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**The role of Youth Social Movements in a (Re)democratization Process from a Civil and Political
Rights Perspective in Venezuela (1998-2026):**

***Informing the development of a comprehensive working methodology for training the next
generation of Venezuelan democratic leaders***

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Abstract:

This dissertation examines the role of Venezuelan youth social movements during the country's process of democratic backsliding between 1998 and 2026 and their potential contribution to a future process of (re)democratization from a civil and political rights perspective. It addresses the question of how youth democratic resilience can inform the development of a methodological framework for training the next generation of democratic leaders. The study is grounded in theories of democracy, democratic backsliding, political socialization, youth political participation, and human rights, adopting a qualitative case study design that combines process tracing and document analysis. The findings demonstrate that democratic backsliding progressively weakened not only constitutional institutions but also the mechanisms through which democratic citizenship, civic culture, and democratic leadership had historically been reproduced. Nevertheless, Venezuelan youth continued to sustain democratic resilience through student movements, civil society organizations, humanitarian initiatives, community leadership, and digital activism. Building upon these findings, the dissertation proposes an original *Human Rights-Based Methodological Framework for Training and Empowering the Next Generation of Venezuelan Democratic Leaders*. It argues that sustainable democratic reconstruction depends not only on restoring democratic institutions but also on rebuilding the *democratic human infrastructure* capable of sustaining constitutional democracy across generations.

Keywords: Venezuelan democratic backsliding, youth political participation, democratic leadership, (re)democratization

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Introduction

Venezuela has been facing a multidimensional political, social, institutional, and economic crisis since 1998 that has progressively eroded trust in constitutional institutions and democratic processes, directly affecting the quality of democracy and the rule of law (Casal Hernández, 2020). Numerous scholars have argued that the Venezuelan political system evolved from a democratic framework toward a hybrid and increasingly authoritarian model characterized by the concentration of power, the weakening of checks and balances, increasing restrictions on civil and political rights, and growing political polarization. While the literature has extensively examined the causes and consequences of democratic backsliding in Venezuela, less attention has been devoted to understanding the role of youth social movements within this broader political transformation.

Within this context, youth have emerged as important actors in the defence of democratic values, civic participation, and political engagement. Student movements, youth civic organizations, advocacy networks, and digital activism initiatives have played visible roles in promoting democratic resilience and defending civil and political rights despite operating in an increasingly restrictive environment. As

Coe and Vandegrift (2015) argue in the broader Latin American context, youth political participation has increasingly expanded beyond traditional institutional channels toward new forms of civic engagement, social mobilization, and digital activism. However, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding the specific contribution of Venezuelan youth movements to both resistance against authoritarian practices and prospects for democratic reconstruction.

The political developments of January 2026 have opened a new and uncertain phase in Venezuela's contemporary history, characterized by renewed debates regarding democratic transition, institutional reconstruction, and citizen participation. In this context, understanding the limitations, challenges, and lessons learned by youth social movements throughout the period of democratic backsliding between 1998 and 2026 becomes particularly relevant. Therefore, this research seeks to evaluate the role of youth social movements in Venezuela's (re)democratization process from a civil and political rights perspective and to identify lessons that may inform the development of a comprehensive methodological framework for training the next generation of Venezuelan democratic leaders.

This dissertation is structured into four chapters. Chapter I develops the theoretical and conceptual framework, examining democracy, democratic backsliding, youth political participation, and (re)democratization processes. Chapter II creates the historical and contextual background of Venezuela's democratic crisis and the erosion of the Punto Fijo paradigm between 1958 and 2026. Chapter III explores the evolution of youth political participation in Venezuela from 1998 to 2026, focusing on student movements, civic organizations, democratic advocacy networks, and digital forms of engagement, as well as the political, institutional, and socioeconomic constraints that shape youth participation. Finally, Chapter IV examines the contribution of youth leadership to future (re)democratization efforts and presents a methodological framework for training and empowering the next generation of Venezuelan democratic leaders.

General Objective

To evaluate the role of youth social movements in Venezuela's (re)democratization process from a civil and political rights perspective between 1998 and 2026, with the goal of informing the development of a comprehensive working methodology for training the next generation of Venezuelan democratic leaders.

Research Question

What has been the role of youth social movements in Venezuela in the (re)democratization process from a civil and political rights perspective between 1998 and 2026, particularly student movements, youth civic organizations, and digital activism initiatives, and how can these insights inform the development of a working methodology to train the next generation of Venezuelan democratic leaders?

Specific Objectives

- To contextualize the process of democratic backsliding in Venezuela since 1998, the erosion of the Punto Fijo democratic paradigm, and their effects on youth participation as the historical background to the events of 3 January 2026.
- To analyse the role of student movements, youth civic organizations, and digital activism initiatives in Venezuela's (re)democratization process from a civil and political rights perspective.
- To develop a comprehensive methodological framework for the training and empowerment of Venezuelan youth as democratic leaders in the context of the country's (re)democratization process after January 2026.

Justification

Youth play a critical role in historic processes of societal transformation such as democratization, reconciliation, and institutional reconstruction. Venezuela is no exception. Throughout the last decade, young people and youth social movements have consistently remained at the forefront of the country's multidimensional political, social, and economic crisis, acting as advocates for democratic transition, civic participation, and the defence of civil and political rights.

Against the backdrop of Venezuela's prolonged process of democratic backsliding since 1998—characterized by institutional erosion, increasing restrictions on civil and political rights, repeated cycles of civic mobilization, and sustained efforts by opposition actors, civil society organizations, and youth movements to defend democratic principles—it becomes increasingly important to understand the role that younger generations can play in future processes of democratic reconstruction. Within this broader trajectory, the events of 3 January 2026, together with the gradual flexibilization of certain policies promoted by the interim authorities—including measures such as the “Amnesty Law for Democratic

Coexistence (2026)” and ongoing efforts to renew key public institutions such as the Ombudsman’s Office and the Attorney General’s Office with a view to strengthening transparency and institutional independence—represent the most recent phase of a much longer process rather than its sole starting point. Beyond analysing youth participation as a social phenomenon, there is a growing need to explore strategies capable of engaging, empowering, and preparing young people for future leadership roles in governance, politics, and public service.

This concern is also reflected in the international literature. Venezuela's prolonged process of democratic backsliding has been widely documented by international democracy indices. Recent editions of the Freedom in the World report published by Freedom House classify Venezuela as “*Not Free*,” while the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Report (2025) identifies the country as an electoral authoritarian regime, reflecting the sustained deterioration of democratic institutions, civil liberties, and political pluralism. Within this context, IFES (2025) demonstrates how youth political and civic engagement can serve as an effective mechanism for countering democratic backsliding and strengthening democratic resilience. Similarly, the OECD (2020) argues that “public governance must be at the heart of the debate about the role of the state in creating an enabling environment for youth, trust and intergenerational justice.” These perspectives suggest that youth participation should not be viewed solely as a democratic outcome but also as a necessary condition for the sustainability, legitimacy, and long-term consolidation of democratic institutions.

Despite the growing academic literature on democratic backsliding, authoritarianism, and political transformation in Venezuela, there remains a significant gap regarding the role played by youth in the country’s socio-political evolution between 1998 and 2026. Existing research has largely focused on institutional deterioration, political polarization, economic collapse, and the broader dynamics of democratic decline, while comparatively less attention has been devoted to analysing how youth movements, student organizations, civic initiatives, and new forms of digital activism have contributed to democratic resilience and political participation under increasingly restrictive conditions. Likewise, there is limited policy-oriented research aimed at identifying practical strategies to empower Venezuelan youth in a context of political transition and institutional reconstruction.

The relevance of this research also lies in the fact that democratic transitions cannot be understood merely as transfers of political power between competing elites. Rather, they require the reconstruction of democratic institutions, the restoration of social trust, and the development of a civic culture capable of

sustaining democratic governance over time. Values such as integrity, human dignity, commitment to public service, responsibility, and active citizenship are therefore likely to play a decisive role in shaping the next generation of Venezuelan democratic leaders.

As Puerta (2026) argues:

“The loss of institutional legitimacy cannot be overcome by changing the regime’s face; a democratic transition will depend not only on economic stability. The lesson of Venezuela’s trajectory, from initial democratic promise through institutional decay to authoritarian consolidation, is that institutions without legitimacy and responsiveness cannot survive, particularly when facing economic crisis and political stress. The future requires not merely new leaders but fundamental institutional reform, genuine democratic participation, and moral recommitment to public welfare over private interest” (Puerta, 2026, p. 12).

This reflection is particularly relevant in the current Venezuelan context. The temporal scope of this research (1998–2026) has been deliberately selected because it encompasses the period of democratic backsliding associated with the Bolivarian governments (Bermeo, 2016; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019), beginning with the election of Hugo Chávez Frías in 1998 and his presidency (1999–2013), continuing through the period of authoritarian consolidation under Nicolás Maduro Moros (2013–2026), and concluding with the most recent political developments that have reopened debates on democratic reconstruction. This period allows for the analysis of both continuities and ruptures in the relationship between democratic backsliding, youth political participation, and civic mobilization. While the Chávez and Maduro administrations share important political and ideological continuities, they also represent distinct stages characterized by different institutional dynamics, patterns of repression, political opportunity structures, and forms of youth participation (Tarrow, 2011; García-Guadilla, 2020). Understanding how youth movements evolved throughout these successive stages provides valuable insights into both the challenges and opportunities of a future (re)democratization process. At a moment in which international democracy indices and human rights organizations consistently classify Venezuela as an authoritarian regime and document the progressive erosion of democratic institutions and civil and political rights (Freedom House, 2025; V-Dem Institute, 2025; IACHR, 2025), studying youth participation is not only academically relevant but also socially and politically necessary.

This study seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the mechanisms through which youth social movements have participated in Venezuela's democratic trajectory between 1998 and 2026. By examining the evolution of youth participation across different stages of democratic backsliding and changing political opportunity structures, the research aims to identify both the constraints faced by younger generations and the ways in which they have contributed to democratic resilience, civic engagement, and democratic advocacy under increasingly restrictive conditions (IFES, 2025; García-Guadilla, 2020). Furthermore, it seeks to provide a practical contribution by proposing a methodological framework for training and empowering a new generation of Venezuelan democratic leaders.

Research Methodology

This chapter presents the research methodology for analysing the role of youth movements in Venezuela's (re)democratization process from a civil and political rights perspective after January 2026. Given the complexity of political transition in Venezuela and the multidimensional nature of youth participation, a qualitative research design is adopted. This design allows for an in-depth exploration of the historical, political, and social processes shaping democratic engagement, as well as the lived experiences of youth actors.

