path towards regime change and informal coordination otherwise.

Additionally, there are two profiles for personal incentives related to LRMs:

- **Concrete motivation:** LRMs whose commitment to the party and degrees of mobilization are determined by specific material incentives (money, promises of power, responsibility roles). These LRMs are projected to prefer cohabitational strategies, while considering hybrid or Jacobin strategies only if they are well-funded or have a well-defined material promise.

- Activist motivation: LRMs whose commitment to the party and degree of mobilization is determined by non-material incentives (ideological work, personal values). These LRMs are projected to support any strategy (cohabitational, hybrid or Jacobin) defined by the party line from leadership.

Once personal incentives shape the strategic and coordination preferences of opposition actors, structural incentives shape the capacity for parties to maintain effective leadership, give space to emerging figures and change course when pursuing sub-optimum strategic and coordination approaches. There are two possible values for structural incentives:

- Strong internal democracy: well-defined mechanisms for the election of authorities combined with such level of accountability that party leaders may lose their position if they don't achieve their goals and opportunities for emerging leaders to climb through the party. Under this type, leaders are pressured from below to perform well to remain in office, emerging leaders can otherwise remove them and change the course of the party and there is an overall high capacity to vary on strategic and coordination choices.
- Weak internal democracy: irregular mechanisms for the election of authorities combined with such a level of accountability that party leaders are entrenched in their position and there are little opportunities for emerging leaders to climb through the party. Under this type of internal democracy, leaders do not have pressure from below to perform well, emerging leaders are blocked from contesting their position and changing the course of the party and there is an overall low capacity to vary on strategic and coordination choices.

Each personal incentive type includes projections on their preferred strategic and coordination choices, while each structural incentive type includes projections on their effect upon senior leaders, emerging leaders, and the party as a whole. It is worth noting that the human nature of

party members implies that individual members may be motivated by more than one type of incentive. However, this analysis is based upon what they have vocally expressed as their main driver, that of those who integrate their party at different levels of seniority and those who integrate other opposition parties.

Assessing the intervening variables: strategic and coordination choices

Strategic and coordination choices are not only the intervening variables of this study but also the productive conditions of the path dependence framework. In order to assess opposition coordination and strategic approaches at a given point in time, as well as their variation over different time periods, the analysis consisted of a review of grey literature to produce a descriptive assessment of the strategic and coordination choices of the Venezuelan opposition. I analyzed opinion articles, press reports, white and other policy papers, political speeches, and official documents. I also considered prior literature on Venezuelan politics for this analysis. While the Venezuelan opposition is comprised of dozens of parties and other organizations, the analysis of productive conditions focused on the G4 parties: *Acción Democrática (AD)*, *Primero Justicia (PJ)*, *Un Nuevo Tiempo (UNT)* and *Voluntad Popular (VP)*. As previously mentioned, these parties represent the main subject of research because they concentrate the core of electoral support, organizational strength, and relevant leadership figures within the Venezuelan opposition. In addition, two other parties with outlier choices were included in the analysis of productive conditions to widen the understanding of opposition actors. These parties are *Vente Venezuela (VV)* and *Avanzada Progresista (AP)*.

To assess productive conditions at moments of potential critical junctures (i.e., moments with high levels of permissive conditions), both coordination and strategic approaches will be classified into one of several distinct categories. The analysis of productive conditions will focus on the three moments with highest levels of permissive conditions since Maduro became

president: the Guaidó interim government and the April 30th Conspiracy in 2019, the protests against the Maduro regime in 2017 and the opposition victory and takeover of the National Assembly in 2015-2016. To establish a baseline level for opposition coordination and strategic approaches, the analysis will also include 2013 – the year when Maduro came into office after the death of President Hugo Chávez. The goal of analyzing and classifying opposition coordination and strategic approaches is to identify categories that are most effective, with effectiveness being defined as the probability of opposition actors achieving regime change.

The classification of opposition coordination levels is based upon the work of Maryhen Jiménez, who defined opposition coordination as “a process in which opposition parties decide to work together towards the shared goal of dislodging incumbents”. It is worth noting that a broader interpretation than the one offered by Jiménez would also consider the coordination of political parties around other goals besides achieving regime change, such as achieving material gains (e.g., money, public office) or enacting policy reforms in the country. This broader interpretation will be further explored in the upcoming chapters. Jiménez distinguishes between two types of coordination, depending on the degree of structure given to said efforts: formal and informal coordination. The former implies clear mechanisms that structure and facilitate party interactions (e.g., decision-making rules), agreements on concrete issues (e.g., policy platforms, joint candidates), and a decision to undertake high-cost actions collectively. The latter implies private and flexible mechanisms for party interactions, loose agreements (e.g., cross-party endorsements, protests) and the possibility of high-cost actions being taken unilaterally (Jiménez, 2021, p. 4). To account for potential extreme cases, a third category known as “no coordination” will also be included. The logic of this classification is that the opposition is more effective as its coordination efforts increase and become more formal. The classification of opposition strategic approaches is based upon the degree of confrontation against incumbents in a given strategy, ranging from non-confrontational, *cohabitational*

strategies to highly confrontational and intransigent, *Jacobin* strategies. As will be argued below, these extreme approaches are rather ineffective, while a mixed or “hybrid” strategy that combines elements from the other two is most effective to achieve opposition goals.

The theoretical understanding about the correlation between these categories and the level of opposition performance will be discussed in the following chapter. As mentioned before, the degree of coordination of the G4 opposition parties can fall into one of three categories.

- Formal coordination: opposition parties establish mechanisms to structure and facilitate their interactions (e.g., decision-making rules, conflict resolution mechanisms); they reach agreements on concrete issues (e.g., joint candidates, electoral coalitions, common policy platforms) and undertake costly actions collectively.
- Informal coordination: opposition parties have flexible and private agreements, without any mechanisms to build or enforce them; they reach agreements on loose issues (e.g., cross-party endorsements, general platforms, protests), and undertake costly actions both unilaterally and collectively.
- No coordination: opposition parties have no public or private space for coordination, they reach no agreements and undertake costly actions unilaterally.

As with coordination preferences, the theoretical understanding about the correlation between strategic preferences and the level of opposition performance will be further explored in the following chapter. The strategic preferences of the G4 opposition parties can also fall into one of three categories.

- Cohabitation strategy: opposition parties are only willing or capable of challenging the regime in the electoral and institutional “arenas”, are always willing to negotiate with incumbents and make no attempts to break up the dominant regime coalition.

- Hybrid strategy: opposition parties confront the regime on multiple “arenas” (e.g., elections, institutional spaces, street protests, discrete activities), negotiate with incumbents only when the topic of such negotiations may be conducive to a potential regime change (e.g., discussing guarantees and conditions for a presidential election, agreeing terms for the negotiated exit of incumbents) and make persuasive efforts to break the dominant coalition by inviting certain incumbents to join a new, emerging coalition.
- Jacobin strategy: opposition parties are only willing or capable of confronting the regime on the most radical or violent “arenas” (e.g., potentially violent protests, discrete activities, armed struggle, foreign intervention), are unwilling to negotiate with incumbents, and pursue coercive efforts to break the dominant coalition by pressuring certain incumbents until reaching a “breakpoint” where they switch sides.

Assessing the dependent variable: opposition performance change

Opposition performance is not only the dependent variable of this study but also a telling indicator of the occurrence of a critical juncture: Opposition performance has been conceptualized in the theory section as a measure of its capacity to achieve regime change, and so achieving regime change represents the occurrence of an agency-driven path divergence in the Venezuelan political space during a critical juncture. This is important because without regime change actually taking place in Venezuela, the study can shift its focus to the conditions necessary for it to occur in the first place. That is, a moment of opportunity (provided by sufficient permissive conditions) as well as the subject of this section: having the right type of decision-making by opposition actors to seize upon the opportunity. The opposite also holds true: the fact that the opposition has been unable to achieve regime change shows that either conditions have not been present for path divergence to occur, or alternatively that the

opportunity (i.e., permissive conditions) was there but it was not seized (i.e., productive conditions) by opposition actors.

Measuring opposition performance is the result of aggregating other variables. In essence, opposition performance is a multivariable function of strategic and coordination choices. The variation in the two variables creates a set of four potential outcomes: The first is a high level of opposition performance, a combination of formal coordination and hybrid strategies. The second and third represent intermediate levels of opposition performance, with formal coordination or pragmatic strategies but not both. Finally, the fourth outcome represents a low level of opposition performance, a combination of informal coordination and less efficient strategic approaches (either cohabitational or revolutionary). Once permissive conditions have set the foundations for a potential critical juncture, it is the variation of opposition performance around the four outcomes previously described that will determine whether the moment of opportunity will catalyze into an actual critical juncture (I.e., regime change). An actual critical juncture that will lead to regime change is most likely to occur when the opposition is performing at a high level (I.e., a combination of formal coordination and hybrid strategies).

4. Summary of the thesis structure

To advance the arguments presented in this work, the thesis will be divided into six chapters. Following this introductory chapter, the second chapter will present the theoretical framework for the thesis. In it, I will speak to the relationship between critical junctures and regime change, the effect of strategic and coordination choices upon opposition performance, and the theorized causal mechanisms between opposition actor motivations, their performance and -by extension- the occurrence or non-occurrence of regime change during potential critical junctures.

The third chapter will discuss permissive conditions within the critical juncture framework. This conversation will include the bounding of permissive conditions within the Venezuelan context, the proposal of specific permissive conditions and the identification of moments with high values in said permissive conditions (i.e., moments that represent potential critical junctures).

The fourth chapter will discuss productive conditions. Like with permissive conditions, this chapter will include a conversation about how to adapt the theory on productive conditions to the Venezuelan context, the proposal of specific productive conditions (i.e., strategic and coordination choices made by opposition actors) and their measurement during those moments of opportunity identified in the previous chapter.

The fifth chapter will discuss the critical antecedent, which in this case is the focus of my work: the motivations of opposition actors to be in politics. The chapter will offer a classification system with different types of incentives (ranging from inherent within opposition actors to structural within the opposition parties), and the ways in which those incentive types have shaped the decision-making of opposition actors.

The conclusion will review the focus of this thesis, summarize the main findings from each chapter, review the limitations of the work and propose potential extensions of the literature based on the findings of this work.

CHAPTER II: THEORY

1. Introduction

The following chapter will discuss the theoretical framework that guides this work. The chapter will first offer a brief summary of the concept of critical junctures and its relationship to the outcome of focus for our study: opposition performance as a determinant of regime change. After this, the chapter will provide an understanding of opposition performance as an aggregate function of strategic and coordination choices by opposition parties (i.e., the productive conditions in this study). Finally, the chapter will propose a causal mechanism for how the motivations of opposition actors to be in politics translates into their strategic and coordination preferences. This chapter seeks to offer the key theoretical arguments advanced by this study to provide readers with the guiding principles utilized in this review of the Venezuelan case. Furthermore, having this chapter as the reference to understand the mechanics observed will prevent any obscuring of the analysis from the minutiae of the case study in question.

2. What is a critical juncture?

Critical junctures can be considered periods of time where decisions taken by actors have a significant effect on political outcomes. There are various interpretations as to what critical junctures entail: from their length (whether they are brief moments or lengthy processes), to the discretion that actors have (whether considerable or dependent upon prior conditions). But in general, most interpretations of critical junctures agree on the fact that decisions taken during this time are highly sensitive to initial conditions and outcomes shape significant trajectories in a given political space. There are three main components to a critical juncture: that a significant change took place, that this change took place in different ways depending on the

case, and an explanatory hypothesis about its legacy or consequences – with the validation of the latter confirming whether the critical juncture has taken place or not. (Collier & Collier, 2002, pp. 30–32).

3. Critical junctures and regime change

This study made use of the critical juncture framework and sought to identify potential critical junctures with it because these moments constitute rare opportunities when favorable conditions come together to facilitate the occurrence of regime change. Under authoritarian regimes, the struggle between incumbents and opposition actors is quite asymmetric – with incumbents holding greater leverage by controlling the institutional apparatus, information flows and a superior capacity to exercise violence. Even if incumbents are unpopular and the opposition has the support of the masses, achieving regime change is difficult when the power structure is balanced in favor of incumbents.

This political dynamic between incumbents and opposition actors often holds as the status quo over long periods of time. However, critical juncture theory points to the fact that there are sporadic, time-bound moments where the structural conditions that uphold the “upper hand” of incumbents seem to weaken. Opposition actors can seize upon those brief moments of opportunity, given by a weakened incumbent superiority (i.e., permissive conditions) to achieve regime change. But opposition actors are not guaranteed to succeed simply by taking decisive actions in opportune moments: the types of actions they pursue are relevant to assess their capacity to produce regime change. What types of actions are most effective (i.e., productive conditions) will be discussed in the next section and further explored throughout this work.

4. Opposition performance: strategic and coordination choices

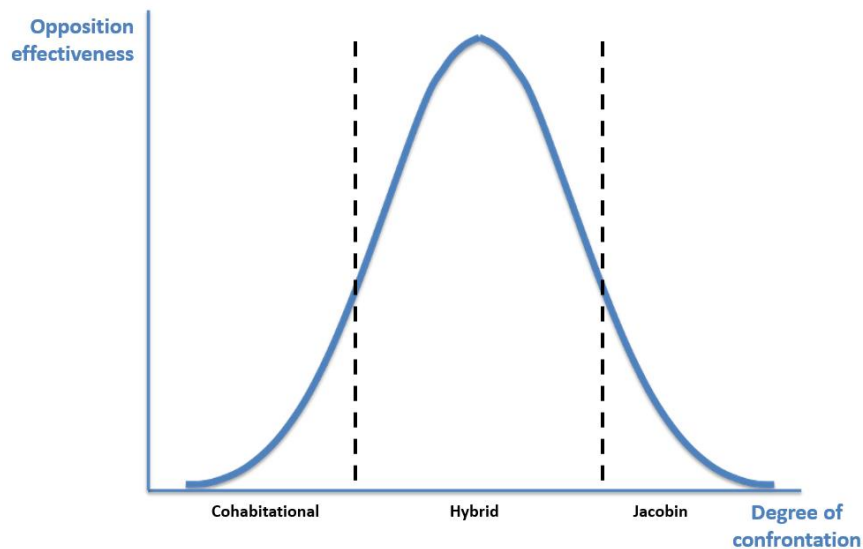
This study subordinates the occurrence of a theoretical regime change to the presence of a strong opposition performance. This study also understands opposition performance as a function of two variables: strategic and coordination choices. The former refers to the set of tactics and actions employed by opposition actors (e.g., the political arenas in which they engage, their degree of confrontation towards incumbents) while the latter refers to the degree in which opposition actors implement those actions and tactics either together or in an orchestrated manner. Together, these variables make up the productive conditions for the occurrence of a critical juncture (i.e., regime change) in the Venezuelan context.

As described in the previous chapter, this study argues that opposition actors can pursue one of three types of strategies when they engage in the political space. The first is a **cohabitational** strategy, which is defined by the opposition's unconditional willingness to dialogue with incumbents, making no attempts at breaking up the dominant coalition and limiting itself only to the electoral and institutional arenas. The second is a **hybrid** strategy, which is defined by a willingness to dialogue with incumbents when conducive in any manner to achieving regime change, making persuasive attempts at breaking up the dominant coalition and a willingness to engage on multiple political arenas (e.g., elections, institutional spaces, street protests, discrete activities). The third is a **Jacobin** strategy, which is defined by an absolute unwillingness to dialogue with incumbents, making coercive attempts at breaking the dominant coalition (i.e., pressuring incumbents to a "breakpoint") and limiting themselves to the most confrontational and often violent arenas (e.g., potentially violent protests, discrete activities, armed struggle, foreign intervention).

This study considers that a hybrid strategy is the one which most likely leads to the strongest opposition performance. By contrast, on the one hand, the cohabitational strategy is so mild in its approach to political engagement that it poses no risk for incumbents of losing real power - save by joining the dominant coalition and practically abandoning the opposition role. The Jacobin strategy, on the other hand, is so radical and confrontational that it risks suffering significantly higher repression by incumbents and potentially deters members of the dominant coalition whose cooperation will be crucial to achieve a lasting and hopefully peaceful transition to democracy.

This understanding of strategic choices as a variable of opposition performance can be conceptualized as a convex, normally distributed curve - with the x-axis representing the degree of confrontation towards incumbents and the y-axis representing the effectiveness of opposition performance. The tails of this normally distributed curve represent strategic choices that are either non-confrontational towards incumbents (i.e., cohabitational) or extremely confrontational (i.e., Jacobin). The peak of the curve is represented by a strategy that to some extent is confrontational towards incumbents but also allows for persuasive interactions with members of the dominant coalition (i.e., hybrid).

Graph 2.1: conceptualized relation between opposition performance and strategic choices



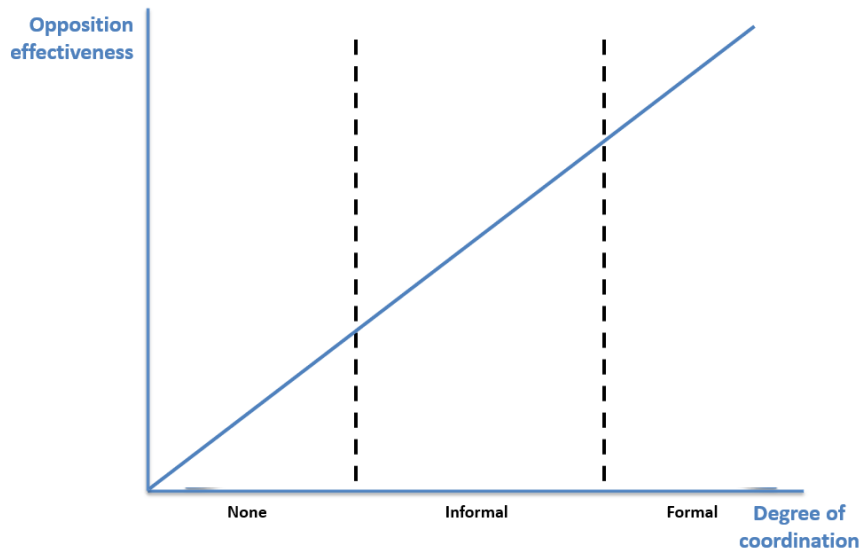
Source: designed by author

This study also premises that opposition actors can pursue one of three degrees of coordination among themselves when they engage in the political space. The first is *no coordination*, which is defined by opposition parties having no public or private spaces for coordination, the absence of any sort of agreements and undertaking costly actions unilaterally. The second level is *informal coordination*, which is defined by opposition parties having private and flexible agreements (although lacking mechanisms to craft or enforce them), reaching agreements on loose issues (e.g., cross-party endorsements, general policy platforms, street protests) and undertaking costly actions both unilaterally and collectively. The third is *formal coordination*, which is defined by opposition parties having established mechanisms to structure and facilitate their interactions (e.g., decision-making rules, conflict resolution schemes), reaching agreements on concrete issues (e.g., joint candidates, electoral coalitions, united policy platforms) and undertaking costly actions collectively.

This study considers that formal coordination leads to the strongest opposition performance when compared to its alternatives. On the one hand, informal coordination lacks the mechanisms to agree upon and enforce agreements between opposition actors, produces some types of joint actions but not the concrete ones most needed for effective performance (e.g., a united electoral coalition for a presidential or parliamentary election) and leaves the door open for parties to undertake costly actions unilaterally – with an increased probability of failure due to lower organizational strength. Having no coordination, on the other hand, simply leads to an exacerbated version of the issues found when pursuing informal coordination: without any mechanisms to craft and enforce agreements, lack of joint actions and entirely unilateral implementation of costly actions – the opposition would not be able to pool resources, deliver strategic approaches more efficiently and disperse risks amongst actors.

This understanding of coordination choices as a variable of opposition performance can be conceptualized as a linear curve showing a positive correlation, with the x-axis representing the degree of coordination among opposition actors and the y-axis depicting the effectiveness of opposition performance. The point of origin of this curve shows low levels of opposition effectiveness due to the absence of coordination. Towards the middle of the curve, one can find greater levels of opposition effectiveness when they pursue informal coordination. Finally, the greatest levels of opposition effectiveness can be found on the right-hand side of the curve, where opposition actors are displaying a formal degree of coordination.

Graph 2.2: conceptualized relation between opposition performance and coordination



Source: designed by author

5. Incentives as an explanation for strategic and coordination choices

Incentives, for the purpose of this study, are the motivations that drive actors to be in politics. Specifically, these incentives are already conditioning the preferences of the actor *before* the occurrence of the critical juncture – with the actor arriving at a potential critical juncture with a set of motivations built up that will guide their actions through such periods. Incentives emerge prior to the rise of the potential critical juncture, meaning that they are not affected by permissive conditions. However, it is worth recognizing that opposition actors could be encouraged or dissuaded by different structural factors such as State repression, the magnitude of economic sanctions, or the regime's popularity, as they can see these as driving their chances of success. This implies that even if the permissive conditions that create a specific window of opportunity do not shape the pre-existing incentives of opposition actors, the overall relationship between permissive conditions (i.e., structural factors) and the critical antecedent

(i.e., motivations) is complex. There is a great deal of variety around what incentives politicians have, including those in the opposition. Some are materialistic while others can be altruistic. But whatever those motivations may be, they all define the goals that actors pursue within the political arena – and therefore which strategies and forms of coordination they are interested in or willing to pursue.

There are two main types of incentives that are of interest for this study. The first type is personal incentives, which refers to the individual-level motivations that opposition actors, and in particular opposition party members carry with them when engaging in politics – and thus how opposition actors assess the costs and benefits of a given strategic and coordination approach. This type can be further sub-divided into the personal incentives of senior leaders and low-ranking members (LRMs). The former is relevant because of the role of senior leaders in setting party lines and strategies, while the latter is relevant because of how a large mass of party members with a common set of motivations may condition or limit the coordination and strategic options available to the leadership. This categorization will be discussed further on in the study.

The second type of incentives are organizational incentives, which refers to the motivations of both leaders and LRMs that are shaped by the internal organization of political parties. This is mainly defined by the party's leadership selection procedures – or the lack thereof – which can strengthen or weaken internal democracy. Organizational incentives are relevant for this study because, while personal incentives determine the strategic and coordination choices of a political party, organizational incentives determine the capacity of said party to change course if they have a low performance due to pursuing sub-optimum strategic and coordination choices.

Causal mechanisms

To understand how parties value regime change, one could imagine a function whose output is the utility of a given political goal. The first component of this function is the perceived benefits of the goal (B), which are defined by the type of incentive for a given opposition actor. If the goal is aligned with their motivations to be in politics, then the value of (B) will be higher. By contrast, if the goal is tangentially or not aligned at all with their motivations, then the value of (B) will be lower. The second component of the function is the perceived costs of achieving the goal (C), which are determined by resource constraints of opposition actors and the actions of incumbents (e.g., state repression). The third component of the function is the perceived probability of the goal being achieved, which weighs the perceived benefits and costs of the goal by the likelihood that it will be achieved (P) or not (1-P). These coefficients reflect the understanding that reaping benefits or costs will depend on whether the goal is achieved. The perceived probability of the goal being achieved will depend on observations of the political space by opposition actors – with particular attention to structural factors (i.e., permissive conditions). This is to say that even if a goal is seen as highly beneficial by an actor, the perceived utility of the goal may be low because they see its achievement as unlikely.

$$U = B(P) - C(1 - P)$$

As a reminder, critical junctures are periods of time in which permissive conditions weaken structural conditions and loosen the agency of opposition actors. As such, the presence of permissive conditions would imply a high probability of regime taking place – and thus provide a higher (P) value. But even in that case, the perceived benefits of said goal (B) by an opposition actor will be determinant for their perceived utility of the goal. Said perceived benefits are, once again, defined by their motivations to be in politics.

Once the perceived benefits and costs build into the perceived utility of a goal like regime change, one could theorize about the way in which actor choices would play out. Let us assume that there are two opposition parties who perceive a high utility in achieving regime change. If their perceived utility about a goal determined their strategic and coordination choices, the actual utility obtained by each party is determined by the interactions of their choices. To better conceptualize this, let us make use of a stylized game where the two parties can choose one of three strategy types: Cohabitation, Hybrid and Jacobin. The game rewards coordination (i.e., when both parties pick the same strategy) and maximizes those rewards when they coordinate upon a hybrid strategy (with each party receiving a score of 3).

Table 2.1: The payoffs of different strategic and coordination choices for opposition actors

| | | <u>Opposition party 2</u> | | |
|---------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| | | <u>Cohabitation</u> | <u>Hybrid</u> | <u>Jacobin</u> |
| <u>Opposition party 1</u> | <u>Cohabitation</u> | 1,1 | 1,0 | 1,-1 |
| | <u>Hybrid</u> | 0,1 | 3,3 | 0,-1 |
| | <u>Jacobin</u> | -1,1 | -1,0 | 2,2 |

Source: designed by author

As one can see, any other alternative to hybrid coordination is sub-optimum. If a party chooses a cohabitation strategy, for example, they will certainly gain some utility (i.e., score of 1) regardless of what the other party chooses. This is to reflect the relative benefits it entails, such as a somewhat safe access to sub-national and even limited national spaces of power. But because this is still distant from achieving regime change, its utility is relatively low. The other

party would then reap an equally low but positive utility if it coordinates around cohabitation but be punished otherwise: if they pursue a hybrid strategy, they will lack the organizational strength to operate efficiently due to acting unilaterally, reflected in a utility of 0. And if they pursue a Jacobin strategy, the existence of the other party within cohabitational boundaries will allow incumbents to categorize the two into “legitimate” and “illegitimate” opposition actors – opening the door to repress the “illegitimate” (i.e., Jacobin) opposition harshly, reflected in a utility of -1.

Choosing a hybrid strategy without coordination is also punished. As mentioned before, if the other party chooses cohabitation, then the party with the hybrid strategy does not have sufficient unilateral strength to act effectively, reflected in a score of 0. And if the other party chooses to pursue a Jacobin strategy, the party with the hybrid strategy is not cohabitational enough to be labelled as “legitimate” by incumbents and thus risks being put in the same category as the Jacobins and repressed harshly. This uncertainty about the risks brought about by their proximity to radical actors is also reflected in a utility of 0.

Finally, there is the case of coordination around a Jacobin strategy. In this case, both parties would perceive a positive utility from coordinating and confronting incumbents, but this is set back by the exposure to state repression and by the incapacity of this strategic approach to bring about cooperation with actors within the dominant coalition. The only reason why this scenario gives a higher utility to both parties (a score of 2 for each) is because it would have significant strength if parties coordinate, potentially overwhelming the capabilities of incumbents – thus bringing opposition actors closer towards achieving regime change when compared with coordinated or unilateral cohabitation, although at a much higher risk for opposition actors and greater costs for the political arena and the country overall.

6. Alternative explanations

Given the utilities derived from this game, opposition parties would be expected to coordinate on a hybrid strategy. But as this study will explore in subsequent chapters, this has not been the case with the Venezuelan opposition parties since Maduro came to power in 2013. So why has this not happened? Why do actors not make the strategic and coordination choices that steer them most towards reaping the benefits of regime change? Before focusing on the explanation of interest for this study, it is worth addressing some potential alternative explanations.

One potential explanation is that opposition actors perceive a low probability of regime change taking place, probably due to the set of structural conditions in the political arena at a given point in time. But this study focuses on potential critical junctures, which are precisely defined as moments where permissive conditions have loosened structural constraints – thus making regime change more likely. Another potential explanation is that opposition actors perceive high costs from pursuing regime change. Even if the perceived probability of regime change happening was high, the perceived costs may be so elevated (for example, due to a great risk of severe repression) that actors will not see enough utility in seeking regime change to actually pursue it in the first place. Finally, it may be the case that there are information asymmetries among opposition actors. In other words, opposition parties are not capable of perceiving that their utility is maximized when coordinating around a hybrid strategy. But the interviews conducted in this study have shown a keen awareness from opposition actors about the importance of achieving greater unity among opposition parties (even when they struggle at achieving it) and a strong rejection towards outlier opposition parties who are very cohabitational – dubbed as “*alacranes*” or “scorpions” by the mainstream opposition parties, which at least suggests some wariness about cohabitation.¹

¹ Placeholder, interviews FG and EM.

Once these alternative explanations have been addressed, let us now focus on the explanation of interest: that opposition actors perceive low benefits from regime change. This would be the case if the goal of regime change is not aligned with their motivations to be in politics, thus seeing little utility in this goal. If the goals of an opposition party are different from regime change, the utility values assigned to coordinating and different strategies in table 1 would break down. This is the case because the table shows an understanding of utility as a function of achieving regime change. If actors, moved by their incentives, want something else other than regime change, they may value strategies and coordination differently – which would explain why they have made choices other than coordinating around a hybrid strategy.

7. Summary and conclusion

Over the course of this chapter, I presented the theoretical framework that sustains this study into the effect of opposition actor motivations upon the performance of opposition parties and their capacity to achieve regime change. The chapter first offered brief descriptions of what critical junctures are and what their relationship with regime change is. Then, the chapter described opposition performance as an aggregate function of the strategic approaches and levels of coordination that opposition parties pursue – as well as an overview of what strategic and coordination approaches are available to opposition actors. Finally, the chapter proposed causal mechanisms for how the incentives of opposition politicians shape their decision-making.

The next chapter will discuss the first major element of critical junctures: permissive conditions. The entire presented in this chapter about regime change, the role of opposition performance in achieving it and the effect of opposition actor incentives upon all of it is based upon the notion that opportunities for regime change (i.e., potential critical junctures) have

taken place since Nicolás Maduro became president in 2013. But such a notion cannot be assumed: it must be demonstrated to sustain the argument. The next chapter will precisely focus on demonstrating that structural factors (i.e., permissive conditions) were sufficiently present for a critical juncture to take place at different times over the course of the Maduro government. If there have indeed existed moments where structural conditions would allow for regime change to take place, and this did not happen, then the study could focus on reviewing the opposition performance during those critical moments and the effect that opposition actor incentives may have had upon this.

The contents of this chapter connect with the upcoming one because they lay the theoretical foundation for the study of permissive conditions in Venezuela and the use of the critical juncture framework more broadly. By offering an understanding of how the motivations of opposition actors can shape their decision-making, the overall performance of the opposition and the occurrence of regime change in Venezuela – this understanding can then be used as guidance for the study of each element of the critical juncture framework in more detail.

CHAPTER III: ANALYZING PERMISSIVE CONDITIONS FOR A POTENTIAL CRITICAL JUNCTURE IN VENEZUELA

1. Introduction

The following chapter will discuss to what extent permissive conditions, one of the main elements of critical juncture theory, have been present in Venezuela between 2013 and 2022 and have thus allowed for the possibility of regime change to take place since Nicolás Maduro became president. To do this, the chapter will first offer a theoretical discussion on permissive conditions, including a brief review of the permissive conditions selected for analysis, the justification for their choice and considerations on alternative permissive conditions not selected. Secondly, the chapter will propose a series of indicators to measure the permissive conditions chosen and a series of parameters to assess their variation. Finally, the chapter will analyze these permissive conditions during the 2013-2022 time period, identifying moments with high values across all permissive conditions and describing political events that took place in the country at the time.

This chapter seeks to demonstrate the significance of studying the motivations of opposition actors. Without permissive conditions, analyzing actor choices -as well as their underlying incentives and motivations- becomes irrelevant: any course of action pursued by opposition actors would fall short of success without the right structural conditions to allow for regime change to take place. Identifying moments with high levels of permissive conditions would demonstrate that, in the ten years since Maduro has become president, there have been moments where actors' choices (and the motivations that shape them) have been important to explain the occurrence or absence of regime change in Venezuela.

2. Bounding permissive conditions

Permissive conditions in the Venezuelan context

As discussed in the introductory chapter, permissive conditions are one of the main elements of a critical juncture. When these types of conditions are present, structural factors become weaker and actors' choices gain greater influence over political outcomes. Because permissive conditions constitute the baseline factor for the occurrence of a critical juncture, the emergence of permissive conditions creates temporary bounds for a divergence in the path of a political space. It is worth noting, however, that permissive conditions are a necessary but not sufficient condition for the occurrence of a critical juncture. Without adequate productive conditions (i.e., actor choices), the conditions for a critical juncture will be present but path divergence will not materialize (Soifer, 2012, p. 1574).

I selected four different permissive conditions for analysis. These four conditions are the level of oil wealth that the regime is enjoying from its control of the industry, its level of popular support, foreign pressure in the form of actions by international actors, domestic pressure in the form of a social or institutional challenge to the regime, and the occurrence of public frictions or breakups in the dominant coalition.