The chapter explains the research design, methods, and techniques, with a focus on process tracing as a method to understand causal mechanisms linking youth participation to democratic outcomes.

Research Design

This research, situated within the social sciences and characterized by complexities, contradictions, tensions, and interconnected elements of analysis (Elliott, Christy, & Xiao, 2023), follows a qualitative case study design that examines the role of Venezuelan youth, youth social movements, student organizations, civic initiatives, and democratic advocacy networks in promoting civic engagement, democratic resilience, and prospective (re)democratization throughout the period 1998–2026 from a civil and political rights perspective. This approach makes it possible to contextualize the evolution of youth political participation within Venezuela's contemporary historical and political trajectory, beginning with the crisis of the Punto Fijo democratic paradigm, continuing through successive stages of democratic backsliding and authoritarian consolidation under the model of the so-called “*Twenty-First Century Socialism*”, and concluding with the most recent debates on democratic reconstruction. In doing so, the research analyses the mechanisms through which youth participation has contributed to democratic

resilience, civic mobilization, institutional reconstruction, and the development of future democratic leadership under increasingly restrictive political conditions.

This approach also integrates multiple sources of evidence, including previous research, documents, and historical records regarding youth participation, democratization processes, as well as legal analysis under international standards on civil and political rights. Furthermore, “qualitative methods have emerged as indispensable tools for garnering deep insights and understanding complex phenomena” (Lim, 2025, p. 2). This qualitative design provides the basis for exploring complex causal relationships and social mechanisms that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods alone. The temporal scope focuses on the period between 1998 and 2026, while incorporating historical antecedents from 1958 onwards to identify relevant causal factors and long-term political dynamics.

Tenny, Brannan and Brannan (2022) explain the advantages of this research design:

“Qualitative research, at its core, asks open-ended questions whose answers are not easily put into numbers, such as ‘how’ and ‘why’. Due to the open-ended nature of the research questions, qualitative research design is often not linear like quantitative design. One of the strengths of qualitative research is its ability to explain processes and patterns of human behaviour that can be difficult to quantify. Phenomena such as experiences, attitudes, and behaviours can be complex to capture accurately and quantitatively. In contrast, a qualitative approach allows participants themselves to explain how, why, or what they were thinking, feeling, and experiencing at a particular time or during an event of interest” (Tenny, Brannan & Brannan, 2022, p. 1).

In accordance with the EMA Policy on Artificial Intelligence, OpenAI's ChatGPT was used on a limited basis during the preparation of this dissertation solely as a language editing tool. Its use was restricted to improving the academic English, clarity, and readability of selected sections during the revision process. ChatGPT was not used to develop the research questions, hypothesis, conceptual framework, methodology, critical analysis, or conclusions. All substantive intellectual contributions, source selection, interpretation of the literature, methodological development, analytical reasoning, and final editorial decisions remain entirely the responsibility of the author.

Research Methods

This research employs a combination of process tracing and document analysis:

Process Tracing

To provide a structured and efficient methodological framework for training a new generation of democratic leaders from a civil and political rights perspective in Venezuela after January 2026, it becomes crucial to assess the historical background of a complex and evolving process of democratic backsliding. In this regard, Beach and Pedersen (2013) justify why process tracing constitutes an appropriate method for this research:

“Process-tracing in social science is commonly defined by its ambition to trace causal mechanisms (Bennett 2008a, 2008b; Checkel 2008; George and Bennett 2005). A causal mechanism can be defined as ‘a complex system, which produces an outcome by the interaction of a number of parts’ (Glennan 1996:52). Process-tracing involves attempts to identify the intervening causal process—the causal chain and causal mechanism—between an independent variable (or variables) and the outcome of the dependent variable” (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, p. 2).

The objective is to identify and analyse the causal mechanisms that link the historical causes of democratic backsliding, the role of youth participation in a (re)democratization process, and the outcomes associated with democratic resilience, civic engagement, and democratic leadership development. Process tracing also enables the reconstruction of sequences of events, critical junctures, and decision-making processes that shaped both authoritarian consolidation and youth responses throughout the period under study.

Document Analysis

This research proposes the integration of political, historical, sociological, and legal sources, including encyclopaedias, historiographical studies, academic articles, comparative analyses, laws, and international conventions on civil and political rights. These sources require exhaustive documentary research and analysis. Combined with process tracing, documentary analysis will contribute not only to the substantive analysis of youth participation and democratization but also to the development of a methodological framework for training future Venezuelan democratic leaders within a broader process of institutional democratization. Bowen (2009) explains the relevance of document analysis:

“Document analysis involves skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination), and interpretation. This iterative process combines elements of content analysis and thematic analysis. Content analysis is the process of organising information into categories related to the central questions of the research” (Bowen, 2009, p. 32).

Causal Mechanisms Under Investigation

The first mechanism explores the relationship between institutional erosion and youth mobilization. The research seeks to analyse how the progressive deterioration of democratic institutions, restrictions on civil and political rights, declining trust in formal political channels, and increasing authoritarian practices contributed to the emergence and expansion of youth-led activism, student movements, civic organizations, and digital participation initiatives.

Following this, the study examines how youth participation contributed to defending civil and political rights, sustaining civic engagement, promoting democratic values, and generating alternative spaces for political participation despite increasingly restrictive political conditions.

Another mechanism examines the relationship between democratic resilience and opportunities for (re)democratization. It seeks to understand whether and how youth participation contributed to creating favourable conditions for institutional reconstruction, democratic transition, civic empowerment, and the emergence of new opportunities for democratic governance in the post-January 2026 context.

Tracing these mechanisms across different stages of Venezuela’s political development between 1998 and 2026 will allow the research to identify both historical patterns and practical lessons relevant to the development of democratic leadership training initiatives.

Research Techniques

This research combines process tracing and document analysis in order to identify causal relationships between political developments and youth political engagement. Three main analytical techniques are employed: event sequencing, causal mechanism identification, and thematic coding, following Beach and Pedersen (2013).

Event Sequencing (Process Tracing)

This technique involves the chronological organization of key political, social, and institutional events that have shaped Venezuela's democratic backsliding since 1998, linking them to historical antecedents originating in the post-1958 democratic transition. By mapping the sequence of events, the research reconstructs the temporal evolution of democratic backsliding, its consequences for youth participation, and the conditions that influenced the emergence of youth mobilization and civic engagement.

This approach makes it possible to establish preliminary causal connections between political developments and the emergence of youth-led initiatives, protest movements, civic organizations, and democratic advocacy strategies, while also identifying systemic failures, institutional gaps, and areas for improvement relevant to future democratic leadership development.

Causal Mechanism Identification (Process Tracing)

The second analytical technique focuses on identifying causal mechanisms that explain how youth participation influences political processes within democratization and (re)democratization dynamics. This step examines how youth movements and civic initiatives interact with political institutions, civil society organizations, and international actors in order to strengthen democratic governance and rule of law standards through different forms of civic engagement and political participation.

The analysis also evaluates constraining factors that limit youth participation, including political repression, restrictions on freedom of assembly and association, economic pressures, and institutional barriers to political engagement, with a view to identifying lessons learned and informing future policy recommendations.

Thematic Coding (Document Analysis)

The third technique used in this research is thematic coding, applied to the qualitative analysis of documents, reports, and secondary sources related to youth political participation and democratization processes. Thematic coding will facilitate the identification of recurring themes, patterns, leadership competencies, civic engagement practices, and democratic values that can contribute to the construction of a methodological framework for training future democratic leaders.

Analytical Integration and Alignment Between Research Objectives and Research Techniques

The three techniques described above are applied in a complementary manner. Event sequencing provides the chronological structure of political developments, causal mechanism identification explains the processes linking youth participation to political outcomes, and thematic coding allows for the systematic interpretation of qualitative evidence.

The methodological design has been structured to ensure coherence between the research question, research objectives, analytical techniques, empirical evidence, and expected outcomes.

The first specific objective—contextualizing democratic backsliding in Venezuela since 1998 and its effects on youth participation—is examined through event sequencing, which enables the reconstruction of the historical and political trajectory that shaped successive opportunities and constraints for youth political participation. The evidence generated through this analysis establishes the historical and contextual foundation necessary to understand the evolution of youth engagement throughout the period under study.

The second specific objective—analysing the role of student movements, youth civic organizations, and digital activism initiatives in Venezuela’s (re)democratization process—is addressed through causal mechanism identification. This technique enables the research to examine how different forms of youth participation contributed to democratic resilience, civic mobilization, democratic advocacy, and prospective (re)democratization by identifying the mechanisms linking youth participation with broader processes of institutional and political change.

The third specific objective—developing a methodological framework for the training and empowerment of Venezuelan youth as democratic leaders—is operationalized through thematic coding and document analysis, which facilitate the identification of recurring democratic values, leadership competencies, institutional lessons, best practices, and educational approaches derived from both the empirical analysis and the specialized literature. These findings constitute the analytical foundation of the methodological framework proposed in Chapter IV.

Beyond aligning research objectives with analytical techniques, the methodological design incorporates an explicit stage of analytical synthesis. At the conclusion of each analytical chapter, the evidence generated through event sequencing, causal mechanism identification, thematic coding, and document

analysis will be systematically synthesized in order to identify the principal causal mechanisms observed, assess the extent to which the evidence supports the proposed analytical relationships, and explain how the findings contribute to answering the research question and fulfilling each specific objective. This cumulative process of analytical integration also provides the empirical and conceptual basis for the methodological framework presented in Chapter IV.

Chapter I. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

I.1 Democracy: Approaches from a Human Rights Perspective

Without claiming to establish a definitive definition of democracy, or even an approximate conception of what democracy is, this research adopts and agrees with Giovanni Sartori's (n.d.) perspective, which offers a tripartite understanding of democracy: "first, democracy is a principle of legitimacy. Second, democracy is a political system designed to solve problems concerning the exercise—not merely the ownership—of power. Third, democracy is an ideal" (Sartori, n.d., p. 27).

This approach is complemented by the contribution of González (n.d.), who specifically analyses the meaning of democracy through the notion of democracy as a socio-political concept inspired by Reinhart Koselleck's theory of conceptual history. Naturally, democratic theory itself does not escape the Popperian epistemological condition: "Theories are nets cast to catch what we call 'the world': to rationalize, explain, and master it. We endeavour to make the mesh ever finer" (Popper, 2011, p. 57).