Oil wealth probably has one of the most straightforward explanations on why it should be considered as a permissive condition. The oil industry has been, for decades, both the epicenter of the Venezuelan economy and the main source of government revenues. Throughout the rule of Chavismo in Venezuela, oil rents have represented between 10% and 30% of the entire national GDP (World Bank, n.d.). And according to the Observatory of Economic Complexity, up until 2013 the oil industry and its complementary sectors represented close to 97% of Venezuelan exports – meaning that when Maduro became president, he inherited an economy highly reliant on crude extraction, refining and trading. Although that percentage has reduced

over the course of the Maduro administration (namely due to poor mishandling of the industry and the effect of U.S. economic sanctions) by 2019 the exports of crude oil and refined petroleum still represented 86.07% of all exports (OEC, n.d.). Given the major reliance of the national economy and government revenues in the oil industry, a significant drop in oil wealth (caused by mismanagement, market trends or any other reason) would significantly curtail the resource availability of the government to implement policy and negatively affect growth trends in the country – all of which would put pressure on society and serve as a factor for regime change to potentially take place.

Popular support for the regime provides insight into the possibility of whether the Venezuelan people are willing to mobilize for or against the incumbent regime at any given point in time. Because several points of pressure against the regime may take the form of some type of mass mobilization, like a major election or nationwide protests, it is important to assess the variation in the mood of the Venezuelan people with respect to Maduro and the incumbent regime over time. Low popularity levels for the Maduro government would make it difficult for Maduro to mobilize supporters in defense of the government while making it easier for opposition actors to mobilize masses through discontent – which would also play a key role in the scenario of a potential regime change.

Economic sanctions were selected to represent levels of international pressure. Firstly, they were chosen as a permissive condition because they represent a specific form in which foreign actors (namely, the United States of America and its allies) attempt to influence political outcomes in Venezuela. Secondly, economic sanctions were chosen because they have a structural effect on the political space. Whether personalized and targeted or general and industry-wide, sanctions affect the economic dynamics of the country, constrain the decision-making of regime figures, and provide leverage to actors other than the incumbent regime. Economic sanctions would play a dual role in setting up the stage for regime change: for nation-

wide or industry-wide sanctions, their effect would result in economic pressure akin to the one produced by oil wealth. And for individual targeted sanctions, their effect would result in key regime figures being isolated, internationally condemned and limited in their ability to enjoy their power and wealth – which raises the cost of remaining loyal to the dominant coalition and thus facilitating a potential instance of regime change.

Finally, public demonstrations of internal dissent within the dominant coalition provide some degree of insight into the otherwise obscure internal dynamics of the regime. As with most forms of autocratic government, there are little to no free flows of information – especially when it comes to the internal dealings of incumbents. While there could be some form of tension or division within the regime at any given point in time, the public will not be informed about it if these disagreements do not become public. When internal divisions do become public, whether through statements or actions, it is therefore not only a demonstration that there were internal tensions but also an indication that these tensions were so high that they could no longer be kept away from the public eye. In an authoritarian context such as that which Maduro has maintained throughout his rule, public demonstrations of dissent signal a significant departure from the dominant coalition. Public demonstrations of dissent within the dominant coalition, especially those committed by military officers, would be key to the occurrence of regime change: by publicly breaking ranks, they would signal to other senior civilian and military officers that may also be considering defection but are unsure about doing so – potentially producing a snowball effect that leads to the downfall of the incumbents.

Considering alternative permissive conditions

To conclude this initial review, it is necessary to discuss potential alternatives to the permissive conditions selected. One potential permissive condition to be included would have been some sort of measurement related to general economic trends in Venezuela, such as GDP or inflation

rates. The reason for considering this type of permissive condition is that economic trends have significant repercussions on political developments. Signs of economic instability provided by high inflation rates, or an economic downturn observed in the GDP could serve as the basis of a potential critical juncture that leads to path divergence in Venezuela.

However, oil wealth was chosen above alternative economic measurements because it is both an indicator of economic trends and government capabilities. Given that the economy is so reliant on oil production, what happens to crude production will have great repercussions and likely shape the broader state of the economy in Venezuela. And given that most government revenues come from the oil industry, any downturn would also lead to diminished government capabilities. Therefore, choosing any other economic indicator other than oil wealth as a permissive condition would necessitate choosing an additional condition to measure government capabilities – making the entire analysis of permissive conditions more complex.

Another potential permissive condition to be included would have been a broadened interpretation of foreign influence that accounted for the use of soft power. This would have likely taken the form of diplomatic influence. The reason to include this potential permissive condition is that, unlike economic sanctions, it captures persuasive approaches towards the regime that could lead to agreements and negotiated solutions – an environment in which an agreed form of transition could take place in Venezuela.

However, economic sanctions and social-institutional challenges were chosen instead of soft power tactics because the latter have been demonstrated to be highly ineffective when dealing with the Maduro regime. Decades of diplomatic influence from western countries did not prevent Venezuela from suffering a major democratic backsliding, and repeated negotiation rounds (often brokered by international actors) have all broken down – the latest example of this being the failed negotiations that took place in the Dominican Republic in 2018 (Jiménez,

2021, p. 14). The Maduro regime seems to be more responsive to confrontation rather than cooperation. This, however, does not constitute a wholesale rebuttal of negotiation and diplomacy. Instead, it questions its capacity to act as a permissive condition that generates the setting in which a critical juncture can take place. Once those conditions are present, actors can resort to negotiations and diplomacy at given points in time to catalyze the critical juncture and cause a path divergence (i.e., a regime change).

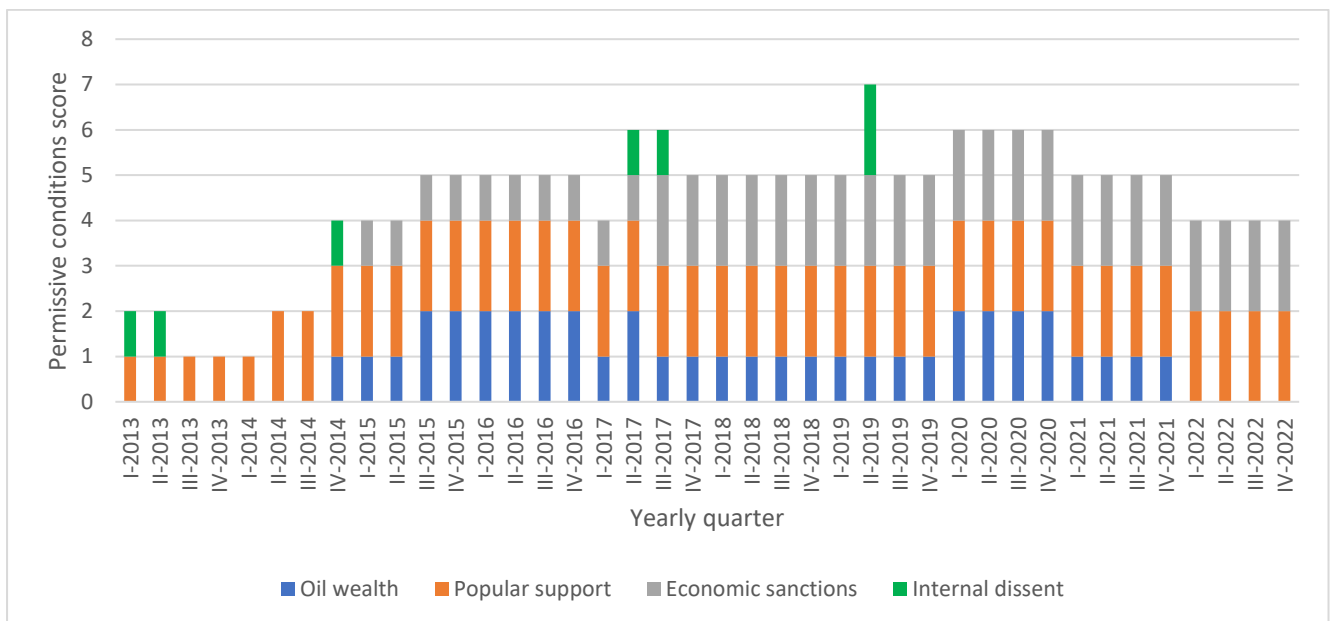
3. Measuring permissive conditions

As discussed in the Introduction, four structural factors were selected as essential to determine if conditions were permissive at any point between 2013 and 2022: oil wealth of the regime, public support of incumbents, the cohesion of the dominant coalition and pressure upon the regime by international actors. Every year from 2013 to 2022 was divided into six-month periods and their conditions evaluated through indicators that allowed an assessment of the structural factors mentioned above. Oil wealth was evaluated through oil barrel prices, public support was evaluated through polling on the approval rate of Maduro, internal cohesion was evaluated by identifying public expressions of dissent by senior regime leadership and foreign pressure was evaluated by whether international sanctions have been imposed on the regime. Given these indicators, the permissive conditions that would allow a potential critical juncture would be a context of low oil barrel prices, low approval rates for Maduro, significant demonstrations of internal dissent in the dominant coalition and the imposition of economic sanctions abroad.

4. Identifying moments with high potential for critical junctures

Once that permissive conditions were identified, benchmark indicators were selected to assess them, and parameters were set to assess their variation over time – then the analysis sought to identify points in time with permissive conditions showing high values and indicating the potential occurrence of a critical juncture. In each quarter, a score of 2 will be assigned to “High” values, 1 to “Medium” values, and 0 to “Low” values – creating a global range of possible values for permissive conditions between 0 and 8 points. Based on the parameters established in the introduction, the detailed results of the assessment for every quarter between 2013 and 2022 can be found in table 3.1, found in the appendix. Results are summarized in Graph 3.1 below. While there is no specific threshold above which permissive conditions are considered sufficient to sustain a critical juncture, the variation in scores will allow an assessment of which moments could have been more conducive to a critical juncture (i.e., regime change) than others.

Graph 3.1: permissive conditions in Venezuela, 2013-2022



Source: designed by author

5. Assessing moments of opportunity

The most opportune moment: The April 30th Conspiracy

The highest concentration of permissive conditions took place during the second quarter of 2019. This quarter scored 7 out of 8 in the measurement of permissive conditions – the highest value observed between 2013 and 2022. At this time, the Maduro regime enjoyed little popular support and was confronted by widespread economic sanctions from the United States and other western countries. Domestically, the regime was confronted by the Interim Government of Juan Guaidó and the Venezuelan opposition. Following the fraudulent presidential election of 2018 that Maduro used to force himself onto power, the opposition-controlled National Assembly declared the vacancy of the presidency and accordingly appointed Speaker Juan Guaidó as interim President until new presidential elections could be held (Jiménez, 2021, p. 15).

Guaidó represented a particularly strong challenge because his presidency was recognized by more than 50 countries around the world, including the United States, the European Union, and most Latin American countries at the time. Additionally, the opposition took to the streets and mobilized its base in support of the interim government, and so the challenge to the regime was both social and institutional. This combination of low levels of support with unprecedented high levels of foreign and domestic pressure likely explain why there was an unprecedented degree of dissent within the Armed Forces, allegedly involving officers in the Military High Command and several intelligence services – namely, the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service and the General Directorate of Military Counter-Intelligence (Caracas Consulting, 2019).

According to multiple sources, a plan had been agreed to remove Maduro from office with the support of the military and the regime-controlled Supreme Court. On the agreed upon date (May 1st), Chief Justice Maikel Moreno would issue a ruling declaring that the 2018 presidential election had indeed been illegitimate and that the office of the presidency was vacant. After the ruling was issued, the military high command would address the nation to declare their adherence to the Supreme Court ruling and therefore denying their subordination to Maduro as Commander in Chief. This was considered sufficient to trigger an internal crisis within the Maduro regime that would force them to agree to a peaceful, negotiated exit. However, the plan backfired as conspirators had to move the timeline forward and took to the streets on April 30th, a day ahead of the planned date. The reasons why plans were sped up and eventually broke down remain unclear to this day (Caracas Consulting, 2019).

The relevance of the Guaidó interim presidency in general, and the April 30th Conspiracy in particular, cannot be understated. Most permissive conditions analyzed showed high values, suggesting a significant degree of pressure upon key regime figures. This is also reflected in the fact that the second quarter of 2019 represents the only occasion in all 10 years of the Maduro presidency that high-ranking officers of the military have taken actions against the incumbent regime in public. Given that the military constitutes the last line of support and defense for authoritarian regimes, this break in military subordination signaled a tenuous moment for regime stability in Venezuela.

Other opportune moments: the 2017 protests and the opposition takeover of the National Assembly

Besides the other quarters of 2019, which will not be considered here for being closely related to the Guaidó Interim Government and the build-up to the April 30th Conspiracy discussed previously, there are two other moments that scored high values across different permissive

conditions. These moments will be presented not in chronological order, but in the order of their scores for measurements of permissive conditions. The first of them took place in the second and third quarters of 2017, both of which scored 6 out of 8 in the measurement of permissive conditions. Like with 2019, the regime was confronted with decreasing oil prices and popular support. It was also during this period when the Trump administration in the United States decided to move from the Obama-era policy of personal sanctions against human rights violators to widespread economic sanctions against the Venezuelan oil industry and State apparatus. The combination of all these factors likely explains the emergence of a social challenge to the dominant coalition in the form of a series of protests that took place across the country – starting on April 2017 (Jiménez, 2021, p. 13).

A series of protests against Maduro had already taken place in 2014, but permissive conditions did not seem as high as in 2017 for two different reasons. The first and most structural of the two is that while popular support for Maduro had already declined significantly by 2014, oil prices had not yet crashed by the time of the protests that year and so the economic environment was still somewhat more favorable for regime stability. The second is that during the 2014 protests there were no significant statements or actions of dissent by senior regime figures, while the 2017 protests saw the departure from the government of Attorney General Luisa Ortega Díaz. While these factors created a greater opportunity in 2017 than in 2014, it was less of an opportunity than in 2019 because dissent by civilian figures like Attorney General Ortega Díaz was not accompanied by similar actions and statements by military leadership. (Jiménez, 2021, p. 13).

The other moment with high values across all permissive conditions took place between the fourth quarter of 2015 and the fourth quarter of 2016. These quarters scored 5 out of 8 in the measurement of permissive conditions. Like with the round of protests in 2017, this time period also had unfavorable oil prices and popular support. But, unlike the 2017 protests, the sanctions

regime at the time was less intensive (limited to the Obama-era targeted sanctions against human rights abusers and regime figures accused of drug trafficking) while there were no significant public demonstrations of internal strife from civilian or military leadership as a consequence of the opposition victory and its takeover of Parliament in January of 2016.

Momentum had been building up for the opposition over the previous years. Following the narrow and contested victory of Nicolás Maduro over opposition candidate Henrique Capriles in the 2013 Presidential Election, and the 2014 round of protests briefly mentioned previously, the economy tanked as oil prices collapsed. With a strong reliance on imports subsidized through oil revenues and high levels of government spending on social programs, the economy had become very sensitive to fluctuations in the energy markets. This is why, when the 2014-2015 global oil “glut” took place, the national economy was thrown down a contraction spiral with hyperinflation, food shortages and significant increases in poverty rates. Public discontent became particularly pronounced, and the opposition was able to channel it into the Parliamentary elections – effectively turning support for opposition candidates into a way for the people to express their discontent with Maduro and the Chavista leadership (Alarcón et al., 2016, pp. 20–21).

Opposition momentum continued to increase as they were able to capitalize the majoritarian public support into a concrete electoral victory that gave them control of an entire branch of government for the first time since Chavismo came to power in 1999. Given that most people voted for the opposition to see major changes nationwide, the opposition quickly moved to explore different constitutional mechanisms through which to oust Maduro peacefully. Some opposition politicians considered a constitutional reform, a Constituent Assembly and triggering a recall referendum. In addition, opposition lawmakers began drafting legislation with political significance, such as an Amnesty Law that would have released all political prisoners in the country. However, Maduro quickly reacted through the regime-controlled

Supreme Court and issued a ruling that practically disavowed all measures enacted by the National Assembly. This, and significant losses in strategic focus and coordination between opposition parties after their victory, meant that the new National Assembly lacked focus and gradually lost the *auctoritas* that it had earned at the polling booths (Jiménez, 2021, pp. 13–14). The review of opposition actor motivations (i.e., the critical antecedent) in Chapter 5 will provide further insight into these issues experienced by the opposition after taking over the National Assembly.

Finally, it is worth noting that all quarters of 2020 scored significantly high values, specifically a score of 6 out of 8. However, no significant political events took place in the country during this time period. This may be the result of two potential, interconnected explanations. The first is that, while permissive conditions were present, no political development could take place in the country due to the severe restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The second is that permissive conditions may have been high precisely because of the effects of the pandemic around the world: by constituting a black swan, unprecedented event – the government may have been subjected to an unusual form of structural pressure by the pandemic. Therefore, no further analysis of 2020 was considered for the purpose of this study.