The truth is that democracy can be conceived as a historical and reflective concept whose axiological justification remains essentially unchanged, while its systemic methodology and practical manifestation continue to be the subject of debate within intellectual and political circles. To a certain extent, democracy is also defined negatively—that is, by distinguishing it from aristocracy, monarchy, dictatorship, and other forms of non-democratic political organization.

Before examining the concepts of democratization, (re)democratization, democratic backsliding, youth political participation, and social movements developed throughout this chapter, it is useful to introduce some of the principal theoretical approaches that have shaped contemporary democratic thought. Rather than applying these concepts immediately to a particular empirical case, this section establishes the conceptual foundations that will subsequently guide the analysis developed in the following chapters.

Robert Dahl (n.d.) identifies a series of institutional guarantees and minimum democratic conditions that constitute the essential foundations of a democratic political order. From this perspective, democracy depends not only on competitive elections but also on effective political participation, public contestation, civil liberties, and inclusive citizenship. Dahl's approach therefore provides an important

normative and institutional point of departure for understanding democracy as both a political system and a set of guarantees upon which the following conceptual discussions are built.

Similarly, Max Weber's conception of rational-legal authority emphasizes that democratic legitimacy depends upon institutions governed by legal norms rather than personal authority or charismatic leadership. Political legitimacy is therefore closely associated with the rule of law, institutional predictability, and the capacity of public institutions to exercise authority through legally established procedures.

Likewise, David Easton's systems theory conceives politics as a dynamic process through which societal demands and support (inputs) are transformed into authoritative decisions (outputs). Democratic stability depends largely on the ability of political institutions to respond effectively to social demands while preserving legitimacy, accountability, and public trust. This perspective highlights the importance of institutional responsiveness as a core characteristic of democratic governance.

From a sociological perspective, Pierre Bourdieu's conception of social fields highlights how political, economic, legal, and cultural structures interact within broader configurations of power. Democratic governance therefore requires institutions capable of responding effectively to social demands while preserving legitimacy and maintaining citizens' confidence in representative institutions.

Against this backdrop, it becomes inevitable to engage with authors such as John Elster (2001), Joshua Cohen (2001), and Chantal Mouffe (n.d.), who, despite their significant theoretical and ideological differences, converge in recognizing deliberative democracy as a central element for understanding contemporary politics.

Within a deliberative context, Elster (2001) argues that threats based on force are inadmissible—not necessarily because they respond to selfish interests, but because the only force that should prevail is the “force of the better argument,” in Habermasian terms. Within this framework, deliberation becomes a fundamental mechanism through which political conflicts can be processed within democratic institutional frameworks.

Although processes of political transformation are often characterized by tensions and contradictions, this research shares Elster's (2001) concern with the conditions, incentives, and procedures that make legitimate agreements possible in deeply polarized societies. Particularly relevant is his emphasis on the

need to reduce external pressures on deliberative spaces and strengthen procedures oriented towards forms of procedural justice similar to those proposed by Rawls.

This perspective can be contrasted with Chantal Mouffe's theory of agonistic pluralism. As Mouffe (n.d., p. 1) argues, "rather than witnessing the end of history, what we may actually be witnessing is the end of politics." Rather than eliminating conflict, democratic politics should recognize conflict as an inherent feature of pluralistic societies.

Starting from the premise that "conflict in democratic societies cannot and should not be eradicated, since the specificity of modern democracy resides precisely in the recognition and legitimation of conflict" (Mouffe, n.d., p. 7), it becomes important to analyse how processes of polarization can transform political competition into relationships of radical antagonism.

In Mouffe's terms, democratic problems emerge when political actors cease to perceive one another as legitimate adversaries and begin to view each other as existential enemies. Viewed in this way, the challenge of democratic politics is not to eliminate conflict but to transform antagonistic relationships into agonistic ones, where disagreement remains intense but compatible with democratic coexistence.

As Mouffe (n.d., p. 7) argues, "what is important is that conflict should not take the form of antagonism (struggle between enemies) but rather agonism (struggle between adversaries)." Democratic politics is therefore not based upon the elimination of disagreement but upon the institutionalization of legitimate political competition. Similarly, Mouffe emphasizes the need to "domesticate passions by mobilizing them towards democratic purposes" (Mouffe, n.d.) while recognizing that political disagreements "are not only legitimate but also necessary" (Mouffe, n.d., p. 9) for democratic life.

Equally relevant is the observation made by Vallés (2015), who reminds us that "although conflict is undeniably part of social life, it does not necessarily follow that wherever there is conflict there is politics, nor that every conflict is political" (p. 4). This observation highlights the fact that the mere existence of conflict does not guarantee the existence of healthy democratic politics; institutions and practices capable of channelling conflict democratically are also required.

Inspired by Korstanje (2007), we consider that democratic analysis cannot be limited exclusively to procedural dimensions. Beyond the mechanisms through which rulers are selected or political decisions are made, it is necessary to pay attention to a structural dimension of democracy, understood as the set

of conditions related to participation, freedom, equality, and other characteristics considered essential for democratic coexistence.

In a similar vein, Alain Touraine (1992) reminds us that democracy is neither exclusively participatory nor exclusively liberal; rather, it fulfils an arbitral function within society. This observation is particularly relevant when analysing democratization and (re)democratization processes, where the central challenge is not merely the restoration of formal institutions but also the reconstruction of legitimacy, trust, and meaningful spaces for citizen participation. The following sections gradually introduce the concepts that inform the analytical framework of this research before their subsequent application to the Venezuelan case in Chapters II, III, and IV.

1.2 Youth Political Participation

According to the most widely accepted international definitions, youth is generally associated with specific age groups. The United Nations commonly defines youth as individuals between 15 and 24 years of age, while the European Union frequently adopts the broader range of 15 to 29 years old, according to Galstyan (2019). However, beyond age alone, the concept of “youth” encompasses a series of social, economic, political, and cultural considerations linked to identity formation, socialization, citizenship, autonomy, and participation in public life.

In this regard, it is important to note that youth participation is not a static phenomenon. As Galstyan (2019) points out, “participation itself is a changing concept, which has evolved over time due to developments of social science and civic processes” (p. 3). Consequently, the study of youth political participation requires moving beyond traditional understandings centred exclusively on electoral behaviour, affiliation with political parties, and institutional politics. This consideration becomes particularly relevant when analysing the experiences of Generation Z (born in the 2000s) and, increasingly, Generation Alpha (born in the 2010s), whose relationship with politics is shaped by technological transformations, emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), new communication ecosystems, and socio-economic dynamics, especially through social media, as well as alternative forms of civic engagement facilitated by these digital environments.

Political participation has traditionally been associated with voting, party membership, and electoral campaigns. Contemporary scholarship has demonstrated that this understanding is insufficient to capture

the complexity of youth engagement in public affairs. As Galstyan (2019) argues, “there are many forms and types of political participation which surpass the formal act of voting” (p. 3). This broader conception allows us to understand participation as a multidimensional process through which individuals seek to influence decision-making, public policies, institutions, and societal outcomes, with the peculiarity of a “*glocal approach*,” as many important societal issues such as climate change or gender equality transcend physical frontiers and often generate a domino effect worldwide, frequently amplified through social media.

Following the framework proposed by Chisholm and Kovacheva, as cited by Galstyan (2019), youth political participation generally encompasses three major dimensions: “involvement in institutional politics (elections, campaigns and membership); protest activities (demonstrations and new social movements); civic engagement (associative life, community participation, voluntary work)” (Galstyan, 2019, p. 5). This distinction is particularly useful for the purposes of this research because it provides an analytical framework for understanding different forms of youth participation beyond electoral politics, including student movements, civic organizations, democratic advocacy initiatives, and, more recently, digital forms of mobilization and collective action. The application of these dimensions to the Venezuelan case is developed in Chapter III.

Youth participation should also be understood as a mechanism of inclusion and empowerment. In the words of Galstyan (2019), it represents “a way of giving young people a voice in society, addressing political marginalisation of youth and changing power relations between generations” (p. 3). This definition is especially relevant for democratic societies, where participation constitutes not only a right but also a means through which younger generations can contribute to shaping political outcomes and influencing the future of their communities.

The normative importance of youth engagement has likewise been recognized at the international and multilateral level by the United Nations. According to the organization, “through active participation, young people are empowered to play a vital role in their own development as well as in that of their communities” (United Nations, 2012, p. 1). Furthermore, the General Assembly reaffirmed the “importance of the full and effective participation of youth and youth organizations at the local, national, regional and international levels” (United Nations, 2012, p. 1). These principles highlight the intrinsic relationship between youth participation, democratic governance, and sustainable development.

At the same time, recent studies suggest that younger generations are increasingly redefining the forms through which political participation occurs. As Galstyan (2019) observes, “young people are rejecting traditional ways of political participation of the older generation and creating new models and forms of political participation” (p. 8). This tendency reflects broader transformations affecting contemporary democracies, where digital platforms, social networks, informal movements, and decentralized civic initiatives have expanded the repertoire of political action available to young people.

Moreover, participation should not be understood merely as an isolated political act but also as a learning process capable of generating long-term democratic effects. In this regard, Bacalso et al. (2024) highlight that “there is research to suggest membership of civic organisations that allow young people to acquire high-quality participation experience and to practise their participatory skills boosts civic and political engagement, including engagement with voting” (p. 23). Likewise, according to Bacalso et al. (2024), participation in civic, community-based, and voluntary organizations during adolescence often translates into higher levels of political engagement later in life, while simultaneously strengthening civic knowledge, democratic values, leadership capacities, and political efficacy. These findings further reinforce the understanding of participation not only as a democratic right but also as a formative process through which future democratic citizens and leaders are developed.

Understanding youth political participation from this multidimensional perspective also requires examining the collective forms through which young people organize, mobilize, and articulate their political demands. The following section therefore explores youth social movements, student movements, and civic activism as some of the principal expressions of contemporary youth political participation.

I.3 Youth Social Movements, Student Movements, and Civic Activism

In a world increasingly complexified by the crisis of the democratic paradigm, the proliferation of (semi)autocratic systems, the crisis of political party systems, and the polarization and radicalization of the ideological spectrum, all of which are becoming global trends as a result of the incentives and mechanisms generated by globalization, the debate surrounding citizen participation, youth social movements, and civic activism becomes imperative, particularly when considering the role of citizenship itself.

“Citizenship is sometimes defined in terms of public duties and privileges, and at other times as rights and equality. Finally, the political loyalty of the citizen may have a local, particularistic, political or ethnic, state-based or abstract, and even universal dimension. All of these dispersed ingredients form part of what citizenship is, and there is no doubt that, in an appropriate combination for each case, they are necessary for citizenship to continue fulfilling an essential function” (Rivero, 2001, p. 57).