6. Summary and conclusion

Over the course of this chapter, we looked at permissive conditions that could have allowed for a critical juncture to take place in Venezuela between 2013 and 2022. We discussed the four permissive conditions considered and the reasoning for their selection as the subject of analysis. Indicators for operationalization were also introduced, as well as parameters to classify the values of those indicators into “high”, “medium”, and “low” categories. Finally, the analysis of permissive conditions was conducted across all years from 2013 to 2022, and the moments

of highest opportunity (i.e., the moments with the highest levels of permissive conditions) were identified and discussed.

The next chapter of the thesis will look at the other major element of critical juncture theory: productive conditions. Given a series of sufficient permissive conditions, the structural constraints that limit actors become loose and allow for actor choices to become much more influential in causing a path change in a given social space. In this thesis, productive conditions will take the form of two types of actor decisions: strategic and coordination choices. The former refers to types of actions that opposition actors employ against the incumbent regime, while the latter refers to the degree of unity and alignment over strategic choices demonstrated by those same opposition actors.

The findings in these chapter connect with the upcoming one because they suggest the need to study productive conditions in the Venezuelan context. If an analysis of permissive conditions did not show a single moment with high values, then productive conditions would be less relevant to understand how Maduro has remained in power: in other words, structural factors would be too rigid, limiting actor agency and the possibility of a critical juncture where the path of Venezuelan politics could be altered (i.e., regime change). But the analysis shows that there has been at least one moment of high opportunity given by permissive conditions (the April 30th Conspiracy during the Guaidó Interim Government) and at least two alternative moments of lesser but still significant opportunity: the 2017 round of nationwide protests and the 2015-2016 opposition takeover of the National Assembly.

It is evident that regime change did not take place in Venezuela during neither of those moments: Nicolás Maduro and the Chavista regime remain in power, about to reach a decade leading the country without the leadership of former president Hugo Chávez. But it seems like conditions for a regime change existed at all these different points in time. This suggests the

possibility that Maduro was not overthrown due to agency-related rather than exclusively structural conditions. The following chapter will analyze opposition choices to determine whether they have effectively missed these opportunities to achieve regime change in Venezuela.

CHAPTER IV: ANALYSING PRODUCTIVE CONDITIONS TO EXPLAIN THE ABSENCE OF REGIME CHANGE IN VENEZUELA

1. Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a potential explanation for the absence of regime change in Venezuela since Nicolás Maduro became president in 2013. Given that there have been moments when permissive conditions were more favorable for path divergence and constraints upon agency were loosened, actors' choices in those moments (particularly those of opposition politicians) have shaped political outcomes in the country. Given the interpretation offered in this chapter on the kind of coordination and strategic approaches to maximize utility (or minimize costs) that the opposition should follow, it is easy to then compare actual opposition choices to those benchmarks and assess whether they have taken the right paths to produce a regime change. Alternatively, diverging from those benchmarks would point to choices that have drifted the Venezuelan opposition away from path divergence. Alternative choices to those who maximize utility in terms of regime change would also point out to the fact that certain actors may see utility maximization in terms of other goals and/or that their value assigned to regime change (in terms of projected costs and benefits) frames this alternative as a less desirable alternative.

This chapter will assess the state of productive conditions, another key element of critical junctures, between 2013 and 2022 in Venezuela. Since the previous chapter demonstrated the presence of permissive conditions on multiple occasions during this period, checking that there are sufficient productive conditions would help determine if a critical juncture could take place. Like the last chapter, this will first involve a theoretical discussion on productive conditions, with a brief review of the productive conditions selected, the justification for their choice and considerations on alternative productive conditions not chosen. Secondly, the chapter will

propose an operationalization of productive conditions and classify their variation over time, based on a review of grey literature on political developments in Venezuela. Finally, the chapter will present an analysis of productive conditions between 2013 and 2022 and discuss why moments with high levels of permissive conditions turned out to be “missed opportunities” rather than critical junctures due to insufficient productive conditions.

2. Bounding productive conditions

Productive conditions in the Venezuelan context

As discussed previously, productive conditions are another important aspect of critical junctures. Specifically, productive conditions are the aspects of a critical juncture that shape the outcomes emerging from them, given that sufficient permissive conditions are present for the occurrence of path divergence. This last aspect, the need for them to be accompanied by permissive conditions, points to the fact that productive conditions are necessary but insufficient on their own to produce a critical juncture – and the same can be said about permissive conditions themselves. Once the temporal bound created by permissive conditions comes to an end, productive conditions serve to “lock in” the path divergence created during the critical juncture. In essence, while permissive conditions are more structure-related, productive conditions tend to be more agency-related (Soifer, 2012, p. 1575). For the purpose of this study, two different productive conditions have been selected for analysis: coordination between opposition parties and their strategic approaches to face the incumbent regime.

Why coordination and strategy?

When it comes to coordination between opposition actors, prior literature has shown that authoritarian regimes perceive well-coordinated opposition groups as more threatening. These perceptions of threat are backed by findings that show that coordinated opposition parties become more effective at dislodging authoritarian figures (Jiménez, 2021, pp. 1–3). Nonetheless, many opposition groups struggle and eventually fail to coordinate. The reasons for this are varied: for instance, authoritarian incumbents seek to diffuse the opposition threat by employing “divide and conquer” strategies that range from clientelism and offering money or political offices to the use of coercion, as it is easier for authoritarian regimes to manage (i.e., dominate) a fragmented opposition. However, there are other factors that can affect the degree of opposition coordination – such as the nature of electoral systems, ideological differences, personal rivalries, among others (Jiménez, 2021, pp. 1–3). Nevertheless, overcoming these obstacles remains necessary to confront incumbents. If they do so, opposition actors will be able to benefit from the advantages of high degrees of coordination, such as the pooling of resources, dispersion of risks such as suffering from incumbent coercion and better targeting of their efforts.

When it comes to strategic approaches, the literature speaks to the relevance of achieving an intermediate or “hybrid” strategic approach in order to successfully achieve regime change when confronting authoritarian incumbents. This middle-way stands in contrast to the “purer”, yet less effective strategic approaches of cohabitational subservience to the regime or uncompromising confrontation (i.e., Jacobin). Corrales, for example, speaks about the way in which strong political parties greatly influence democratization because they serve as intermediaries between the people and incumbent elites, driving the former towards non-violent action while convincing the latter of possibly achieving a rational, orderly transition to

democracy that somewhat protects their interests (Corrales, 2001). Kutiyski and Krouwel, on the other hand, showed that the opposition significantly increased its support base during the late 2000s and early 2010s when it moderated its economic positions from its much stronger free-market discourse during the early years of Chavismo – although this of course implies moderation in terms of speech and not in terms of strategy (Kutiyski & Krouwel, 2014). Finally, Corrales once again points to the dangers of not achieving this moderation among all parties when he warns that seeking “total unity” among parties with vastly different goals (and likely very different strategic approaches) may drive people away from supporting them as they are incapable of understanding what is it that they truly believe (Corrales, 2005, p. 116).

There are other arguments to consider for the selection of strategic approaches and coordination as productive conditions for this analysis. First, there are theoretical reasons to think that opposition parties that score high on these two variables would be more effective in achieving the critical juncture (regime change). A strategically moderate or “hybrid” opposition will be more effective than an extremist one because it will prevent the dual pitfall of either becoming a legitimizing appendix of the incumbent regime or a force so radicalized that will struggle to reach agreements for a negotiated transition and will also likely suffer the highest degrees of political repression (Karl, 1990). Meanwhile, a well-coordinated opposition will be more effective because it will be better capable of concentrating efforts on whatever strategy is agreed, settle internal disputes more easily and convey a perception of cohesion that serves as an important signal towards the people they are trying to mobilize and other actors with whom it may be necessary to eventually agree on a negotiated transition (e.g., factions of the dominant coalition) (Jiménez, 2021).

The second, more intuitive argument to consider strategic approaches and coordination as productive conditions is that the subject of this analysis is to study the occurrence (or non-occurrence) of regime change from the perspective of the opposition. If the goal of this study

is to understand whether, under favorable (i.e., permissive) conditions, the opposition has followed the right decision-making paths towards achieving regime change – then the logical decision for this analysis is to select factors on which opposition actors have agency for the role of productive conditions. The types of strategies employed by opposition parties, as well as their degree of coordination, are certainly factors over which opposition factors have a significant -if not primordial- agency.

Considering alternative productive conditions

It is worth considering the possibility that there are relevant productive conditions missing from this analysis. One way in which this reasoning could be approached is from the perspective that oppositions to authoritarian regimes rely significantly on the massive support of the population to represent their discontent with the incumbent regime, and that therefore productive conditions should be focused on the relationship between opposition actors and the people. Two potential productive conditions that could emerge from this reasoning would be the discourse and political program employed by opposition actors. The channels of communication between opposition actors and the people are essential to sustain their interaction, and both the discourse and program offered by parties serve as key vehicles through which politicians interact with their supporters. Given that the effectiveness of the opposition is affected by their capacity to connect with the masses, then it may be relevant to take a look at whether the right speech or the right set of policies are being presented to the public. The underlying implication would be that the opposition would be more effective if it adopted a type of discourse and policy program that maximized their utility in terms of mobilizing people.

A counterargument to this potential permissive condition is that this study is trying to advance a top-down focus: it is necessary to better understand opposition leaders and activists to deepen knowledge regarding regime change dynamics in Venezuela and around the world. Another

significant counterargument is that such potential productive conditions are subordinated to the ones already proposed. In essence, the discourse adopted by the political leadership of the opposition and the policy program constructed within opposition groups and presented before the people are but an indicator of their strategic approaches, while the effectiveness in communicating with the people is greatly influenced by the degree of coordination between opposition actors (and it may be influenced by exogenous factors). If opposition actors pursue an effective strategic approach, their program (content) and discourse (form) are both likely to connect significantly with their intended audiences. And if opposition actors achieve a high degree of formal coordination, the “rollout” efforts of their messaging and policy proposals are also likely to be more effective. In each case, the analysis of the former makes it unnecessary to dive deeper into the latter. Furthermore, it could be argued that discussions around speech and program content are too idiosyncratic, thus not allowing for systematization of the analysis. At the same time, this work has shown that holding leaders and their traits constant, some parties have changed their strategic and coordination preferences – pointing to other factors molding permissive conditions.

At this point, it would also be relevant to remind readers that the arguments in this work have operate both from the individual and the organizational level. On the one hand, it is the individual (i.e., the opposition party member) who is considered the agent of change. But on the other hand, the individual uses the political party as a vehicle to seek change – while at the same time the study analyzes the internal dynamics of the parties and how their structural setup molds the incentives to engage politically.

3. Measuring productive conditions

Once permissive conditions (i.e., the structural factors laid out previously) have created the opportunity for a potential critical juncture to take place, the right combination of strategic and coordination choices would lose the restrictions that prevent path divergences by enhancing the influence of agency on political outcomes. Variation in strategic and coordination choices was evaluated through a combination of sources: firstly, prior work from the literature that has assessed variation in the degree of coordination and strategies employed by the opposition since 2013. This was reinforced by a review of domestic and international news media sources, opinion pieces in different outlets and other primary sources to assess both types of choices. Based on the categorization proposed in the theory section, the state of the opposition at any point in time was classified into a given strategic state and a given coordination state.

4. Assessing productive conditions over time

Once productive conditions were identified, benchmark indicators were selected to assess whether productive conditions were sufficient for the occurrence of a critical juncture at a given point in time. As detailed in table 4.1 found in the appendix, there are three indicators related to coordination choices (C1, C2 and C3). For each of these indicators, opposition parties may have displayed a behavior that closely matched either formal, informal or no coordination. Similarly, there are three indicators related to strategic approaches (S1, S2 and S3). For each of these indicators, opposition parties may have displayed a behavior that closely matched either Cohabitation, Hybrid or Jacobin strategies. Because the behavior of political parties was expected to vary and show diverse features, the analysis allowed for combinations across different coordination and strategic categories (e.g., a party showing signs of both formal and

informal coordination) rather than attempt to assign each party into a single type of coordination or strategic approach.

For every potential critical juncture (2013, 2015, 2017 and 2019), each party was assigned a score of 2 for each indicator showing “formal” behavior, a score of 1 for each indicator showing “informal” coordination and a score of 0 for each indicator showing “no coordination”. It is worth mentioning that the whole of the opposition includes dozens of political parties - but because this study has focused on the core parties, formal coordination would only be considered as such when all four parties (AD, PJ, UNT and VP) are engaged in it. Partial formal coordination by some but not all of the G4 parties will still be considered as informal behavior for the opposition overall. On the other hand, every party was assigned a score of 2 for each indicator showing a “Hybrid” behavior and a score of 0 for each indicator showing either “Cohabitational” or “Jacobin” behavior. Based on the parameters described previously, the overall results for the G4 opposition parties as a whole can be summarized in the following table:

Table 4.2: summary of opposition strategic preferences during potential critical junctures, 2013-2022.

| | | Strategic preference | |
|---------------------------|------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| | | Cohabitational or <u>Jacobin</u> (0-3) | Hybrid (4-6) |
| Coordination level | High (4-6) | - 2013 - 2015 before victory | |
| | Low (0-3) | - 2015 after victory - 2017 before reaching out to the <u>military</u> | - 2017 after reaching out to the military - 2019 |

Source: designed by author

In summary, the Venezuelan opposition experienced almost all potential combinations of strategic and coordination preferences across the four potential critical junctures studied: high coordination with a cohabitational strategy in the (2013, 2015), low coordination with a cohabitational strategy after the victory in the (2015 after winning the election), low coordination with a Jacobin strategy (2017), and low coordination with a hybrid strategy (2017, after reaching out to the military, and 2019). The absent combination has been a high degree of coordination among all G4 opposition parties under a hybrid strategy. Let us explore each of the cases mentioned to better understand how these strategic and coordination preferences eventually led to failures of the opposition to achieve regime change.

5. Assessing moments of high potential for critical junctures

The 2013 presidential election: coordinated but cohabitational.

During 2013, the Venezuelan opposition enjoyed one of its highest levels of formal coordination since the arrival of Hugo Chávez to power in 1999. The context for this level of coordination can be traced back to a series of “warning signs” that took place between 2007 and 2009, which the opposition saw as threatening, such as the government’s closure of RCTV (the biggest television network in Venezuela), the failed attempt at constitutional reform and the elimination of term limits. Following these events, opposition actors perceived that Chávez had a very strong intention to perpetuate himself in power and their probability of individual party success had diminished. In response, the major opposition parties founded the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD, in Spanish) in 2008 with the goal of improving their performance and chances of survival against Chavismo (Jiménez, 2021, pp. 9–10).

By 2013, the MUD had already established itself as the locus of formal coordination of its member parties and leaders. The coalition had by-laws with a clearly defined decision-making process. As such, policy platforms and candidacies ranging from the municipal level to the presidency of the republic were chosen according to MUD mechanisms. Internal decisions were approved either by consensus or by a majority of 3/5 of the party or 70% of an electoral district, while candidates were selected either through consensus or primary elections. The opposition was rewarded by its improved coordination, shown by the fact that the unitary opposition campaign for the 2010 parliamentary elections received a majority of the popular vote. By 2013, the opposition had doubled down on their formal coordination – with the election of presidential candidates in primary elections, a single unified program and a single opposition ticket in the ballot box (Jiménez, 2021, pp. 10–11).

The strategic approaches of the opposition were less optimal during this period. Up until the death of Hugo Chávez on March 5th, 2013, and the presidential election held on April 14 of that year – the opposition had consigned itself to a solely electoral and institutional strategy since at least 2006. This made sense, given that Chávez had left sufficient institutional spaces at the national and sub-national level for the opposition to participate and contest power. During the April 14 election, results pointed to a very narrow Maduro victory over opposition candidate Henrique Capriles – by less than 2%. Capriles, at the helm of the opposition coalition, initially demanded a full recount of the ballots and called to the streets in protest for what he claimed had been an “electoral fraud”. His call to take the streets was replicated by the remaining independent media outlets at the time, as well as in social media (Cannon, 2014, p. 62). Protests were bound to climax during a nationwide protest called to march towards the offices of electoral authorities, including the headquarters of the National Electoral Council in Caracas. However, after the announcement of a preliminary recount, Capriles decided to call off the protest. The desired recount would never materialize, and the people had been

demobilized. The essential problem during the 2013 election was that, while the opposition had formal coordination, they were not willing to shift arenas of action and adopt a more hybrid strategy through street protests.

The aftermath of the 2013 presidential election shows that this point in history represented a divergence within opposition leadership. On one hand, most political parties, including Capriles himself and his *Primero Justicia* (PJ) party, embraced a rather cohabitational strategy and showed themselves unwilling to exit the electoral-institutional arena to confront the regime. On the other hand, *Voluntad Popular* (VP) and *Vente Venezuela* (VENTE) had favored a more hybrid strategy in which the opposition continued to contest the election and confront the regime in the streets (Jiménez, 2021, p. 12). While this would certainly represent a break up in coordination, the analysis does not count it as so because these differences did not manifest until the 2014 protests, when the latter group embraced more confrontational tactics against the incumbents (Jiménez, 2021, p. 12). In essence, during 2013 the opposition had great levels of coordination but not a sufficiently hybrid strategic approach.

The 2015-2016 opposition takeover of the National Assembly: inefficient, disperse strategies and coordination breakdown.

In terms of coordination, the 2015 opposition victory and takeover of the National Assembly was a continuation, if not an improvement, of what had been observed already in 2013. Following the aforementioned strategic divergence during the 2014 protests, most parties coalesced once again around the MUD and resumed formal coordination ahead of the 2015 parliamentary elections. The opposition ran a highly coordinated -and highly effective- campaign, that included joint candidates for most seats, maintaining a single opposition ticket at the ballot box, a common program, collective campaign guidelines and reinforced links with local leaders to strengthen the grassroots support (Jiménez, 2021, p. 12). This high degree of

formal coordination allowed the opposition to capitalize on the economic hardships of the country and the questions around Maduro's capacity to fill in the shoes left by Chávez, winning 112 seats, or 2/3 of the National Assembly – the greatest electoral defeat that Chavismo had suffered since they had come to power in 1999.

But if coordination had been formal and effective up until the opposition victory in the parliamentary elections, the takeover of the National Assembly led to a loss in coordination efficiency. One of the reasons for this is that opposition parties translated the epicenter of decision-making from the MUD to the halls and committees of the newly conquered National Assembly. While it made sense to incorporate such an important institution into the decision-making process of the opposition, the reality is that the National Assembly did not have any rules or formal mechanisms to resolve the internal dynamics of opposition parties: while the MUD had clear rules on how to adopt a policy, candidate or decision in general, debates within the National Assembly were informal and did not set specific rules on what a sufficient majority constituted to make an internal opposition agreement (Jiménez, 2022, p. 10) Without the rules and mechanisms offered by the MUD, the National Assembly became a less effective space for opposition decision-making and consensus-building. All of this resulted in a breakdown of formal coordination, which was reinforced by the fact that the opposition victory created the notion that the Maduro regime was weakened and regime change was within grasp. Given this outlook, most opposition parties perceived that the risk of repression was diminished and there was less need for formal coordination (Jiménez, 2022, p. 11). The resulting outcome was that opposition coordination became less effective after the takeover of the National Assembly in January of 2016.

It was evident to all opposition actors that the MUD had won 2/3 of the National Assembly on a mandate to generate political change in Venezuela (Alarcón et al., 2016, pp. 25–26). But different political parties had differing ideas of just exactly how did political change look and

what was the best mechanism to achieve it. For parties following the more cohabitational approaches, like Henri Falcón's *Avanzada Progresista* (AP), political change meant the recovery of institutional strength in the legislative branch and the normalization of the political process alongside Chavismo after the turbulent years of the contested election in 2013 and the nationwide protests in 2014. For parties following a more Jacobin approach, like VP and VENTE, the National Assembly was but another space from which to continue agitating and pressuring for regime change. To them, Venezuela had clearly descended into authoritarianism and there was no room for realistic legislative work. Parties like PJ, AD and UNT were in the middle – although still tending towards cohabitational approaches- and were trying to find a middle ground that combined institutional strengthening, separation of powers, legislative work and offering voters a clear constitutional path towards removing Maduro from power.²

It is evident that neither PJ, AD, UNT nor AP were willing to attempt any strategy outside of the electoral-institutional game in early 2016. And while one could argue that VP and VENTE displayed hybrid-like behavior by combining electoral-institutional and extra-institutional tactics, the reality is that these parties were not committed to true legislative work in the long run because they did not believe it was feasible, given the nature of the Maduro regime.

“I think that the mayors and members of the National Assembly from our party were dedicated to their job, but we realized that there was a barrier that prevented us from working for the country beyond those spaces because we were under a dictatorship”³

As such, no party demonstrated a hybrid strategic approach during this period. Instead, they were grouped into a cohabitational approach or a Jacobin approach masking as hybrid due to their presence in the legislature. These differences could have been bridged through MUD

² Interview with senior leader of AD, conducted on 08/03/2022.

³ Interview with senior leader of VP, conducted on 09/27/2022.

decision-making mechanisms, but given the weakening of this institutional space described before and the incapacity of the National Assembly to serve in the same capacity, the first year of the opposition-controlled parliament saw significant strategic dispersion, with a combination of loose tactics that included a failed amnesty law, a call for a recall referendum, passing of bills that were shut down by the Supreme Court and unproductive negotiations with the regime.

The 2017 protests against the regime: uncoordinated Jacobinism

By 2017, the Maduro regime had become much more violent and repressive while also presiding over the economic debacle of the country – namely, four-digit inflation, shortages of basic goods and increased poverty. In response, the opposition organized a series of protests against Maduro that left the country with more than 130 people dead and hundreds more arrested and turned into political prisoners. What had been first seen in the 2014 protests was now evident: Maduro was willing to employ extensive state violence to remain in power. As the tensions between incumbents and the opposition increased, state repression became more widespread and the opposition in general responded by making their coordination efforts more informal and even clandestine (Jiménez, 2021, p. 13). There are two elements worth pointing out here. The first is that while state repression made coordination more difficult to achieve, there was not much formal coordination to salvage in the first place - given the weakening of the MUD and strategic dispersion described in the previous section. And the second is that in this case coordination and strategic dynamics reinforced each other. The lack of formal coordination would, for example, facilitate the manifestation of different strategic approaches during the protests, and these differences would make it harder to re-establish formal mechanisms of coordination.

By the start of the protests in 2017, the opposition was still far from a hybrid strategy. After two years, they had failed to propose a detailed plan for an orderly political transition. This

meant that there had been no significant, persuasive attempts at breaking the dominant coalition by recruiting factions of the regime into plans for a transition (Rosas Rivero, 2017a). Negotiations had also been proposed after the cancellation of the recall referendum in 2016, and most opposition parties agreed to participating – even if regime change was not a part of the discussion. AD, PJ, UNT and AP were part of these conversations. Both VP and VENTE abstained from participating in these negotiations (Gabaldón, 2017).

Two months into the protests, the opposition began to collectively chart a course of action more in line with a hybrid strategic approach. Through the National Assembly, the opposition formed a committee to draft “guarantees for a democratic transition”. This committee included members of the core G4 parties, as well as AP and VENTE. The plan called for setting clear guidelines for regime change, offering amnesty and other incentives to convince elements within the dominant coalition to switch their allegiance. In essence, the opposition parties were willing to offer guarantees to and negotiate with regime figures. Because the object of these future negotiations would be to chart a course towards regime change (a sign of a more hybrid approach), such strategy garnered the support of more confrontational parties like VP (Rosas Rivero, 2017b).

What is most noticeable in strategic terms during this time period is the significant hardening of the strategic preferences of *Primero Justicia* (PJ), the party of former presidential candidate Henrique Capriles led by then-president of the National Assembly Julio Borges. When Borges began his term in office in January of 2017 (just two months before the start of the protests), the approach charted by his party for the year was more cohabitational: focusing on elections, maintaining a peaceful political environment and restoring the role of parliament within Venezuelan institutional life after a year under the leadership of AD’s Henry Ramos Allup as president of the National Assembly (Cadena, 2017). As the protests unfolded and the Maduro regime pressed harder against parliament, the strategic preferences of PJ changed. By March,

Borges had declared public disobedience to a Supreme Court ruling denying the legitimacy of the National Assembly. And by the end of the year, Borges was fully dedicated to pursuing international sanctions against regime figureheads and garnering foreign support for a peaceful transition to democracy (Duarte & Rojas, 2017). But while there were signs of “hybridization” by some political parties, these changes were still insufficient: the opposition had still not confronted the incumbent regime on multiple arenas simultaneously, and negotiations with factions of the dominant coalition were still not as significant as to offer the persuasive incentives that they would in the future. Furthermore, the unshaken commitment of AD and UNT to cohabitational strategies meant that there would be no opposition coordination around a hybrid strategy – while the virtual disappearance of the MUD meant that there were no formal mechanisms in place to bridge the gap between these parties and the Hybrid-Jacobin group of PJ (after 2017), VP and VENTE.

The 2019 Interim Government and the April 30th Conspiracy: hybrid but still uncoordinated

Following the 2018 sham presidential election in which Maduro secured a new six-year term, the opposition and the international community questioned Maduro’s democratic legitimacy. Pressure built up until the National Assembly declared on January 5, 2019 that Nicolás Maduro was “usurping” the presidency, since no one had been democratically elected for the position. Under a constitutional interpretation that saw this as a power vacuum, the National Assembly then declared the vacancy of the presidency and on January 23rd appointed its newly minted speaker Juan Guaidó from *Voluntad Popular* (VP) as interim president until free presidential elections could be held in the country. Over the next couple of days, more than fifty countries -including the United States and most members of the European Union- recognized Guaidó as the legitimate president of Venezuela, triggering an unprecedented political crisis in recent Venezuelan history (Gombata & Cameron, 2022, p. 151).

This challenge to incumbent rule reached a boiling point during the April 30th Conspiracy. Plotters from the opposition, military and judicial branch had agreed to a 15-point plan that included the issue of a ruling by the Supreme Court recognizing that the 2018 presidential election had been fraudulent, that Maduro was illegally occupying the presidency, and that Guaidó was the legitimate president of Venezuela. The Armed Forces would then issue a statement in support of the ruling and pressure for the oust of Maduro. In his place, a provisional junta would be formed with Guaidó as president and a vice-president chosen by Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino López. The provisional junta would then call for elections in six months. 300 military officers across all branches of the Armed Forces were expected to mobilize during the uprising, including the commanders of some branches. Foreign allies of the opposition, namely the United States and Colombia, were informed about developments around the plot (Caracas Consulting, 2019).

In terms of coordination, at first it seemed like the momentum caused by the announcement of the Interim Government and the support from dozens of foreign governments would pressure all major opposition parties to coalesce around Guaidó. Indeed, Guaidó drafted people from all G4 opposition parties to be Ambassadors in the countries that recognized his legitimacy. But soon enough, it became apparent that the opposition parties were operating in a “multi-speed” highway: some parties had committed more formally than others to the Interim Government and its hybrid approach. VP and PJ had thrown their full support behind Guaidó, and this was reflected in the make-up of the Interim Government: Guaidó, Leopoldo López (Chief of Staff), and Alejandro Plaz (Commissioner for Economic Development) belonged to VP, while Julio Borges (Commissioner for Foreign Affairs), Carlos Paparoni (Commissioner against Organized Crime & Terrorism) and Miguel Pizarro (UN Ambassador) belonged to PJ.

On the other hand, AD and UNT had decided to remain on the side-lines of key Interim Government appointments and from the executive team overall. Furthermore, it is reported that

as early as March 22nd these parties had sent envoys to negotiate with the Maduro regime. The proposal brought forward to Maduro would involve the reform of the National Electoral Council and the calling of new elections in 90 days. The reports that Guaidó would support the proposal also indicates that the initiative did not come from him but from the two parties mentioned before (PRR 148). Once again, AD and UNT were trying to drive back the political game away from any military or extra-institutional outcome and back into the electoral-institutional terrain (PRR 149), something that may be interpreted as Cohabitation behavior – although it did call for accelerated presidential elections in a context where Maduro was likely to be defeated.

But the differences in strategic preferences between the more Hybrid VP and PJ (shown by their clear attempts at persuading members of the dominant coalition to switch sides and join the Interim Government) on one hand, and the more Cohabitation UNT and AD on the other hand continued to manifest. Namely, the Guaidó camp did not believe the UNT-AD proposal for elections in 90 days would work because (1) the United States, the main ally of the Interim Government, would not approve the plan and (2) the removal of Maduro had to come before the calling of free elections. On March 29th, reports still maintained that negotiations remained inconclusive – just a month away from the April 30th Conspiracy (PRR 149). This plot to remove Maduro involved senior regime figures such as the defense minister, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, the head of the Bolivarian Intelligence Service and the head of military Counterintelligence. The plot also involved several figures from the Interim Government. Deals were brokered by both the United States and Venezuelan businessmen with ties to both sides of the struggle (Caracas Consulting, 2019).

When the conspiracy erupted, it became evident that PJ and VP were involved in the planning – alongside regime military and intelligence officials. Key figures of UNT and AD had been kept in the loop about the plan but had not been given active participation. This reinforces the

notion that PJ and VP were engaged in formal coordination within the Interim Government structures while they held informal coordination with UNT and AD through loose communication and verbal agreements. However, the plot failed as neither the Supreme Court nor the military high command came out in support of the uprising. Most conspirators were arrested, requested asylum or escaped the country. It is still not clear why the plot failed, but sources claim that there were significant leaks and Maduro moved to arrest everyone involved. In response, the conspirators tried to move the plot forward from its original date (between May 1st and 3rd) before ensuring all of the military support they required – without success (Caracas Consulting, 2019).

Following the failure of the April 30th Conspiracy, the rift between the two partisan groups continued to widen. For AD and UNT, the failure of the conspiracy meant that negotiations and a return to the electoral-institutional path was the only way out of the crisis. But for VP (and possibly PJ), the belief was that there was still time to cause a breakup in the dominant coalition – which never happened (Caracas Consulting, 2019). While the details of the April 30th Conspiracy are the most obscure of all the events covered in this analysis and ascertaining the facts is therefore complex, it still remains evident that the level of coordination within the opposition was informal. Essentially, the opposition had turned into a multi-tiered structure of concentric rings – with PJ and VP fully committed to the Interim Government strategy that would pressure the dominant coalition to a breaking point and a negotiated transition, while major opposition parties like AD and UNT refused to exit the electoral-institutional space and engage in properly hybrid strategies. Furthermore, it is possible that while PJ and VP had engaged in a more hybrid strategy during the months of the Interim Government, the communicational effort to offer persuasive incentives to break up the dominant coalition or negotiate with regime figures may have been insufficient after years of a much more Jacobin rhetoric. This was certainly the case after the Interim Government embraced the possibility of

a foreign military intervention, the epitome of Jacobin strategies discussed by Venezuelan opposition forces. It could be that their strategic approach got as close as ever to the ideal level of hybridity, but that it may not have been enough – or simply was not accompanied by a solid enough degree of formal coordination.

6. Summary and conclusion

Over the course of this chapter, we looked at productive conditions during moments where we know that permissive conditions were also present – thus allowing for a potential critical juncture to take place in Venezuela between 2013 and 2022. We discussed the two productive conditions chosen and the reasoning for their selection as the subject of analysis. Indicators for operationalization were also introduced, as well as parameters to classify the values of those indicators into categories. Finally, the analysis of productive conditions was conducted across four key events that demonstrated high values of permissive conditions.

The next chapter of the thesis will look at the final major element of critical juncture theory: the critical antecedent. This chapter has demonstrated that while permissive conditions were present for a critical juncture to take place at given times in recent Venezuelan history, those moments were not accompanied by sufficiently high productive conditions to trigger the juncture. The critical antecedent is a variable of critical juncture theory that is present before the emergence of permissive conditions and holds influence over productive conditions. Therefore, an analysis into why productive conditions were insufficient at the moments of potential critical juncture may find the answer in the study of the critical antecedent. As mentioned before, the critical antecedent for the purpose of this analysis is the incentives of opposition party members to be in politics.

The findings in these chapter connect with the upcoming one because they suggest the need to study the critical antecedent in the Venezuelan context. We already know that a critical juncture did not take place in Venezuela because none of the moments with high values in permissive conditions were accompanied by high values in productive conditions. But leaving the analysis up until this point will not provide sufficient insight into the political dynamics of contemporary Venezuela. It is necessary to go beyond and ask why those productive conditions never materialized. Or simply put, why was the opposition not able to coordinate sufficiently nor adopt the right strategic approach when confronted with an opportunity to achieve regime change.

CHAPTER V: INTRODUCING INCENTIVES AS THE CRITICAL ANTECEDENT IN CONTEMPORARY VENEZUELAN POLITICS

1. Introduction

This chapter will propose that the incentives that motivate opposition politicians are a critical antecedent for the critical juncture in this study, i.e., regime change in Venezuela. While the last chapter showed how the opposition missed opportunities for regime change (I.e., moments with high levels of permissive conditions) due to sub-optimum strategic and coordination choices (I.e., productive conditions), this chapter seeks to explain why opposition actors made these suboptimal choices in the first place. Given that critical junctures are moments when structural constraints are loose and actor agency becomes fundamental, understanding the motivations of opposition actors and how they affect decision-making becomes relevant to understand why regime change has not occurred in Venezuela. The main finding of this chapter is that opposition members are motivated by vastly different and often conflicting aspirations, preventing any formal coordination around an effective, multi-arena, hybrid strategy to confront incumbents: some may be interested in achieving power for the sake of power or to gain money and prestige. Others wish to eradicate Chavismo as a political force from Venezuela, upend the status quo and establish a new political regime. A third type may want to simply enact policies and reforms to help people in need around the country.