Precisely this conception of citizenship, understood in relation to political institutions and public authority, requires reflection on the delimitation of competences, duties, and rights within the public sphere, while also embracing an anthropological conception of the individual based on freedom as both the nature and telos of human beings within the liberal tradition. This perspective maintains a close relationship with the principle of subsidiarity, emphasizing autonomy, civic responsibility, and the individual's capacity for action oriented towards the common good. This becomes particularly relevant when analysing youth political participation. As Magoga (2025) argues, "Youth activism has always been a driving force for social change. From civil rights movements to environmental protests, young people represent the innovative power of change towards a more democratic and inclusive world."

The principle of subsidiarity has also acquired relevance within contemporary democratic governance. It has been incorporated into European Union law through the Treaty on European Union (Maastricht Treaty, 1993), contributing to the development of a multilevel system of governance that seeks to balance institutional responsibilities while promoting citizen participation in public affairs. Within this framework, subsidiarity not only protects political rights but also recognizes corresponding civic responsibilities, encouraging citizens to participate actively in democratic decision-making processes. As Font et al. (2000) explain, these mechanisms range from participatory governance instruments and citizen consultations to broader forms of civil society engagement.

These developments are closely connected to democratic-federal theory which, according to Máiz (n.d., p. 39), proposes:

"Unlike the consociational model, it proposes an unprecedented pluralization of constituent power and constituted powers: first, a multi-level government structure—local (municipal), regional (federal states), national (federation), and supranational (European federation)—based upon the principle of subsidiarity; second, the participatory-deliberative democratization of all decision-

making processes, where the federal level of shared government serves precisely to guarantee democratic quality at the local level and inter-territorial solidarity through fiscal redistribution mechanisms; and third, cohesion through joint involvement and deliberation regarding a common project of coexistence within the same state."

The growing prominence of youth social movements and civic activism also reveals an important conceptual challenge. Young people are frequently perceived as politically apathetic because their forms of engagement do not necessarily conform to traditional patterns of political participation. As Magoga (2025) argues, young people are often portrayed as politically disengaged because their forms of participation do not necessarily fit within conventional institutional frameworks. However, available evidence suggests that youth are not withdrawing from public life; rather, they are increasingly creating alternative pathways of civic engagement through community initiatives, advocacy campaigns, volunteer networks, student organizations, and digital platforms (Magoga, 2025).

Understanding contemporary youth participation also requires examining civic activism as a broader repertoire of collective action through which citizens organize, advocate, deliberate, and seek to influence public affairs outside exclusively institutional channels. Civic activism therefore complements more traditional forms of political participation by expanding opportunities for democratic engagement, particularly among younger generations.

I.4 Civic Organizations and Democratic Advocacy Networks

Following the discussion on youth social movements and civic activism, it is also necessary to examine the role of civic organizations and democratic advocacy networks as institutional expressions of citizen participation. While social movements often emerge through collective mobilization around specific political or social demands, civic organizations frequently provide more permanent and structured mechanisms through which citizens can organize, cooperate, advocate for public interests, and contribute to democratic governance.

As Azhar et al. (2026) explain, civil society organizations (CSOs) play a fundamental role in strengthening democratic systems by serving as intermediaries between citizens and public institutions. They "promote democratic values, foster civic engagement, and hold governments accountable" (Azhar et al., 2026, p. XX), while simultaneously creating opportunities for participation beyond formal political

institutions. Viewed in this way, civic organizations contribute not only to the protection of rights but also to strengthening democratic legitimacy, accountability, and public trust.

Beyond moments of protest or political mobilization, civic organizations provide institutional spaces through which citizens can transform collective concerns into concrete initiatives, public policies, community projects, and democratic advocacy. As Azhar et al. (2026) further argue, these organizations "provide platforms for marginalized voices to be heard," thereby strengthening the inclusiveness of democratic decision-making processes. Their contribution becomes particularly relevant in contexts where representative institutions experience declining legitimacy or where formal channels of participation become increasingly restricted.

This perspective is closely related to the principle of subsidiarity, which recognizes that public action should, whenever possible, be exercised by individuals, communities, and intermediate organizations before being assumed by higher levels of government. Beyond its institutional dimension, subsidiarity reflects an anthropological understanding of the human person as an active subject capable of contributing to the common good through civic responsibility, solidarity, and participation as Delsol (2024) argues.

Within this framework, civic organizations constitute practical expressions of democratic participation by encouraging cooperation between citizens, communities, and public institutions. Similarly, Del Águila (2017) recalls John Rawls' notion of "reinvigorating the public sense of justice," arguing that responsible citizenship requires active participation in public affairs rather than passive observation (p. 9). Civic organizations therefore become spaces where democratic values are translated into collective action, strengthening solidarity, civic responsibility, and public engagement.

Technological transformations have also expanded the possibilities for civic organization and democratic advocacy. According to Calvo (2019), the emergence of new digital technologies, Artificial Intelligence, and Big Data has contributed to new forms of interaction between citizens and institutions, facilitating broader participation while simultaneously generating new challenges regarding democratic representation, accountability, and public deliberation.

Following this perspective, civic organizations should not be understood exclusively through ideological categories but rather as institutional mechanisms through which citizens cooperate in the pursuit of the political common good. As Maino (2020, p. 143) further explains:

"The political common good possesses an essentially dynamic character, in the sense that it is not something that one possesses, but rather a good that all contribute to realizing daily through coordination with the State, and in which all participate and share."

Overall, these perspectives demonstrate that civic organizations and democratic advocacy networks constitute essential components of contemporary democratic governance. They complement youth social movements by transforming civic participation into sustained forms of collective action, democratic advocacy, community engagement, and institutional cooperation. The empirical manifestation of these theoretical approaches, including their relevance in contexts of democratic backsliding, is examined in Chapter III through the analysis of civic organizations and democratic advocacy initiatives in Venezuela.

I.5 Digital Mobilization and Informal Networks

Citizen participation in the public sphere has multiple expressions and degrees that are interconnected and have undergone profound transformations in recent decades, particularly with the emergence of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), which have generated alternative and mass channels of participation ranging from television and radio to digital media and social networks, thereby expanding the very conceptualization of the public sphere itself.

Likewise, this amplification of citizen presence in the public sphere, beyond traditional mechanisms of participation such as voting, assemblies, or municipal councils, coincides with a specific global moment characterized by what could be described as a permanent crisis affecting political systems, inequality, public distrust, and democratic erosion. In his reflections on the political impacts of globalization, Martí i Puig (2010) highlights complex realities, noting that "almost 57% of humanity, living in the poorest countries, survives on only 6% of global GDP, and each of its inhabitants survives on less than two dollars a day" (Martí i Puig, 2010, p. 82). These structural transformations have contributed to the emergence of new forms of collective action that increasingly transcend national borders.

Globalization has also facilitated the expansion of social movements by enabling geographically dispersed individuals and organizations to articulate common demands through digital communication. As Almeida (2020) explains, contemporary social movements range from campaigns for economic justice to climate justice, operating simultaneously at local, national, and transnational levels while using digital technologies to coordinate collective action, influence public opinion, and promote political advocacy.

These developments illustrate the emergence of a broader ecosystem of citizen participation in which digital technologies complement rather than replace traditional forms of political engagement. Digital activism, cyberactivism, volunteer networks, online advocacy campaigns, and collaborative platforms have expanded the repertoire of collective action available to citizens, particularly younger generations. As Fernández (2012) argues, representative democracies are increasingly incorporating new forms of electronic participation, including digital consultation, online deliberation, and electronic protest (e-protest), giving rise to new forms of e-democracy.

Recent decades have provided numerous examples of this phenomenon. International initiatives such as the #MeToo movement and Fridays for Future, led by Greta Thunberg, illustrate how digital communication can rapidly transform localized initiatives into global movements capable of influencing public debate, institutional agendas, and political decision-making. These experiences demonstrate the growing capacity of informal digital networks to connect citizens across national boundaries around shared political, social, and environmental concerns.

Following Almeida (2020), this new era of citizen participation is characterized by sustained collective mobilization, particularly among historically excluded groups, articulating social, economic, environmental, and political demands through moderately structured strategies based on coalition-building, non-violent action, and digital communication. Rather than replacing conventional participation, these new forms complement institutional politics by creating additional opportunities for democratic engagement and civic action.

Another important actor within this evolving participatory ecosystem is the think tank. As Bakhtiyorov (2021) explains, think tanks are organizations dedicated to public policy research, analysis, and advocacy that generate evidence-based recommendations to inform both policymakers and society. Whether

institutionally affiliated or independent, they have become increasingly influential in contemporary policy ecosystems by facilitating dialogue between academia, civil society, governments, and the private sector. Collectively, digital mobilization, informal civic networks, social movements, volunteer initiatives, and think tanks illustrate how democratic participation has progressively expanded beyond traditional institutional arenas.

1.6 Defining (Re)democratization

Having examined the principal theoretical approaches to democracy, youth political participation, civic engagement, and democratic networks, it is now possible to advance towards a normative-operational definition of democracy for the purposes of this research, inspired by the postulates of Ferrajoli (2003), Korstanje (2007), and Sartori (2003). Etymologically derived from the Greek words *demos*—people—and *kratos*—power—or “the power of the people,” democracy can be understood as both a mechanism and a normative horizon for the management, exercise, limitation, and control of political power.

It offers a solution to the questions of legitimacy, ownership, and recipients of power, namely the people, understood in its broad, inclusive, and universal conception, through a series of processes and mechanisms—a procedural vision—widely agreed upon in the constituent origins of political communities within a substantive axiological and normative framework that settles and channels political conflict through an institutional order respectful of the Rule of Law, with a view to preserving human dignity and pursuing the common good.

For the purposes of this research, (re)democratization may be defined as a complex, broad, and progressive process that seeks to return “power to the people” by transitioning from authoritarian scenarios towards political, social, and economic mechanisms capable of restoring democratic legitimacy—symbiotic to legality—to the political system in service of an self-governing political community that constitutes both the means and the end of such a process. It is nourished by, and owes itself to, a foundational function in terms of methodology, respect, and recognition of all actors participating in the political and electoral contest, and a procedural function related to deliberative processes and the proper conduct of governance, respecting institutional and constitutional standards while striving for greater quality and effectiveness of the political regime, in line with the perspectives of Castaño (2014) and Hernández (2019).

This process acquires meaning when it unfolds within a political community understood as a set of public and private political actors—individuals, institutions, civil society organizations, among others—which, as a result of an original political agreement, freely, autonomously, sovereignly, independently, and equitably establish a series of guiding principles for effective political coexistence and the institutional channelling of social conflict. The members of the political community enjoy a set of political rights and civic duties that confer legitimacy upon the established political order and the existing authority. The existence of the political community gives meaning to the social contract and is called upon to pursue the common good while overcoming the individual-collective dichotomy.

(Re)democratization processes fundamentally target political institutions, as these constitute the set of juridical-political organizations that provide structure, form, and method to politics and political systems, but also citizens and civic engagement. They are called upon to act jointly and complementarily with other social institutions—including families, religious organizations, public administrations, and civil society organizations—under criteria of autonomy and impartiality consistent with the Rule of Law, as reflected in the works of O'Donnell (2001) and Nohlen (2008).

Beyond institutional reconstruction, however, (re)democratization also requires rebuilding democratic political culture through processes of political socialization. Political socialization can be understood as the system of socio-political influences through which values associated with civic culture are incorporated into different social groups—generally focused on younger generations—through education, both formal and informal, as well as through the media, with the purpose of shaping attitudes and behaviours towards political and institutional alternatives (Almond & Verba, 1970).

This acquisition of principles, attitudes, values, and patterns of conduct related to political phenomena promotes pluralistic permeability and, from a phenomenological perspective, objectifies social awareness through the political behaviour of individuals—not merely in partisan or homogenizing terms—following the perspectives developed by Díaz Gómez (2004) and Himmelweit (1983). In the face of growing political disaffection and civic apathy, recovering the meaning and transcendence of political socialization becomes particularly relevant.

A natural catalyst of (re)democratization resides in political parties, as organizations that provide a formal and procedural structure to members of a given political community (Duverger, 1957 [1951]), united by

a set of values, convictions, and beliefs from ideological, political, economic, and social perspectives, and endowed with a normative vocation. Political parties are called upon to act as mediators and promoters of public debate, articulating social demands and concerns while simultaneously serving as vehicles for the nomination of leaders to public office through democratic elections (Malamud, 2002). There is broad theoretical and conceptual consensus regarding the evolution and classification of political parties—elite parties, catch-all parties, and cartel parties. Despite the contemporary crisis of political parties, it remains imperative to recover their connection to democracy and their organizational value as interinstitutional conciliators in order to protect and promote democratic institutions and political socialization, following the perspective advanced by Sartori (1987).

It may be argued that the ultimate goal of (re)democratization is to move towards a model of *good governance*. Good governance refers to the set of processes, traditions, modes, and mechanisms through which public institutions legitimately and responsibly manage public affairs and resources in pursuit of the common good while respecting and enforcing the principles of justice, legality, transparency, accountability, responsibility, and integrity (Del Campo, 2017). Good governance represents a new paradigm in the relationship between the state and society, becoming a normative vision of government and public administration. It encourages public institutions and governmental actors to adopt participatory modes of decision-making, decentralization, anti-corruption measures, and local development strategies, thereby strengthening citizenship and fostering an inclusive political community (Alcántara-Santuário & Marín-Fuentes, 2013).

In sum, these elements suggest that (re)democratization cannot be understood merely as the replacement of political authorities or the restoration of electoral competition. Rather, it constitutes a multidimensional process involving institutional reconstruction, political socialization, democratic governance, civic participation, and the recovery of legitimacy. These dimensions provide the analytical framework through which the following section examines democratic backsliding and authoritarian regimes before their subsequent application to the Venezuelan case in the empirical analysis developed throughout the remainder of this thesis.

I.7 Democratic Backsliding and Authoritarian Regimes

The study of democratic backsliding requires understanding that the deterioration of democracy does not necessarily occur through abrupt institutional ruptures or the formal abolition of democratic institutions.

Contemporary political experiences demonstrate that democratic systems may gradually erode while maintaining constitutional frameworks, electoral processes, and representative institutions. For this reason, democratic backsliding should be understood as a progressive weakening of the principles, institutions, and guarantees that sustain democratic governance and the Rule of Law.

One of the central characteristics of democratic erosion is the concentration of political power. History repeatedly demonstrates that when political authority is exercised without effective temporal, institutional, or constitutional limitations, there is a tendency toward political perpetuation. The issue should not be understood as a restriction of political rights but rather as a democratic safeguard aimed at preventing the excessive concentration of authority and preserving political alternation, accountability, and free competition.

As Aguiar (2012), drawing on the Santiago Declaration adopted during the Fifth Meeting of Consultation of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Organization of American States, explains, democracy must be understood:

“as submission to the rule of law through the independence of powers and the supervision of governmental acts by judicial bodies of the State; the emergence of governments through free elections; the incompatibility between democracy and the perpetuation in power or the exercise of power without a determined term or with the manifest intention of perpetuation; the duty of governments to sustain a regime of individual liberty and social justice founded upon respect for human rights; effective judicial protection of human rights; incompatibility between political proscription and democratic order; and the exercise of freedom of the press, information and expression as essential conditions for the existence of democracy itself” (Aguiar, 2012, p. 12).

Particular attention should be given to the explicit incompatibility between democracy and the perpetuation of political power. This observation is especially relevant because democratic alternation constitutes one of the fundamental safeguards against authoritarian concentration of authority. Democracy is not only about electing governments; it is also about ensuring the possibility of replacing them under conditions of equality and fairness.

Of course, it is legitimate to debate the possibility of re-electing those heads of state or government who have successfully fulfilled their constitutional duties. In order to preserve democratic competition and

accountability, such mechanisms require clear constitutional limitations and robust institutional safeguards capable of guaranteeing equal conditions among political competitors.

As Penfold, Corrales and Hernández (2014) explain, systems that permit consecutive or indefinite presidential re-election tend to favour incumbents because of the advantages associated with executive office. These advantages include the use of public resources, privileged media exposure, patronage networks, and the capacity to influence institutions that should remain politically neutral.

Similarly, Przeworski (2010) demonstrates that incumbents rarely lose elections once institutional safeguards cease to function effectively. The power accumulated by those already in office often becomes so significant that electoral competition ceases to occur under genuinely equal conditions. Cheibub (2010) reaches a similar conclusion when analysing presidential systems, arguing that effective checks and balances are indispensable in preventing excessive concentrations of executive power. In this regard, Guillermo O'Donnell (2004) offers an observation that remains particularly relevant:

“It is evident that presidential re-election reduces alternation in power because it increases barriers to entry for competitors through the same prerogatives associated with executive office; however, alternation remains one of the few protections against abuses committed by presidents through the use of those same prerogatives” (O'Donnell, 2004).

This argument highlights the intimate relationship between alternation, accountability, and democratic quality. Without meaningful possibilities for political alternation, the incentives for institutional capture and authoritarian practices increase substantially.

The concentration of power frequently occurs alongside the weakening of institutional constraints. In weakly institutionalized political systems, charismatic leadership often emerges as an alternative to institutional authority. Barraycoa (2016) explains this phenomenon in the following terms:

“In societies that are weakly institutionalized or bureaucratically organized, charismatic leadership becomes one of their defining features. This type of personal leadership seeks the concentration of state powers and generates mechanisms to avoid accountability, including decrees, constitutional reforms and institutional restructuring” (Barraycoa, 2016, p. 840).

This observation is particularly relevant for understanding democratic backsliding in contemporary Latin America. Charismatic leadership is not necessarily incompatible with democracy. However, when political legitimacy becomes concentrated in a single individual rather than in institutions, democratic safeguards become increasingly fragile. Courts, legislatures, electoral authorities, political parties, and civil society organizations gradually lose autonomy as executive authority expands.

In many cases, the weakening of institutional constraints is accompanied by constitutional reforms aimed at consolidating executive power. Such reforms are frequently justified in the name of popular sovereignty, democratization, or political transformation. Nevertheless, their practical effect may be the personalization of political authority and the erosion of institutional checks and balances.

The literature on populism also provides important insights into these dynamics. Populist leaders frequently establish a direct relationship with "the people" while portraying intermediary institutions as obstacles to popular sovereignty. Moreover, constitutional reforms, institutional restructuring, and political centralization are often presented as necessary instruments for empowering citizens, even when their practical effect is to concentrate power and weaken democratic accountability.

From this perspective, democratic backsliding should not be understood as the collapse of democracy but rather as a gradual and multidimensional process through which institutional safeguards, political pluralism, civil liberties, judicial independence, and the Rule of Law are increasingly eroded. The result is often the emergence of hybrid or competitive authoritarian regimes that formally preserve democratic procedures while simultaneously limiting meaningful political competition, weakening institutional accountability, and restricting the effective exercise of civil and political rights.

Contemporary comparative experiences demonstrate that these dynamics have emerged in different political systems and regions, although they manifest themselves through distinct institutional trajectories and political configurations. Democratic backsliding should therefore be understood as an analytical framework through which scholars can examine the progressive deterioration of democratic quality, the weakening of constitutional guarantees, and the conditions that may eventually facilitate future processes of democratic reconstruction.

I.8 Populism and Pseudo-Democracy

The history of the concept of populism has been marked by imprecision and ambiguity, revealing an inherent difficulty in defining it rigorously. Margaret Canovan, one of the most influential scholars in the study of populism, argues that:

“Populism only constitutes a form of controversial political action, with very vague contours, which under the pretext of a discourse centred in one way or another on the people, seeks above all to provoke a strong emotional reaction in the public to whom it is addressed” (Hermet, 2003, p. 7).

A useful starting point for understanding populism lies in its etymology. Frei and Rovira (2008) explain that while the concept is related to the Latin term *populus*, contemporary populism no longer refers to the totality of citizens within a political community. Instead, it constructs an internal division within society, creating two antagonistic camps that are presented as irreconcilable.

According to Hermet (2003), drawing on Edward Shils, populism proclaims that the will of the people possesses a superior legitimacy over any institutional arrangement, constitutional limitation, or intermediary organization. The populist leader therefore presents himself as the authentic interpreter of that popular will. This dynamic distorts the political system because institutions cease to function as mechanisms of mediation and become obstacles that allegedly prevent the direct expression of the people. An important contribution by Hermet (2003) is his assertion that populism is not an ideology in itself. Rather, it can attach itself to almost any ideological framework. This helps explain why figures as different as Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Marine Le Pen in France can both be described as populists despite representing radically different political projects. Accordingly, populism should be understood as a political logic capable of adapting itself to distinct ideological and historical contexts.