To do this, the chapter will first offer a general review of critical antecedents, including a theoretical summary of critical antecedents, argue for incentives as a critical antecedent in Venezuela, and discuss potential alternatives for critical antecedents. Secondly, the chapter will briefly summarize the proposed methodology to observe and understand the motivations of politicians through interviews with members of opposition parties. Thirdly, the chapter will present the results of the interviews and analyze the responses in search of common patterns

regarding motivations to be in politics and perceptions about the motivations of other opposition parties. Finally, the conclusion will provide a summary of the chapter, the significance of the findings for the overall work and connections to the next section of the study.

2. Bounding the critical antecedent

The critical antecedent in the Venezuelan context

As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, the critical antecedent is the main piece of the critical juncture left to be analyzed in this study. The underlying logic is that there are multiple antecedent conditions before the occurrence of the critical juncture. The particular nature of critical antecedents is that they pre-date the critical juncture *and* causally interact with factors involved in the critical juncture to produce path divergence. The critical antecedent is unrelated to permissive conditions because the critical antecedent is present outside (i.e., before) the temporal bounds set by the permissive conditions, and because permissive conditions emerge exogenously and not due to a prior critical antecedent. This is the opposite case with productive conditions, where the critical antecedent has a causal effect on its manifestation and values demonstrated. Given that both permissive and productive conditions are necessary for the occurrence of a critical juncture, the effect of the critical antecedent on productive conditions speaks to its further influence upon critical junctures and path divergence (Soifer, 2012, pp. 1576–1577).

While the theory on critical antecedents and critical junctures in general is often quite black-and-white, the study of real-life cases requires more nuance. Certainly, permissive conditions may have some degree of influence over certain types of critical antecedent. However, they

need not simultaneously covary. In other words, it is not possible to simply predict the behavior of the critical antecedent based on a given set of permissive conditions. In addition to this, it is also worth remembering that critical antecedents tend to be stickier (i.e., less subject to variation) than permissive conditions, which further speaks to the low capacity of the latter to influence the former.

Proposing a critical antecedent in Venezuela: the incentives of opposition politicians.

The last chapter offered a puzzle: if opposition parties were confronted with opportunities to achieve regime change if they had pursued the right coordination and strategic approaches, why did they not do it? The underlying logic of critical juncture theory is that there is an implicit factor, predating the occurrence of both permissive and productive conditions, which will have an effect on the latter – that is, in the case of this study, strategic and coordination choices. For the purpose of this analysis, the proposed critical antecedents are the incentives that motivate opposition politicians. In order to nuance the analysis further, incentives will be classified into two categories: personal and organizational.

Personal incentives refer to the motivations that party members carry with them when engaging in politics. They also have to do with the way in which opposition actors assess the costs and benefits of a given strategic or coordination approach. I distinguish between the personal incentives of both party leaders and low-ranking members (LRMs). People in positions of power determine the party line, which certainly includes the degree of coordination that the party pursues with other opposition groups and the strategic approaches they follow. Depending on their motivations, the leadership of a party could pursue strategies or coordination levels that either fall short of achieving regime change or do not even seek that as an objective in the first place. For example, a party could have a leadership whose motivations make them highly risk-averse, which then translates into an unwillingness to contest

incumbents outside of the electoral realm (such as street protests, due to the risks associated) and thus defaulting for more cohabitational approaches.

The personal incentives of LRMs also bear relevance. While they don't have as big an influence in setting the party strategy or their degree of coordination with other opposition groups as the senior leaders, a significantly large mass of party members with shared views may exercise influence over the party by pre-conditioning or limiting the coordination and strategic options available to the leadership. For example, it could be that the members of a party share a common set of values that is quite distinct from all the other opposition parties. This makes them highly skeptical of any coordination efforts with parties that do not share their ideology and thus put pressure on the party leadership to avoid any formal coordination and continue to engage in politics alone to maintain a sense of "ideological purity" (Flom, 2007). In general, the motivations of leaders and LRMs can vary across parties, and less frequently, over time – something bound to bring tension between parties and within them.

The second category is structural incentives, which refers to the incentives of leaders and LRMs that are shaped by the internal organization of their political parties. The internal setup of a political organization and the types of incentives they generate are relevant because they speak to the capacity of parties to change course if they have pursued sub-optimum strategic and coordination approaches. These are the incentives related to internal democracy: if party performance (i.e., coordination and strategic choices) differs from optimum, and assuming that party members recognize this, solid mechanisms of internal democracy would serve as incentives for course correction in two ways: by having the threat of losing their position, party leadership will be compelled to revise their strategic and coordination preferences. And by having mechanisms of internal renovation in place, a critical mass of party members could remove the leadership if they disagree with how they handle the party. The opposite is also

true: weak or inexistent mechanisms of internal democracy would hinder the capacity of a party to course correct and improve the quality of their leadership through internal competition.

In brief, a strong internal democracy generates a bottom-up pressure for better party performance through either (a) party leaders acting as effectively as possible to remain in power or (b) new leaders taking their place and trying new strategies or ideas. This means that internal democracy serves as an enabler of changes within the party line, rather than an obstacle. In its absence, changes to the party line are at the whim of perennial party leaders – neither of which seem to vary much over time, even if they fail to meet their goals. This can also be seen by exploring how a weak internal democracy ends up being an obstacle of change: if a strategy fails, senior leaders have no bottom-up pressure to step aside nor improve on their approaches because no one can challenge their leadership. Alternatively, emerging leaders

and LRMs who would like to change the direction of the party would lack the mechanisms to pursue such changes by either demanding changes from the leadership or changing the leadership itself.⁴

Accounting for structural incentives is relevant to assessing the variation in productive conditions (i.e., coordination and strategic choices) over time. Weak internal democracy mechanisms, which impede the removal of an inefficient leadership, may explain why a party consistently pursues inefficient strategic and coordination approaches against the wishes of discontent party members. It may also explain how a party is limited to electoral, office-seeking strategies because most of its party members are motivated by material incentives. There are two aspects worth mentioning in this respect. The first is that LRMs seem to show greater material motivation than conventional wisdom would suggest about the motivations of activists. The fact that ideological beliefs and other non-material motivations are less relevant

⁴ Interview with mid-level member of PJ, conducted on 08/20/2022.

than expected may speak to a loss of ideological content within Venezuelan opposition parties – which may be related to the contemporary definition of the Venezuelan political conflict as one that is simply concerned with maintaining Chavismo in power or removing it. The second aspect to consider is that, even in the face of weak internal democracy and potentially ineffective leadership, low and mid-level party members choose not to abandon their parties because of high opportunity costs. First, the party system overall has been weakened by repression from incumbents. Second, senior leaders of the party concentrate the little fundraising and material resources available. Finally, many –but not all- alternative options for political parties seem to suffer from the same issues of internal democracy that would lead them to leave their own in the first place.

Reviewing the critical antecedent chosen

To understand why the motivations of opposition politicians were chosen as the critical antecedent, it is worth reviewing the fundamentals of critical juncture theory. As described above, one of the key features of the critical antecedent is that its existence precedes the emergence of permissive conditions. This is very much the case in this study: the motivations of politicians preceded the emergence of the permissive conditions that resulted in the crises (and potential critical junctures) of 2013, 2015, 2017 and 2019. Before these moments of declining oil wealth, low popular support for incumbents, mounting foreign pressure, significant socio-institutional challenges and signs of internal incumbent dissent – the motivations of opposition members to be in politics had already been formed, leading them to seek their respective goals by pursuing different strategic and coordination approaches.

Another key feature of the critical antecedent is that it has significant influence over productive conditions. Here too, it makes sense to select the motivations of opposition politicians as the critical antecedent because of its influence over strategic and coordination choices. If

opposition performance could be measured in terms of utility maximization, then actors would assess a given strategic or coordination approach based on their projected utility. The assumption here would be that optimum strategies and levels of coordination to achieve regime change render the highest utility. But it may be that certain opposition actors pursue different goals from regime change and therefore assess utility differently. Whether their goal is to achieve regime change or not, opposition actors will assess a given strategic or coordination approach based on their perceived costs and benefits, as well as the probability of the approach being successful (thus reaping the benefits) or not (thus suffering the costs).

It may be that even if all opposition parties eventually seek regime change, their incentives may lead them to assign different values to the projected costs and benefits of regime change – as well as their perceived probability that regime change will occur. These differences in incentives across parties and their members may render varying dispositions towards regime change, based on perceived utility differences. This may explain why some opposition parties do not pursue the utility-maximizing choices in the game described in the previous chapter – because the game assumed that agents sought to maximize a utility defined by the very achievement of regime change. In essence, some parties may be motivated by other goals rather than regime change, may not see pursuing regime change as useful as pursuing other goals, or may see the probability of regime change as lower than other goals – given their assumptions about the behavior of other actors (both incumbents and other opposition parties).

Considering alternative critical antecedents

As the theory shows, there are many different antecedents that precede a critical juncture – with one of them standing out as fulfilling the characteristics of the critical antecedent. In this section, it is worth considering alternative options as critical antecedents. These alternative options were inferred from existing theories and extracted out of the very interviews conducted

with opposition party members (described in full below), in which interviewees were explicitly asked whether other factors shaped their decision-making regarding strategy and coordination, other than their motivations to be in politics.

The first potential critical antecedent that stood out was foreign influence. Specifically, during the worst years of the socioeconomic crisis in Venezuela, opposition parties became more susceptible to the influence of foreign actors than before. Given the economic struggles of the country, domestic donors became harder to come by and therefore opposition parties became more reliant on foreign donors. This gave opposition-inclined foreign actors a greater say in agenda-setting within the country. In some ways, this has helped the opposition by offering them some form of funding during times of economic hardship. But at the same time, some party members have expressed frustration with their parties pursuing undesirable strategies because they were pressured to do so by foreign donors.⁵

The second potential critical antecedent would be State repression and violence. The Maduro regime has given signs of its disposition to use violence in defense of its interests – shown in the 2014 and 2017 rounds of protests, as well as the accusations of human rights abuses that stand over the armed forces and intelligence agencies. Some parties have suggested that the first signs of political violence at the beginning of the Maduro administration supported the belief that Venezuela was no longer a democracy – which brought strategic implications on how to confront such a regime. And as political violence became higher, some parties moderated their stances to protect the lives and integrity of their members.⁶

While these factors seem to have a logic and explicit influence over the occurrence of critical junctures (i.e., regime change) in Venezuela, considering them as the critical antecedent would

⁵ Interview with senior leader member of VP, conducted on 09/27/2022.

⁶ Interview with low-ranking member of VP, conducted on 08/24/2022.

be a misinterpretation of their nature. In reality, foreign influence and state violence have served as structural factors that either allowed or impeded the occurrence of a critical juncture by constraining or loosening the capabilities of opposition actors. According to critical juncture theory, this is the effect typically displayed by permissive conditions and not by the critical antecedent. Furthermore, their effect as permissive conditions is already analyzed through the analysis of the foreign economic sanctions regime and domestic socio-institutional challenges covered in Chapter 1, both serving as a proxy for foreign influence and State violence respectively.

3. Measuring the critical antecedent

To assess the critical antecedent, one-on-one interviews were conducted with opposition party members. As described in the methodology section, each interview consisted of three main sections. The first section referred to the personal incentives of senior leaders within the political party of the interviewee, as well as the senior leaders of fellow opposition parties. Questions in this section asked about the motivations of senior leaders, the ways in which they can achieve said motivations and whether they shape the decision-making process of the party. The second section referred to the personal incentives of LRMs of the interviewee's political party. Questions in this section asked about what motivates someone to join their party and participate in activities, whether they receive material compensation for their work and assessing the moments in which party members are most active and mobilized. Finally, the third section referred to the structural incentives of political parties. Questions in this section asked about the process of electing authorities within the party, whether there is a risk that senior leaders could lose their position and whether young leaders can grow within the party.

Interviewees belonged to four different opposition parties: the core parties of the G4 (AD, PJ, UNT and VP). Party members were sampled at different levels of seniority, ranging from LRMs to senior leaders in the national board of their party. The sample also included a balance of party members in Caracas (the capital), other regions of the country and abroad (either in exile or due to migration).

As described in the methodology section of the introductory chapter, there will be two major types of incentives considered in the analysis of opposition actors and their political parties: the first is personal incentives, which can refer to those of senior leaders (having a material, policy or revolutionary motivation) or those of Low-Ranking Members (LRMs, having an activist or concrete motivation). The second type is organizational incentives, which refers to the capacity of a party to maintain effective leadership, provide spaces for emerging leaders and change courses if they have pursued sub-optimum strategic and coordination choices. Organizational incentives will take the form of either a weak or strong internal democracy.

4. Results of the interview responses

Once that the critical antecedent has been identified, a method of analysis has been described and a system of categorization has been proposed – the analysis offers a summary of the interview responses by aggregating the perception of interviewees with respect to the motivations of opposition members. The results are presented on three different tables, for each incentive sub-category.

The first table shows the personal incentives of senior leaders, displaying the (self and external) perception about what motivates the leadership of each party. This means that the table will show both what party members think that motivates their own leadership and the leadership of

other parties. This will help create a more complete rendering of perceived motivations. The insights of other parties are valuable because opposition parties interact with each other often and can also offer insight into their behavior. This is especially true if there is a common pattern on how others perceive the leadership of a single party. Including the insights of other parties also serves to control whatever biases there might be in the self-perception of a given party.

Table 5.1: summary of the personal incentives of senior leaders in G4 opposition parties

| | | Subject party | | | |
|----------------|-----|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| | | AD | PJ | UNT | VP |
| Observer party | AD | Material/Policy | Material/Policy | Material/policy | Revolutionary |
| | PJ | Material/Policy | Material/Policy | Material/Policy | Revolutionary |
| | UNT | Material/Policy | Policy/Revolutionary | Material/Policy | Revolutionary |
| | VP | Material | Material/Revolutionary | Material | Policy/Revolutionary |

Bold: self-perception of party members. Source: designed by author.

The second table displays the personal incentives of LRMs, showing the type described as most fitting to the activists in each party. Since there was significant variation in the description of what motivates LRMs, the table includes a section detailing the case of each party more specifically. Finally, the table also includes a section detailing the moments since 2013 that are perceived as peaks of party activist engagement and mobilization. This last section provides insight about what kinds of conditions or party preferences generate a greater engagement in activists. The reader should notice that while “concrete” and “activist” types of motivation vary

in nature across different parties (e.g., some are activists due to the sense of party history, others because they follow a national leader), all parties show a balance of both types. Furthermore, all parties express the same moments as peaks and valleys of engagement for their LRMs.

Table 5.2: summary of personal incentives of LRMs

| Party | Type | Description | Peaks of engagement |
|--------------|-----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| AD | Concrete/ Activist | Concrete: Aspire to different offices Activist: Sense of deep party history | <u>High</u> : Elections. <u>Low</u> : no strategy, no money. |
| PJ | Concrete/ Activist | Concrete: Achieve positions of power, money, lifestyle Activist: Duty to participate, loyalty to national leaders (e.g., Capriles). | <u>High</u> : elections. <u>Lows</u> : protests, no money, no strategy |
| UNT | Concrete/A ctivist | Concrete: Aspiration to occupy local and regional offices. Activist: ideological values, loyalty to national leader (e.g., Rosales). | <u>High</u> : Elections. <u>Lows</u> : protests, no money |
| VP | Concrete/ Activist | Concrete: Hold office. Activist: fighting against the regime, doing community work, following national leaders (e.g., López, Guaidó). | <u>Highs</u> : elections and protests. <u>Lows</u> : negotiations, no money, no strategy |

Source: designed by author.

The third and final table is for structural incentives, and it will show a score for the level of internal democracy in each party. This score will be based off three indicators, and whether they are fulfilled within a given party: the existence of clearly defined and regular mechanisms

for the election of party authorities, whether there is sufficient pressure on party leaders to perform well due to the risk of losing their position, and whether emerging party members can aspire to climb through the structures of the organization. Regardless of the strategic and coordination preferences shaped by personal incentives, the structural incentives will affect the capability of parties to change course, the incentives of senior leaders to perform well, and the incentives of emerging leaders with new ideas to join and work within a party where they feel that they can grow.