This characteristic explains why populist projects frequently distrust institutional procedures, parliamentary deliberation, and long-term policymaking. Instead, they privilege immediacy and promise rapid solutions to complex social problems. As Hermet (2003) further argues, populism develops a particular relationship with political time, one that is fundamentally different from democratic politics. Democracy requires negotiation, deliberation, compromise, and the gradual management of conflicts.

Populism, by contrast, seeks immediate answers and tends to reject the idea of “giving time to time”. A central question in any analysis of populism concerns the political subject it seeks to construct. Vilas (2018) provides one of the most useful distinctions in this regard:

“The subject of contemporary democracies is the citizen: an individual holder of rights, duties and formal responsibilities. The subject of populism is the people, characterized by the conjunction of the place individuals occupy in the social structure and their political position with respect to power” (Vilas, 2018, p. 77).

This distinction is fundamental. Liberal democracy is built around citizenship, pluralism, and individual rights. Populism, however, replaces the citizen with the people as a collective political subject defined through conflict. In doing so, political identities become increasingly organized around loyalty to a leader or movement rather than around democratic values, institutions, and constitutional norms. Following Ernesto Laclau, politics becomes understood as a struggle between the people and power. The central issue is no longer the diversity of interests within society but rather the creation of a conflictual frontier between “us” and “them”. This logic has been particularly influential in Latin America, where populist leaders have frequently mobilized narratives opposing the people against oligarchies, imperialism, traditional political elites, or foreign interests.

From this perspective, populism may gradually evolve into forms of pseudo-democracy in which elections continue to exist, constitutions formally remain in force, and political participation is publicly celebrated, while the substantive conditions required for democratic competition, institutional independence, political pluralism, and accountability are throughout the period weakened. In consequence, populism frequently emerges from legitimate social grievances and genuine deficits of political representation. However, when political leaders claim exclusive representation of “the people” and intermediary institutions are portrayed as obstacles to popular sovereignty, populism risks evolving from a corrective to democratic shortcomings into a mechanism that facilitates democratic erosion, institutional weakening, and authoritarian consolidation.

I.9 Democratic Transitions: Comparative Lessons and Experiences for Venezuela and the Region

In her research on the rise and crisis of pact democracies, Dr. Paola Bautista de Alemán (2019) develops several concepts that are essential for understanding the Venezuelan democratic experience and, more

broadly, the dynamics of democratic transitions and democratic erosion. Among the most relevant are the notions of the *foundational moment* and the *crisis moment*, which provide a useful analytical framework for understanding both the emergence and the deterioration of democratic systems.

The foundational moment refers to the period in which a new political order is born, in this case a new democratic order. According to Bautista de Alemán (2019), this moment is divided into two stages: *Liberation* and *Inauguration*. Liberation refers to the removal of an autocratic regime, whether through rupture, negotiation, or the resignation of authoritarian authorities. In the Venezuelan case, the events of 23 January 1958 constitute a paradigmatic example of this phase. In contrast, Inauguration refers to the establishment of the new democratic order through institutional mechanisms, generally electoral processes and constitutional arrangements that regulate political competition and governance.

Closely linked to the foundational moment is what Bautista de Alemán (2019) describes as the crisis moment. Political systems often exhibit symptoms that reveal fissures and tensions that no longer fit comfortably within the existing institutional framework. These symptoms may signal the gradual erosion of pact democracies. Venezuela, Chile, and Spain are analysed by Bautista de Alemán as examples of democratic systems that emerged through negotiated agreements among political actors and later experienced different degrees of democratic crisis. At the core of this model lies the assumption that democratic systems function more effectively when elite consensus remains connected to broader societal support, particularly through elections, institutional agreements, and negotiated political arrangements.

Within the concept of crisis, Bautista de Alemán (2019) identifies three levels of intensity. The first is the conjunctural crisis, characterized by the emergence of symptoms indicating a growing distance between citizens and democratic values while democratic institutions remain formally stable. The second is the partial crisis, which affects specific dimensions of the democratic system, particularly political representation and party systems. The third is the structural crisis, representing the deepest form of democratic deterioration, in which political actors and society begin to question the very foundations of the democratic order established during the founding moment.

These observations can be connected to Samuel Huntington's (1991) broader theory of democratization. Huntington describes democratization as a process that generally unfolds through three stages: liberalization, transition, and consolidation. This framework has become one of the principal theoretical

references for understanding democratic transitions, emphasizing that democratization should be conceived as a gradual political process rather than a single institutional event.

The final stage identified by Huntington (1991) is democratic consolidation. Traditionally, consolidation was understood as the moment when democratic rules became the only legitimate rules of the political game. However, subsequent political developments have demonstrated that democratic consolidation cannot be taken for granted. The emergence of democratic backsliding, populist governments, and authoritarian resurgence in different regions has shown that democratic systems require continuous institutional adaptation, civic commitment, and political renewal.

The complexity of democratic consolidation becomes particularly evident when examined through the work of Juan Linz (1978). In *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*, Linz introduces the notion of insoluble problems. Studying the collapse of the Second Spanish Republic, Linz argues that political systems can appear remarkably stable while deeper tensions accumulate beneath the surface. Democracies may seem healthy and resilient, yet a hidden “sea beneath the surface” may exist within the political culture, only becoming visible when a crisis emerges that demands immediate solutions to problems that are, by their nature, difficult or impossible to solve quickly.

More recent scholarship also provides valuable insights. Analysing the failure of the Arab Spring, Fukuyama (2014) argues that many of the countries involved lacked the pre-democratic institutional conditions necessary to sustain democratic governance after the fall of authoritarian rulers. His analysis reinforces the broader argument that successful democratic transitions require not only regime change but also effective institutions, political moderation, civic culture, and state capacity.

The concept of pact democracy can also be explored through the works of Aníbal Romero and Juan Carlos Rey (1991). Their analyses highlight how political agreements among key actors frequently become institutionalized through constitutional arrangements, formal political structures, and negotiated mechanisms capable of generating political stability, legitimacy, and democratic governability. These approaches underline the importance of consensus-building during democratic transitions and illustrate how negotiated settlements may strengthen institutional resilience over time.

Comparative scholarship therefore suggests that democratic transitions cannot be understood as isolated political events but rather as long-term political, institutional, and societal processes. Democratic reconstruction depends upon the interaction between effective institutions, political moderation,

constitutional guarantees, civic trust, democratic leadership, and the capacity of political actors to negotiate sustainable agreements capable of preserving democratic legitimacy over time.

Likewise, democratic consolidation should not be regarded as irreversible. As Huntington (1991), Linz (1978), Fukuyama (2014), Bautista de Alemán (2019), Romero, and Rey collectively demonstrate, democratic systems remain vulnerable to institutional erosion, declining political trust, polarization, and democratic backsliding. Democratic resilience therefore depends not only on constitutional arrangements but also on the continued commitment of political elites and citizens to democratic values, institutions, and the Rule of Law.

These concepts provide the conceptual foundations developed throughout this chapter. The following chapter analyses the historical evolution of Venezuela between 1958 and 2026, exploring how democratic transition, institutional erosion, democratic backsliding, and subsequent prospects for (re)democratization unfolded within the country's political trajectory.

CHAPTER II: Historical-Contextual Framework: Democratic Backsliding in Venezuela and the Erosion of the Punto Fijo Paradigm (1958–2026)

II.1 The End of the Pérez Jiménez Regime (1958) and the Emergence of the New “Old Regime”

The fall of Marcos Pérez Jiménez's dictatorship on 23 January 1958 marked a turning point in Venezuelan political history and inaugurated a democratic era that would shape the country's political development for the following four decades. This transition established the foundations of a relatively stable liberal democracy that, despite its limitations and contradictions, became one of the longest democratic experiences in Latin America during the second half of the twentieth century.

Authors such as Daniel Levine (2002) use the term “old regime” to describe the political, social, and economic order that emerged after 1958. While this system successfully consolidated civilian rule, reduced military intervention in politics, and generated a framework for democratic competition, it also gradually accumulated structural weaknesses that would later contribute to its crisis. Understanding these tensions is essential because the democratic backsliding process that emerged after 1998 cannot be understood without analysing the strengths and limitations of the democratic model that preceded it.

The democratic system established after 1958 created opportunities for political participation and institutional stability, but it also became increasingly dependent on oil revenues and concentrated political representation around a limited number of actors. These dynamics would become particularly relevant during the final decades of the twentieth century, when economic decline and growing social dissatisfaction began to challenge the legitimacy of the political order.

Examining the origins, strengths, and gradual limitations of the post-1958 democratic model lays the historical point of departure for understanding the subsequent processes of democratic erosion analysed throughout this chapter. At the same time, it establishes the historical context within which new generations of Venezuelans would later engage in political participation, civic activism, and democratic advocacy.

II.2 The Punto Fijo Democratic Paradigm (1958–1998)

The Punto Fijo Pact, signed on 31 October 1958 by Acción Democrática (AD), Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente (COPEI), and Unión Republicana Democrática (URD), became the foundational agreement of Venezuela's new democratic order and established the basic rules of political competition and governance during the second half of the twentieth century (Myers, 2017).

The pact sought to guarantee democratic stability, prevent military intervention in politics, and create a framework for peaceful coexistence among the country's principal political forces. As Juan Carlos Rey (1991) argues, the Punto Fijo system can also be understood through the notion of the “*Populist Conciliation System*” (*Sistema Populista de Conciliación*), referring to the particular political culture and set of informal rules that emerged after 1958. According to Rey (1991), this system consisted of a broad coalition of diverse political and social actors based on the recognition of their legitimacy and on the establishment of mechanisms of negotiation, compromise, and accommodation. In this sense, the preservation of democratic stability depended not only on formal institutions but also on the capacity of political actors to manage conflict through consensus-building and negotiated agreements.

For the Venezuelan political system, the Punto Fijo Pact represented the fundamental instrument for overcoming the governance crisis that followed the fall of the Pérez Jiménez dictatorship. It contributed to the institutionalization of political competition, the consolidation of a loyal democratic opposition, and the construction of what could be described as a genuine political community. By providing political

stability and facilitating the peaceful coexistence of competing actors, the pact became one of the central pillars of Venezuela's democratic experience during the second half of the twentieth century.

The institutional framework established by the Punto Fijo Pact was accompanied by the gradual consolidation of a relatively stable party system. During the first decades of the Punto Fijo period, Venezuela developed a political system dominated by Acción Democrática (AD) and Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente (COPEI). This bipartisan arrangement contributed to political stability, facilitated peaceful alternation in power, and promoted institutional continuity. However, from the late 1980s onwards, increasing political fragmentation, declining party identification, and growing public dissatisfaction gradually weakened this model, creating space for new political actors with anti-establishment discourse and eventually facilitating the emergence of outsider leadership.

For several decades, the Punto Fijo system provided institutional continuity and democratic stability. Nevertheless, over time it became increasingly associated with bureaucratic inefficiency, political exclusion, corruption, and declining responsiveness to citizen demands.

According to Levine (2002), the roots of the crisis that would eventually culminate in the collapse of the Punto Fijo paradigm can be found in the gradual erosion of public confidence in democratic institutions and in the inability of the political system to adapt to changing social and economic realities. What initially functioned as a mechanism of democratic stabilization increasingly came to be perceived by many Venezuelans as a closed political arrangement disconnected from societal demands and aspirations.

As Bautista de Alemán emphasizes, the durability of pact democracies depends not only upon constitutional arrangements but also upon the existence of political trust, consensus, moderation, and the willingness of competing actors to preserve democratic institutions beyond immediate partisan interests. Once these elements begin to deteriorate, the democratic system gradually loses its capacity to process conflict through institutional channels.

The Punto Fijo democratic paradigm therefore constituted both one of the principal achievements and, over time, one of the principal vulnerabilities of Venezuela's democratic experience. Examining its institutional design, political achievements, and gradual deterioration establishes the historical foundation for understanding the subsequent processes of democratic backsliding analysed throughout

this chapter. Likewise, it establishes the political and institutional context within which new generations of Venezuelans would later engage in civic participation, democratic advocacy, and collective action, illustrates the institutional environment, for the analysis of youth political participation developed in Chapters III and IV.

II.3 Crisis and Decline of the Punto Fijo System

The decline of the Punto Fijo system was not the result of a single event but rather the consequence of a sequence of political, economic, and social crises that eventually undermined the legitimacy of democratic institutions. Levine (2002) identifies several critical developments that contributed to this deterioration.

Among the most significant was the so-called “Black Friday” of 18 February 1983, when the government of Luis Herrera Campins abandoned the long-standing stability of the Venezuelan Bolívar, devaluing the national currency and ending the symbolic exchange rate of 4.30 bolívars per U.S. dollar. Beyond its economic consequences, Black Friday represented the beginning of a broader crisis of the Venezuelan rentier model and exposed structural vulnerabilities that had remained largely hidden during previous decades of oil prosperity.

The crisis deepened considerably with the *Caracazo* of February 1989, a series of violent protests, riots, and mass looting that erupted primarily in Caracas as a response to the economic adjustment programme implemented by President Carlos Andrés Pérez. The measures, which included increases in fuel and transportation prices, generated widespread social unrest and revealed a growing disconnect between political institutions and large sectors of society. The violent repression that followed further damaged the legitimacy of democratic institutions and left a profound mark on Venezuela's collective memory.

The multidimensional crisis also exposed deeper structural deficiencies within the Venezuelan state. During the 1980s, increasing concerns emerged regarding bureaucratic inefficiency, political centralization, declining institutional responsiveness, and the growing distance between political parties and society. These concerns led to the creation of the Presidential Commission for State Reform (COPRE), which sought to promote political decentralization, strengthen democratic representation, modernize public administration, and expand citizen participation. The proposals advanced by COPRE

reflected an awareness that the existing institutional framework required substantial reform in order to preserve democratic legitimacy and adapt to a more complex and demanding society.

Authors such as Levine (2002) also identifies the attempted military coups of 4 February and 27 November 1992 as crucial indicators of institutional deterioration. The first coup attempt, led by Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez Frías, represented the most significant military challenge to democratic rule since 1958 and revealed growing dissatisfaction not only among civilians but also within sectors of the armed forces. These events constituted the first major military-institutional shocks of the democratic era inaugurated in 1958 and signalled the weakening legitimacy of the political order established under the Punto Fijo Pact.

By the late 1990s, Venezuela faced a convergence of economic decline, political disaffection, institutional stagnation, and growing social mobilization. As Levine (2002) argues:

“The impact of these events was magnified by public scepticism and disaffection coupled with a surge of associational life independent of parties and party-linked networks. The nature of the crisis reflects the dimensions of decline: economic decay, political ossification and immobilism, and rising protest” (p. 251).

These developments created favourable conditions for the emergence of alternative political projects and laid the foundations for a profound transformation of Venezuela's political system. The crisis of the Punto Fijo democratic model therefore cannot be explained solely by economic deterioration or institutional fatigue. It also reflected the progressive weakening of the political consensus that had sustained democratic governance since 1958, as political parties became increasingly disconnected from society and public confidence in democratic institutions steadily declined. Rather than resulting from a single political event, the deterioration of the Punto Fijo system emerged through the cumulative interaction of institutional weaknesses, economic crisis, political polarization, and declining democratic legitimacy. This historical process provides the essential context for understanding the political transformations that followed 1998 and the political and institutional environment within which new forms of civic engagement, student mobilization, and youth political participation would subsequently emerge.

The Rise of Hugo Chávez and the Beginning of Democratic Backsliding (1999–2013)

The election of Hugo Chávez Frías in 1998 under the premises of the so-called *Twenty-First Century Socialism* (*Socialismo del Siglo XXI*) is widely regarded as a turning point in Venezuela's contemporary political history and a rupture with the Punto Fijo paradigm. Chávez's electoral victory was not simply the result of charismatic leadership. It represented the political expression of a much deeper crisis that had been developing throughout the final decades of the Punto Fijo period.

The political transformation initiated after 1999 emerged in the context of a broader crisis of the Venezuelan rentier state. Bull and Rosales (2020) argue that the political deterioration experienced by the country cannot be separated from the structural weaknesses of an economy heavily dependent on oil revenues. Simultaneously, state institutions progressively lost their capacity to mediate social conflict, meet socioeconomic expectations, reduce bureaucratic inefficiencies, combat corruption, and preserve institutional autonomy.

From a constitutional and political perspective, Casal Hernández (2020) argues that the period between 2000 and 2004 was characterized by a process of “hybridity and authoritarian progression.” Democratic institutions formally remained in place; however, mechanisms of accountability, judicial independence, and institutional checks and balances progressively weakened. This pattern was accompanied by increasing concentrations of power in the executive branch, restrictions affecting freedom of expression and freedom of association, and growing pressures on civil and political rights.

This phenomenon has also been associated with the broader rise of populism in Latin America. As Hawkins (2003) argues:

“Not only is Chavismo a poorly institutionalised manifestation of charismatic linkages, but it is built on a strong, classic populist discourse revolving around the notion of *el pueblo* and the capacity of the movement and its leader to embody a singular popular will. It is therefore a populist rather than a liberal democratic discourse.”

The emergence of this discourse contributed to increasing political polarization and to a growing tendency to frame political competition in terms of a confrontation between “the people” and their

perceived adversaries. From this perspective, democratic backsliding in Venezuela should not be understood as a single event but rather as a gradual process that unfolded over time and gradually altered the country's democratic architecture.

In this regard, Carlos de la Torre (2013) points out that Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, and Rafael Correa resembled neopopulist leaders because they emerged with a discourse directed against the dominance of traditional party systems. However, unlike earlier neoliberal neopopulist experiences, their nationalist and redistributive economic policies were fundamentally different. These leaders frequently presented themselves as carriers of historic missions aimed at overcoming the perceived shortcomings of liberal democracy and constructing alternative political models.

Although the Bolivarian project initially benefited from high levels of political support and extraordinary oil revenues, many of the institutional transformations implemented during this period would have long-term consequences for Venezuelan democracy. The progressive concentration of power, the weakening of institutional checks and balances, and the growing personalization of political authority created the foundations upon which the subsequent stage of authoritarian consolidation under Nicolás Maduro would develop after 2013.

The Chávez administration therefore marked the beginning of a new political and institutional cycle in Venezuela. Understanding this period is therefore essential not only for explaining the erosion of Venezuela's democratic institutions but also for contextualising the role that youth movements, student organisations, and civic initiatives would later play in the country's (re)democratization process.

II.5 Authoritarian Consolidation under Nicolás Maduro (2013–2025)

In Venezuela, the so-called Bolivarian Revolution or Twenty-First Century Socialism emerged, a priori, from criticisms of social injustice, poverty, and “neo-liberal” domination. However, according to Prats (2024), its practical evolution generated dynamics closer to what Hannah Arendt described as the organization and mobilization of masses under authoritarian political projects. In Venezuela, increasing levels of poverty in recent years, together with the deterioration of mechanisms of political participation, have contributed to the organization of the masses since, from the perspective advanced by Prats (2024) and Hermet (2003), both populist and authoritarian experiences tend to privilege the mobilization of masses rather than autonomous citizenship. These dynamics have been articulated through a series of

organizations built around the hegemonic PSUV party, which delineates the highly limited mechanisms of mobilization and political action available to citizens, a characteristic commonly associated with authoritarian systems and, according to some authors, with broader tendencies toward multidimensional political control despite the periodic celebration of electoral processes.

Framed within Arendt's descriptions of totalitarianism, Prats (2024) argues that during the last twenty years Venezuela has experienced the development and consequences of a personal project of power associated with Hugo Chávez rather than a coherent project of national development or a long-term country project. It must also be noted that important failures of political parties in fulfilling tasks inherent to their democratic function, particularly political socialization and the construction of a political community intrinsically linked to democratic values, contributed to the emergence of mass support that enabled the regime to consolidate itself gradually while overcoming severe internal and external systemic crises.

Chávez consistently displayed characteristics associated with the populist leader who, in the words cited by Prats (2024), “considers himself the functionary or servant of the masses he leads.” It is interesting to observe how, during the first decade of the Bolivarian project, Chávez appeared to embody the theoretical-political project described by the Argentine thinker Norberto Ceresole regarding the civic-military ideal, where Chávez and the multitude appeared mutually dependent through the multiplicity of rallies and official discourse. Nicolás Maduro has largely maintained this orientation, although with important difficulties and under substantially different political and economic conditions.

Venezuela has therefore experienced the consolidation of a form of authoritarian populism that, according to several observers, has progressively deepened tendencies toward political centralization and social control. ENCOVI (2025) documents the persistence of widespread poverty and severe socioeconomic deterioration affecting broad sectors of Venezuelan society. Moreover, the constant suppression of political parties, together with repeated interventions in the internal dynamics and structures of opposition organizations, particularly during the Maduro period, has reinforced concerns regarding democratic pluralism and political competition.

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, as described by Prats (2024), the enormous volume of resources generated by unprecedented oil prices provided Chávez with the economic means necessary to sustain extensive networks of political support and mobilization, offering an alternative explanation

to interpretations based exclusively on personal charisma. The subsequent economic crisis exposed structural weaknesses and accelerated the deterioration of the party system.