Table 5.3: summary of structural incentives

| Party | Mechanisms to elect authorities | Leaders losing position? | Emerging leaders growing? | Score (0-3) |
|--------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| AD | No. Due to internal disputes over control of the party, internal elections were suspended. | No. Significant heads of the party don't rotate. | Partially. Spaces for new leaders in regions, but not to contest national leaders. | 0.5 |
| PJ | No open elections since 2013(2022 process was by imposed consensus). | No. Party structure built so that everyone is loyal to one of four heads. | Partially. Party heads won't allow growth beyond regional level. | 0.5 |
| UNT | Partially. No internal elections since 2013, but the 2022 process was quite open. | No. Leadership of Rosales and his aides cannot be contested. | Yes. The party gives plenty of space for new leaders to grow and run for office. | 1.5 |

| | | | | |
|----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| VP | <p>No. Scheduled internal elections in 2015 and 2019 didn't take place. 2023 process was by imposed consensus.</p> | <p>Yes. It has happened in the past. Party decisions are often bottom-up and national leaders who don't agree are expelled.</p> | <p>Partially. It happens a lot that people in the youth branch rise to positions of authority. But not if your opposition has the support of superiors.</p> | <p>1.5</p> |
|----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|

Source: designed by author.

5. Analyzing the interview results

Considering the effect of incentives on potential critical junctures

To shape up the argument of this chapter, it is necessary to consider how incentive types influenced the strategic and coordination preferences of opposition parties at the different potential critical junctures identified in Chapter 1, and the incapacity of the opposition to capitalize on these moments by choosing sub-optimum strategies and coordination forms – which was discussed in Chapter 5.

While this section speaks in more detail about personal incentives, it is worth noting that structural incentives also play a role in this conversation by serving as an impediment for the opposition parties to escape these sub-optimum stances: internal mechanisms for the election of authorities are weak, which results in senior leaders who remain in power without regard for mistakes or failed strategies, and emerging leaders who may want to take the party in a different direction but are prevented to do so because they cannot grow within the party. The result of this can be observed in the fact that parties have had virtually the same strategic and

coordination preferences over the past ten years, perpetuating a cycle of strategic dispersion and difficulties to coordinate. The exception to this would probably be PJ, which had a significant sway from more cohabitational stances towards more Hybrid and Jacobin stances over the years. However, this may not be the result of a consensual course change within the party, but rather a reflection of the different incentive types that coexist in PJ – and the way in which, while the party has always demonstrated to have leaders with the “policy” type, there was a greater inclination towards leaders with the “material” type until 2016 (i.e., Henrique Capriles), and more inclination towards a “revolutionary” type after this year (i.e., Julio Borges).

Beyond this, let us dive deeper into the effect on personal incentives at different points in time. To start, the 2013 presidential election had promise for elevated levels of coordination between senior leaders of the G4 parties: all parties supported participating in the election because they all had their own reasons to do so under a common strategy. AD and UNT saw the opposition operating within the boundaries of the electoral-institutional board (fulfilling their more material inclination if the opposition won the election and gained access to the national government), while VP saw a clear way to remove Chavismo from power by beating Maduro in the election (fulfilling their more revolutionary inclination by potentially triggering regime change with an opposition victory). At the same time, both types of low-ranking member “profiles” would be able to support this approach: “concrete” types would pursue this cohabitational inclination because there were plenty of resources during the campaign and because winning the election brought the promise of power – and “activists” were willing to support the strategy charted by the leadership.⁷ Having the candidate, Henrique Capriles, be from PJ served as a perfect bridge between the two party blocs and an intrinsic motivation for the party to support this strategy. But when election results became contested by accusations

⁷ Interview with low-ranking member of VP, conducted on 08/24/2022.

of a potential electoral fraud, Capriles chose to follow a more cohabitational approach and refused to confront Maduro outside of the electoral-institutional realm by taking to the streets (a reflection of his policy-material inclination). This siding with the stances of AD and UNT created a major rift between PJ and VP that would result in the latter unilaterally pushing for the 2014 protests as a Jacobin method to remove Maduro, resulting in the persecution of the VP leadership and the imprisonment of Leopoldo López.

After this 2014 split, the 2015 parliamentary election was a sort of re-edition of the state of affairs seen in 2013. With the entire G4 returning to the electoral-institutional arena, AD and UNT saw the materialization of a strategy that they were willing to support. And by building an electoral campaign that centered around the idea of expressing discontent against Maduro and the desire for change, VP saw a takeover of the National Assembly as an opportunity to start constitutional mechanisms to remove Chavismo from power. The plentiful resource availability during the campaign and clear strategy marked by leadership also meant that both “concrete” and “activist” LRMs would be highly engaged. The strategy worked and the opposition had an outstanding victory in the election – securing them a 2/3 majority in parliament. But when 2016 began, the opposition was once again thrown into disarray by disagreements on what to do exactly with this newly won majority in the National Assembly. On one extreme was UNT, contempt with enacting policy reform and occupying a significant space of power (derived from their material inclination). On the other extreme was VP, who saw parliament control as a simple vehicle towards reaching regime change (derived from their revolutionary inclination). In the middle were AD and PJ, who wanted to balance a desire for policy making with an exploration of constitutional means to achieve the removal of Maduro

(a reflection of the material inclination of the former and the revolutionary inclination within some factions of the latter).⁸

The 2017 nationwide protests were a very different scenario. This was a clear Jacobin approach, with eventual efforts to turn hybrid (e.g., the offering of guarantees to parts of the dominant coalition like the military under a new regime). But the lack of an electoral-institutional arena meant that AD and UNT were unwilling to support this strategy and thus incapable of formally coordinating. PJ was more inclined to join VP – possibly because Julio Borges (the leader of the faction with the more revolutionary inclination) had become President of the National Assembly that year and thus become more prominent than the Capriles, more material faction. But the “policy” types within PJ remained skeptical about how violent clashes with the National Guard would help the people most in need around the country. Yet again, there was strategic dispersion and no formal coordination. LRMs, on the other hand, were confronted with the absence of an election, which made it harder to mobilize party structures. In addition to this, the lack of fundraising typical of an electoral campaign and the severe economic crisis endured at the time meant that parties had little money in their treasury.

*“Some of the lowest moments of party mobilization are during protests. Many party members participate in them, but they do not do so because they are organized party members but as spontaneous citizens. It is not as if the parties set up shuttles to mobilize their members to a protest all the time. Even if parties could, they tend not to do it as a strategy. But when there is an electoral campaign, specifically a campaign rally, that’s when parties mobilize their members. The party structure is usually only mobilized with plenty of resources in those contexts”.*⁹

⁸ Interview with senior leader of AD, conducted on 08/03/2022.

⁹ Interview with senior leader of AD, conducted on 08/03/2022.

Given that the protests were a Jacobin-hybrid strategy, it would only be pursued by “concrete” type if it were well funded (which it was not compared to an electoral campaign) or had a material promise (which was not evidently clear).

Finally, if the 2015 parliamentary elections were a reedition of the state of affairs in the 2013 presidential election – then the 2019 Guaidó interim government was a reedition of the state of affairs in the 2017 protests, in that the core of the strategy fell outside of the electoral-institutional arena. Certainly, Guaidó’s claim to the presidency was based upon the Constitution and the legitimacy of the National Assembly as the only democratically elected institution at the time, but the essence of the strategy rested on the idea of creating enough coercive and persuasive incentives to cause a breakup of the dominant coalition. Street protests and discrete work were well within the means that the Interim Government was willing to pursue. This is not surprising, given that Guaidó and most of his team mainly included figures from VP and the more “revolutionary” types of PJ, such as Julio Borges – who was appointed Commissioner of Foreign Affairs of the Interim Government. As such, AD and UNT were unsurprisingly uncomfortable with the idea of seeking a “forceful” outcome – and were described to constantly advocate for a negotiated solution that eventually resulted in an electoral process, sought through channels of communication with both the rest of the G4 and the Maduro regime. Given that there was no electoral process, it would have been harder to mobilize LRMs. But since the opposition was proposing a clearer strategy than in 2017 (especially in the case of PJ and VP, who strongly supported the Interim Government), and since the Guaidó team had access to resources from regime bank accounts frozen by foreign allies of the opposition – these attenuated the unwillingness of “concrete” LRMs to mobilize.

Assessing individual opposition parties

Acción Democrática, or AD, is a party whose history plays a fundamental role in the motivations of its members. Being the only mainstream opposition party that predates the emergence of Chavismo, and the only one to have governed the country before, most of its members connect their party engagement with a sense of pride over what the party has achieved in the past or tradition from doing politics in such a historic party. This pride instills a sense of “right to rule” in *ADecos*, which manifests in the self-perception of their leadership to have both a “material” and “policy” motivation: some see belonging to AD as a legitimate opportunity to achieve public office and the prestige that comes with it, while others see AD as the historic representative of the people and thus the natural place to defend its rights. Other parties share the perception that leadership in AD is motivated by a combination of material and policy-oriented incentives – with the exception of the more hardline VP, who tends to perceive AD as solely motivated by material gains. The historic pride of AD is also perceived in the motivations of its LRMs, with many of them joining the party out of a deep sense of party history or simply because their families belonged to or supported AD before they were born. While this is a demonstration of “activist” motivation, LRMs also demonstrate “concrete” motivation in their desire to join AD as a means to reach different public offices.¹⁰

Despite all of the engagement of new members and current leaders with the party and its history, structural incentives in AD score low values: the party has been unable to successfully organize internal elections since Maduro is president, and the one time they did it led to a split in the party and the takeover of the board by a faction appointed by the Maduro-controlled Supreme Court. Since then, the legitimate board of the party led by Henry Ramos Allup has abstained from organizing any new internal elections. In addition to this, party members perceive that senior leaders cannot lose their position, that the significant heads of the party will simply not rotate. And while young people are drawn to the party due to its sense of history,

¹⁰ Interview with senior leader of AD, conducted on 08/03/2022.

they find it difficult to find spaces to grow in the party beyond regional decision-making bodies.¹¹

If AD is distinct for the clear motivation of its leaders, *Primero Justicia* is quite the contrary. Certainly, the self-perception of party members in PJ veers towards both the “material” and “policy” motivation – with some leaders seen as simply motivated by the desire to reach power and others having a true vocation for service. When also considering the perception of other parties about the motivations of leaders in PJ – the greatest motivation type remains “policy”, but there is also a fair balance between perceptions of its leadership being motivated by the “material” and “revolutionary” type. This diversity in perception speaks to the diversity in styles and ideological inclinations of leaders within the party, also reflected in the variation of strategic approaches over time. People who comment on the “policy” motivation of PJ speak to it being a “reasonable” party where people feel that they can help their communities, while those who comment on the “revolutionary” motivation of PJ speak to its commitment to regime change in Venezuela – although not as strongly as others in the G4, much less in the broader opposition.¹²

LRMs in PJ also demonstrate a mix of “concrete” and “activist” motivations, although manifested differently than in the case of AD. Certainly there are more similarities on the “concrete” side of things, where LRMs are often motivated by a desire to achieve positions of power, from which they can also extract money and a certain lifestyle. But the differences are starker on the “activist” side of their motivation, where members of this younger party are not motivated by history but rather from a sense of duty to participate and engage in politics. This results in an ethos for PJ members that is decidedly more civic in nature. Alongside this sense of responsibility, LRMs are also observed as motivated by a belief in national leaders such as

¹¹ *Idem.*

¹² Interview with mid-level member of PJ, conducted on 08/20/2022.

Henrique Capriles. In fact, some interviewees claimed that the periods of greatest rise in party membership were during the unsuccessful presidential campaigns of Capriles in 2012 and 2013 – where new members were attracted to the party due to the charismatic appeal of the candidate.¹³

Structural incentives in PJ, on the other hand, score as low as in AD: there have been no internal elections since Maduro became president in 2013 (there was a process in 2022, but almost all candidates to become authorities were imposed by consensus). Furthermore, the party structure is built so that everyone is loyal to one of the four heads of the party – preventing any upwards pressure on the senior leadership- while those same party heads also prevent emerging leaders from growing beyond the regional level.¹⁴

Perceptions about motivations in *Un Nuevo Tiempo* strongly resemble those perceived in AD. This should not be surprising, since UNT is a social-democratic party like AD, very similar in style to it and originated from it as a regional breakup in the state of Zulia, the home turf of its historic leader: governor and former presidential candidate Manuel Rosales. Members of UNT share the perception of their own leadership as motivated by both “material” and “policy” incentives (a self-perception not only shared with AD but also with PJ). This dual motivation is a shared perception by most of the other G4 parties. The slight difference in the responses of interviewees lies in the “activist” motivation of UNT leaders emerging from a commitment to certain ideological principles and values rather than to a sense of history. And like with AD, members of VP stand out as the difference in cross-perceptions by claiming that the motivations of UNT leaders are solely “material” and not balanced with “policy” incentives.¹⁵

¹³ Interview with senior leader of PJ, conducted on 08/25/2022.

¹⁴ Ídem.

¹⁵ Interview with mid-level member of UNT, conducted on 09/29/2022.

In what clearly stands out as a common pattern in opposition parties, those in UNT see the motivations of its LRMs as a mix of the “concrete” and “activist” type. The former emerges from the aspiration of party members to hold public office, especially at the local and regional level – a reflection of the sub-national origin of the party and its strength in particular states like Zulia. The latter emerges from the significant adhesion of its members to the social-democratic ideology of the party (suggesting that the party has ideologically coherent members at all levels), and the following produced by their national leader – Manuel Rosales.¹⁶

Another aspect worth noting is that UNT has significantly stronger internal democracy mechanisms (i.e., structural incentives) than AD and PJ. Certainly, the party had not had internal elections since 2013 – but the elections they held in 2022 were seen as quite open to competition and the aspirations of different members (the party even mandated high quotas for women and youth participation). And while there was criticism about how the leadership of Rosales and his close allies cannot be contested, interviewees also claimed that the party gave plenty of space for new leaders to grow within the party and run for office.¹⁷

Voluntad Popular stands out from the other G4 parties in multiple ways. The first of them is that the motivations of its senior leaders have the greatest consensus of them all. Certainly, the self-perception of people in VP is that their leaders are motivated by a combination of the “policy” and “revolutionary” type. On one hand, party leaders are committed to an ideological mantra of “all rights for all people” and have made unprecedented advancements in the inclusion of minorities such as the LGBTQ+ community and prison inmates. On the other hand, the party is strongly committed to the definition of Maduro’s government as an authoritarian regime, takes pride of being the first major opposition party to have done so, and is therefore committed to various arenas to achieve regime change and the democratization of the country.

¹⁶ *Ídem.*

¹⁷ Interview with mid-level member of UNT, conducted on 09/20/2022.

There seems to be no disagreement about this in other opposition parties, who see the motivation of leaders in VP as definitively revolutionary – the most hardliner party of the G4.¹⁸

Greater insight on this matter is offered when looking at the motivations of LRMs in VP. As with the rest of the G4 parties, the mix of “concrete” and “activist” type is sustained. On the one hand there are many who have joined the party with a desire to reach power and hold office. And on the other hand, there are those who have joined to engage in community work. But both of these particular motivations come back to a specific “activist” motivation, which is the belief that no community engagement nor any public office will be effective in the fulfilment of their duties until regime change and democratization have been achieved in Venezuela. This is reinforced by the leadership of national leaders like Leopoldo López and Juan Guaidó, who cultivate very significant following and have insisted on the subordination of policy reform and political aspirations to the need for regime change in Venezuela. Other parties see these as demonstrations of excessive ambition and neglect for impact-making, while people in VP see it as a realistic recognition that they cannot achieve meaningful reforms in the country until democracy is re-established.¹⁹

VP has a similar score in structural incentives as UNT: national leaders are pressured from below to follow the preferences of most of the party – and have lost their position if they don’t. And many in the youth branch have had the chance to rise to positions of authority. But this is often difficult without the support of some national leaders, and the party has not had an internal election without imposed consensus since Maduro became president.²⁰

Similarities and differences among senior leaders.

¹⁸ Interview with senior leader of VP, conducted on 09/27/2022.

¹⁹ Interview with low-ranking member of VP, conducted on 08/24/2022.

²⁰ Idem.

Senior leaders in the G4 parties fall within three distinct groups based on their personal incentive type. On one hand, there is UNT and AD – whose senior leadership is perceived as motivated by a balance of the “policy” and “material” type, with a slight inclination towards the latter. On the other hand, there is VP – whose senior leadership is motivated mostly by the “revolutionary” types. In the middle of these two groups is PJ – whose senior leadership is perceived to be motivated by a fair balance of all types.

This divide suggests that AD and UNT would act in tandem and struggle to reach agreements with VP – namely because the former two have a strategic inclination towards cohabitational approaches while the latter has a strategic inclination towards Jacobin approaches. This would also make formal coordination more difficult between the AD-UNT axis and VP, since the former only desires formal coordination within the electoral-institutional board and the latter only wishes formal coordination if there is a clear path towards achieving regime change (which may include non-electoral means).

But one could speculate that there is a possibility for “material” and “revolutionary” types to prefer a hybrid strategy if it contains elements that are typically more to their liking. Cementing this preference through formal coordination would be possible if parties could craft a strategy that falls within (or includes) the electoral-institutional arena while at the same time offering a clear path towards regime change. The diversity in motivation that exists within PJ suggests that this party could be instrumental as a bridge between the AD-UNT bloc and VP. But PJ leadership would be effective in serving as intermediary in so far as it ends up in the middle by choice and not by inertia. That is, that the party chooses to act as a bridge between both blocs of the G4 and not because it is constantly swaying from siding with AD-UNT to siding with VP in each new circumstance.

Similarities and differences among LRMs.

It has already been established that all G4 parties have LRMs motivated by both the “concrete” and the “activist” types. That is, motivated by material and non-material incentives. It has also been established that the two types manifest in different ways across two parties – the “activist” types, for example, can refer to a sense of historic pride in a party, commitment to ideological values or support for a charismatic national leader. This is reasonable, considering the complexity of human nature and the fact that each party has thousands of members. However, it would be relevant to ascertain whether LRMs tend towards each of the types in order to assess how LRMs condition the options available to senior leadership.

The inclination of LRMs in the opposition is better understood when considering another common pattern across all parties: the peaks and valleys of engagement. That is, those moments that generate the most and least engagement from LRMs with the party’s directives, activities, and actions. Identifying these moments is relevant because by identifying the features of moments with engagement, it is possible to understand the motivations of LRMs from an empirical perspective. The fact that LRMs are most engaged during elections, for example, should provide insight into the desire to follow a strategy with a concrete material gain, or the likelihood of material gain from potentially gaining power. Respondents in all parties identified elections as the peaks of engagement and protests or other moments where parties have no money nor strategy as the valleys of engagement.

Across these two extremes, there seems to emerge a stronger inclination towards material incentives: elections are moments where party members can achieve positions of power (and all the by-products of said position), as well as a moment where parties improve their fundraising for the electoral campaigns and thus have more money available for activists. And the moments of least engagement are precisely identified as those were “there is no money”. While LRMs may be motivated by both material and non-material incentives, it seems like the extreme moments of engagement are rather defined by material incentives.

Similarities and differences on internal democracy.

It is important to assess the structural incentives across all G4 parties because this may provide insight into the collective capabilities of the opposition to change course with respect to strategic and coordination choices, put pressure on senior leaders to perform well and offer spaces for new leaders and innovative ideas. When it comes to internal democracy, it turns out that there are a few broad common patterns – with some parties acting as outliers in one aspect or another.

Almost all G4 parties have struggled, for example, to have clearly defined and periodically regular mechanisms to elect its internal authorities. Almost none of them have had any sort of internal election since Maduro became president in 2013. Different parties offered different explanations as to why did not take place, ranging from internal dispute to the desire to build consensus in front of a pressing authoritarian regime. The exception to this norm was UNT: while they had only one internal process since 2013, this process (which occurred in 2022) was actually quite open to competition and participation by all members – which stands in contrast to other internal processes that opposition parties had that same year but were actually to rubberstamp internal candidacies imposed from above.

Another common pattern is that national leaders in opposition parties are at little-to-none risk of losing their position, regardless of their performance. Different explanations for this speak to the fact that national leaders do not wish to rotate and that their position cannot be contested because the party structure is built so that decision-making always comes back to them and rising within the party requires the protection or support of one of the senior leaders. The exception to the norm here seems to be VP. Certainly, Leopoldo López has been the hegemonic, undisputable leader of the party since its foundation in 2011. But unlike other parties, were

low-level and mid-level members speak of discontent about their senior leadership and the desire for renovation, party members at all levels in VP seem content with López remaining as *de facto* head of the party (he actually stepped down as *de jure* head of the party following the 2022 internal process). Furthermore, party members at VP speak of the fact that senior leaders have often been removed from their position and even expelled from the party when they have disagreed with party lines agreed from the bottom-up.

Finally, most opposition parties seem to have partially open avenues for new leaders to join and grow within the organization. The common description is that talented leaders will be recruited by a party early on but that their growth is conditioned on two aspects: on one hand free, unrestricted growth until they reach the regional level. On the other hand, accessing national decision-making spaces will become quite difficult due to the unwillingness of current senior leaders to step down or further dilute their influence by sharing power with emerging leaders. Furthermore, this growth will often require that one or multiple senior leaders offer support or “protection” to the emerging leaders a pupil of sorts:

*“There is no renovation policy in the party. You may find spaces to grow at the local and regional level, but not at the national level. The only way to jump into the national stage is if you become a ‘dolphin’ (I.e., pupil) of one of the four heads of the party”.*²¹

The exception to this norm seems to be, once again, UNT. This is because members of the party have a clear conception of the organization as a space to grow and eventually run for office (a very materialistic, and electorally inclined *raison d’être*). People who join UNT know what they are getting themselves into and perceive that if they work hard and well – they will eventually be rewarded with a candidacy.

²¹ Interview with mid-level member of PJ, conducted on 08/20/2022.

6. Summary and conclusion

Over the course of this chapter, we looked at the motivations of opposition members to participate in politics as the critical antecedent that shapes their strategic and coordination preferences. The chapter included a theoretical review of critical antecedents, including the proposal and defense of opposition member motivations as the critical antecedent for this study and the consideration of potential alternatives. The chapter also offered a brief review of the methodology to gain insight into the motivations of opposition politicians and their categorization into different types. Finally, the chapter provided with the aggregation of interview responses, as well as an analysis of how motivations vary across different parties and how they may have impacted moments of potential critical junctures between 2013 and 2022.

The following chapter will offer a conclusion to the thesis, with a summary of the key insights produced in this study about the decision-making of the opposition in the past and the potentially missed opportunities to achieve regime change. This section will also include a discussion on what the study suggests that should be improved about the performance of the Venezuelan opposition to come closer towards democratization. Namely, how can the opposition achieve formal coordination around hybrid strategies – accounting for their motivations to be in politics? Finally, the conclusion section will discuss the main questions that have remained unanswered – thus pointing to potential extensions of the literature.

The findings in this chapter connect with the following one in multiple ways. First, because this chapter is the one that essentially answers the research question on how the motivations of politicians have affected the capacity of the Venezuelan opposition to achieve regime change. Secondly, because the findings in this chapter inform any potential observations about how the opposition could improve their performance. And thirdly, because by concluding the argument

of this study, it sets the boundaries of what has and has not been covered – thus defining the avenues for potential extension of literature.

CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

Over the course of this work, the main focus of the analysis centered on understanding why regime change has not taken place since Nicolás Maduro became president of Venezuela in 2013. Given that I tried to study a potential event that never occurred, the focus of the research shifted to the adequate performance that the Venezuelan opposition should have to theoretically achieve regime change. To better understand what shapes opposition performance, I relied on the critical juncture framework to identify factors that would produce an opportunity for regime change (i.e., permissive conditions), the aspects of decision-making that determined the quality of the opposition performance (i.e., productive conditions), and the incentives that influence and shape said opposition decision-making (i.e., critical antecedent).

The study first demonstrated that structural factors that sustain the status quo of the Maduro regime have not always been strong. Over the last ten years, there has been a significant degree of variation, leading to the emergence of opportunities for regime change in 2015, 2017 and 2019. During each of these moments, structural factors that sustain the rule of incumbents were weaker and thus loosened constraints on the agency of opposition actors to effect change and produce a path divergence in Venezuela (i.e., regime change). By pointing to the existence of these moments of opportunity, the study demonstrated that structural factors were an insufficient explanation for the survival of the Maduro regime since 2013 – and invited to analyze these moments of opportunity in greater detail to find alternative explanations.

The study then showed how the moments of opportunity did not turn into actual regime change because the performance of the Venezuelan opposition was insufficiently strong. By reviewing the decision-making of opposition actors during these critical junctures, I showed that the main parties failed to achieve regime change either because they lacked sufficient coordination among them or because they did not pursue a hybrid strategic approach that combined some

degree of confrontation against incumbents on multiple arenas with persuasive efforts to turn members of the dominant coalition against Maduro. In some cases, both things were absent from the decision-making of the opposition. By showing that the agency of opposition actors had an influence on the failure to achieve regime change, I pointed to the relevance of understanding what led opposition actors to make these choices in the first place.

Finally, the study covered the different types of motivations to be in politics that opposition actors had, and the way in which those motivations turned into strategic and coordination preferences. By showing that the motivations of some senior leaders and low-ranking members of the main opposition parties shaped choices that differed from the most effective alternatives (i.e., formal coordination and hybrid strategies) I demonstrated how the motivations of Venezuelan opposition actors affected their capacity to achieve regime change. This last finding rounded-up the argument of this work on the effect of incentives upon the effectiveness of agents to produce change in the political arena – represented in my case study by the effectiveness of the Venezuelan opposition to achieve regime change and a transition to democracy.

There are some limitations to my work that are worth considering. For once, I sought to identify the motivations of opposition politicians and how they influence the decision-making process – but I did not dive deeper into what shaped those motivations in the first place. Furthermore, while my work was focused on agents and their effects upon political outcomes, I was limited to the perspective of the opposition and did not consider the decision-making of incumbents in sufficient depth. Finally, I focused my work on Venezuela as a single case study – meaning that I did not take into consideration other countries where regime change may have taken place to better test my theory.

As such, some potential extensions of the literature based on the findings of this work could include an expanded scope that seeks to also understand the factors that influence the motivations of opposition politicians in the first place, a deeper review of incumbents as agents operating in a context of critical junctures, and the testing of the theory offered in this work on other case studies where regime change did take place. Nevertheless, it is my expectation that this work will help to advance the discussion on the effect that the desires of actors have on political outcomes. And it is my aspiration that this piece contributes to the ongoing efforts to lead the Venezuelan people through a path that leads the nation towards a bright democracy with rights and opportunities for all.

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Appendix

| TABLE 3.1 – RESULTS OF QUARTERLY PERMISSIVE CONDITION SCORES | | | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| | Oil wealth | Regime support | Economic sanctions | Internal dissent |
| I-2013 | LOW | MEDIUM | LOW | MEDIUM |
| II-2013 | LOW | MEDIUM | LOW | MEDIUM |
| III-2013 | LOW | MEDIUM | LOW | LOW |
| IV-2013 | LOW | MEDIUM | LOW | LOW |
| I-2014 | LOW | MEDIUM | LOW | LOW |
| II-2014 | LOW | HIGH | LOW | LOW |
| III-2014 | LOW | HIGH | LOW | LOW |
| IV-2014 | MEDIUM | HIGH | LOW | MEDIUM |
| I-2015 | MEDIUM | HIGH | MEDIUM | LOW |
| II-2015 | MEDIUM | HIGH | MEDIUM | LOW |
| III-2015 | HIGH | HIGH | MEDIUM | LOW |
| IV-2015 | HIGH | HIGH | MEDIUM | LOW |
| I-2016 | HIGH | HIGH | MEDIUM | LOW |
| II-2016 | HIGH | HIGH | MEDIUM | LOW |
| III-2016 | HIGH | HIGH | MEDIUM | LOW |
| IV-2016 | HIGH | HIGH | MEDIUM | LOW |
| I-2017 | MEDIUM | HIGH | MEDIUM | LOW |
| II-2017 | HIGH | HIGH | MEDIUM | MEDIUM |
| III-2017 | MEDIUM | HIGH | HIGH | MEDIUM |
| IV-2017 | MEDIUM | HIGH | HIGH | LOW |
| I-2018 | MEDIUM | HIGH | HIGH | LOW |

| | | | | |
|-----------------|--------|------|------|------|
| II-2018 | MEDIUM | HIGH | HIGH | LOW |
| III-2018 | MEDIUM | HIGH | HIGH | LOW |
| IV-2018 | MEDIUM | HIGH | HIGH | LOW |
| I-2019 | MEDIUM | HIGH | HIGH | LOW |
| II-2019 | MEDIUM | HIGH | HIGH | HIGH |
| III-2019 | MEDIUM | HIGH | HIGH | LOW |
| IV-2019 | MEDIUM | HIGH | HIGH | LOW |
| I-2020 | HIGH | HIGH | HIGH | LOW |
| II-2020 | HIGH | HIGH | HIGH | LOW |
| III-2020 | HIGH | HIGH | HIGH | LOW |
| IV-2020 | HIGH | HIGH | HIGH | LOW |
| I-2021 | MEDIUM | HIGH | HIGH | LOW |
| II-2021 | MEDIUM | HIGH | HIGH | LOW |
| III-2021 | MEDIUM | HIGH | HIGH | LOW |
| IV-2021 | MEDIUM | HIGH | HIGH | LOW |
| I-2022 | LOW | HIGH | HIGH | LOW |
| II-2022 | LOW | HIGH | HIGH | LOW |
| III-2022 | LOW | HIGH | HIGH | LOW |
| IV-2022 | LOW | HIGH | HIGH | LOW |

TABLE 4.1: INDICATORS OF MEASUREMENT FOR PRODUCTIVE CONDITIONS

| | Degree of coordination | Strategic Approach |
|------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| CATEGORIES | <p>No Coordination</p> <p>-C1: there are no public or private spaces for coordination (0 points).</p> <p>-C2: no agreement between parties, whether flexible or concrete (0 points).</p> <p>-C3: High-cost actions undertaken individually by parties (0 points).</p> | <p>Cohabitation strategy</p> <p>-S1: not willing/capable of confronting incumbents on multiple “arenas”, limited to one or a couple of interlinked arenas, namely the electoral and institutional (0 points).</p> <p>-S2: always willing to negotiate with incumbents. (0 points).</p> <p>-S3: no attempts to break the dominant coalition. (0 points).</p> |
| | <p>Informal Coordination</p> <p>-C1: flexible and private agreements (1 point).</p> <p>-C2: agreement on loose issues (e.g., general platforms, cross-party endorsements, protests) (1 point).</p> <p>-C3: High-cost actions are sometimes undertaken collectively and sometimes individually by parties (1 point).</p> | <p>Hybrid strategy</p> <p>-S1: confront the regime on multiple “arenas” (e.g., elections, street protests, institutional spaces, discrete activities). (2 points)</p> <p>-S2: negotiate with incumbents when conducive to regime change. (2 points)</p> <p>-S3: persuasive efforts to break the dominant coalition by inviting certain incumbents to join a new, emerging coalition. (2 points)</p> |
| | <p>Formal coordination</p> <p>-C1: opposition establishes mechanisms to structure and facilitate their interaction (e.g., decision-making rules, conflict resolution mechanisms). (2 points)</p> <p>-C2: Agreement on concrete issues (e.g., electoral coalitions, common policy platforms, joint candidates). (2 points)</p> <p>-C3: High-cost actions undertaken collectively. (2 points)</p> | <p>Jacobin strategy</p> <p>-S1: not willing or capable of confronting the regime on multiple “arenas”, they limit themselves to the most radical or violent means (e.g., discrete activities, armed struggle, foreign intervention). (0 points).</p> <p>-S2: unwilling to negotiate with incumbents. (0 points).</p> <p>-S3: coercive efforts to break the dominant coalition, by pressuring certain incumbents to switch sides by creating a “breakpoint”. (0 points).</p> |

TABLE 5.1: SUMMARIZED RESULTS OF PRODUCTIVE CONDITIONS PER PARTY, PER YEAR (2013-2022)

| Party & time period | C-1 | C-2 | C-3 | C- total | S-1 | S-2 | S-3 | S- total |
|---------------------|-----|-----|-----|-------------|-----|-----|-----|-------------|
| AD-2013 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| UNT-2013 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| PJ-2013 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| VP-2013 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 5 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| AP-2013 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| VENTE- 2013 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 5 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| AD-2015 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 6 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| PJ-2015 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 6 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| UNT-2015 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 6 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| VP-2015 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 5 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| AP-2015 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 6 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| VENTE- 2015 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| AD-2017 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| PJ-2017 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 4 |
| UNT-2017 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| VP-2017 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 4 |
| AP-2017 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

| | | | | | | | | |
|----------------|---|---|---|----------|---|---|---|----------|
| VENTE- 2017 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 4 |
| AD-2019 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 3 |
| PJ-2019 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 5 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 6 |
| UNT-2019 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| VP-2019 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 6 |
| AP-2019 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| VENTE- 2019 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 |