Thus, the accumulation of errors associated with the so-called Second Venezuelan Civil Republic (1958–1998), together with the unfortunate management of the generalized systemic crisis that emerged during the 1980s and a series of anti-democratic factors, contributed to growing public rejection of corruption and traditional political elites. This environment facilitated the rise of anti-political sentiments which, according to Bernard Crick (2000), may create conditions that lead either toward disorder or toward forms of authoritarian domination. In Venezuela, this process contributed to the deterioration of democratic institutions, the weakening of the productive apparatus, the fragmentation of the party system, and the consolidation of an increasingly authoritarian political model.

Venezuela, as in other experiences frequently analysed through the lens of totalitarian studies, increasing attention has been directed toward mechanisms through which access to food distribution, education, public services, state bureaucracy, and even identification systems become connected to structures controlled by the state. In this regard, Prats (2024), drawing upon Arendt, recalls that “totalitarian movements are mass organizations of atomized and isolated individuals which demand total, unrestricted, unconditional and unalterable loyalty.”

Several observers have argued that the consolidation of the Venezuelan political model has been accompanied by the development of clientelist networks and patronage mechanisms through which access to public resources, social programmes, and political opportunities may become linked to loyalty toward the governing coalition. Such dynamics contribute to the reproduction of political power by creating incentives for dependence upon state-controlled resources and by reinforcing asymmetrical relationships between citizens and political authorities (Coppedge, 2017; Bull & Rosales, 2020).

Based on the analysis developed by Bull and Rosales (2020), there is a growing scholarly consensus that Venezuela transitioned from democracy toward a peculiar authoritarian model during the 2010s. According to these authors:

“Venezuela’s crisis is also a microcosm of wider dynamics, such as the rise of authoritarian politics, the declining power of the United States and of multilateralism, the rise of emerging powers, and the transformation of global economy dynamics such as the expansion of extractive

frontiers. In these processes, Venezuela has not been a passive bystander or agentless victim but, on many occasions, an active participant” (Bull & Rosales, 2020, p. 16).

The consolidation of Nicolás Maduro's government intensified many of the tendencies already visible during the Chávez era. Political pluralism progressively weakened, polarization deepened, and relations between the government and opposition became increasingly confrontational. In parallel, concerns regarding the protection of civil and political rights became more prominent.

The United Nations Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Venezuela (2025) documented serious patterns of human rights violations and a continued deterioration of democratic guarantees. These findings reinforced broader concerns regarding the weakening of the rule of law and the shrinking of democratic space in the country.

The Maduro period therefore represents the consolidation of the process of democratic backsliding examined throughout this chapter. Understanding the political, institutional, and socioeconomic dynamics that characterised this period is essential for contextualising the environment in which Venezuelan youth movements, student organisations, civic initiatives, and democratic advocacy networks developed the forms of socio-political participation.

II.6 Understanding the Events of 3 January 2026

The events of 3 January 2026 marked the latest stage in the political trajectory examined throughout this chapter. Rather than representing an isolated episode, they should be understood within the broader process of democratic deterioration, institutional crisis, and political confrontation that had progressively unfolded in Venezuela since the late 1990s. This historical perspective is essential for understanding the context in which subsequent debates on institutional reconstruction and (re)democratization emerged.

A new political chapter opened after the military operation conducted by the United States on 3 January 2026 in Caracas, which resulted in the capture of Nicolás Maduro. The operation generated significant controversy regarding both its legality and legitimacy. While many Western governments, including the United States and several Member States of the European Union, as well as numerous civil society organizations, had questioned the legitimacy of Maduro's presidency following the disputed presidential elections of 28 July 2024, the operation also generated important debates regarding international law and state sovereignty.

Monnappa (2026), for example, argues that the intervention challenged fundamental principles of international law and the rules-based international order. Regardless of the legal and political debates surrounding the operation, the events of 3 January 2026 undeniably represent a turning point in Venezuela's contemporary history and have reopened discussions regarding democratic transition, institutional reconstruction, and governance.

The framework proposed by U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio—Stabilization, Recovery, and Transition—resembles several stages identified in the democratization literature by authors such as O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Morlino. These approaches emphasize that democratic transitions involve political opening, economic and social recovery, the creation of a new legal and institutional structure capable of guaranteeing free and fair elections, and ultimately a broader process of democratic consolidation. Such a process requires active civic engagement and a shared commitment to democratic values, consistent with the principles established in Article 5 of the Venezuelan Constitution.

Even though authors such as Monnappa (2026) suggest that the January 2026 military operation violated core principles of international law, the truth is that it *de facto* represents a game changer for socio-political and economic environment in the country.

From this perspective, the Venezuelan democratic trajectory between 1958 and 2026 illustrates that democratic transition, democratic consolidation, democratic crisis, democratic backsliding, and prospects for democratic reconstruction should not be understood as isolated historical episodes but rather as interconnected stages within a broader political process.

CHAPTER III: Youth Political Participation in Venezuela (1998–2026)

III.1 Regional Trends in Youth Political Participation in Latin America during the Twenty-First Century

Before examining the Venezuelan experience, it is useful to situate youth political participation within the broader Latin American context. In Latin America, the “silent discontent” identified by Michel Guardiola (2020) can be summarized through a dynamic of electoral punishment directed at incumbent governments, whether from the right or the left, in which what becomes relevant is not ideology or political dogma, but rather the capacity to address contemporary challenges. The Macri–Fernández, Bolsonaro–Lula, and more recently Fernández–Milei dichotomies may be inscribed within this pendular

dynamic, particularly among younger generations. These developments reveal broader patterns of dissatisfaction with political institutions and democratic representation across the region.

These regional developments also introduce another important variable, particularly relevant in recent electoral events, namely the rise of political outsiders. Carlos Meléndez Guerrero (n.d.) reflects on this phenomenon in the Latin American context:

“The outsider acts as a shock absorber, since it only functions as an identity reference and not as a political proposal capable of addressing demands that gradually become mobilizable. The success of outsiders warns of a broader social discontent that accumulates and may overflow at any moment, creating the urgent need for an organic channel capable of preventing protest from turning into violence rather than institutionalized politics. (...) Beyond typologies and nuances, outsiders share a common characteristic: the exacerbation of the personalization of politics and organizational and programmatic improvisation. They seek to represent social discontent (something once associated with the political left), but ultimately provide only temporary relief.”
(p. 4)

Within this approach, phenomena such as López Obrador in Mexico, whose principal political slogan was “the poor first”, Bukele in El Salvador, Milei in Argentina, and other leaders who emerged amid widespread dissatisfaction with traditional political elites may be understood. More broadly, recent electoral processes in Bolivia and Honduras provide evidence of another major institutional challenge: declining trust in electoral systems, aggravated by debates surrounding indefinite re-election, clientelist relationships, and corruption, often generating profound political and institutional crises. In 2019, “the true origin of the conflict in Bolivia was Evo Morales’ attempt to remain in power for a fourth term” (Díaz, 2020, p. 65), a situation that brought the country close to a severe institutional breakdown.

Regional experiences also demonstrate the increasing importance of collective action and youth mobilization as mechanisms of political participation. In the Ecuadorian case, Levi (2020) points to a social and political “awakening”, embodied in the youth mobilizations that emerged in October 2019 and characterized by the participation of indigenous organizations motivated by demands for recognition and inclusion. These mobilizations incorporated trade unionists and other social sectors with heterogeneous objectives and methods but demonstrated the increasing relevance of collective action and civic

engagement as mechanisms of political expression. Despite their differences, these dynamics coincide with other episodes such as the Chilean and Venezuelan protests of 2019.

Regarding Chile, the constitutional process that followed the social protests of 2019 reflected broader regional debates concerning legitimacy, representation, social justice, and democratic reform. The slogan “it is not 30 pesos, it is 30 years” became symbolic of accumulated frustrations regarding inequality, political representation, and the perceived limitations of the institutional order. Flores Cáceres (2020) argues that these mobilizations reflected the erosion of the economic orthodoxy that had shaped Chilean development for decades and the growing perception that areas such as education, healthcare, and pensions had been progressively detached from their social character as rights. This process was accompanied by a broader sense of injustice that increasingly shaped public opinion.

We agree with Sánchez and Niño (2020) that Colombia also faces a profound crossroads marked by the challenges of consolidating a post-conflict era that remains incomplete. Although the country benefits from relatively favorable socioeconomic conditions in terms of literacy and labour-market participation, it continues to be affected by the legacies of more than five decades of armed conflict. According to the Colombian Ombudsman’s Office, between 2016 and October 2019 approximately 555 social leaders were assassinated (Sánchez & Niño, 2020, p. 49), a reality that continues to test the capacities of transitional justice, democratic governance, and political negotiation. In our view, the inability of governments to engage in responsible listening to social demands, a phenomenon also identified by Malamud (2020), constitutes a structural weakness not only in Colombia but also in Ecuador, Chile, and other countries across the region. This weakness is reinforced by growing uncertainty and by the fragility of regional political alliances, which are often based primarily on ideological affinities.

In sum, these cases reveal broader regional trends characterized by declining trust in traditional political institutions, growing dissatisfaction with representative democracy, the emergence of outsider leadership, and the increasing importance of social movements, civic activism, and collective mobilization. These dynamics are particularly relevant for understanding Venezuela, where democratic backsliding, institutional deterioration, and restrictions on civil and political rights have profoundly shaped the ways in which young people participate in politics. As formal channels of participation became increasingly constrained, many young Venezuelans turned toward student movements, civic organizations, democratic advocacy networks, and digital forms of mobilization as alternative mechanisms of political engagement and democratic action.

III.2 Forms of Youth Political Participation in Venezuela (1998–2026)

III.2.1 Student Movements and Civic Activism in Venezuela (1998–2026)

Youth Participation during the Chávez Era

A significant portion of Venezuelan youth has grown up, or lived most of their lives, within the political process known as the “Bolivarian Revolution,” which has generated distortions and, in many cases, significant misunderstandings regarding public administration and political coexistence, framing the understanding of politics and the political sphere within a sociopolitical scenario marked by polarization, the erosion of the Rule of Law, and the documentation by NGOs and multilateral organizations such as the United Nations (2025) of the suppression of fundamental freedoms and setbacks in civil, political, economic, and social rights, as reflected by Ponce (2016). However, this has not been a homogeneous process, either in substance or in narrative, and has furthermore been characterized by the consolidation of authoritarian tendencies throughout the different phases of this political period (1998–2026), meaning that “Polarization, represented by the extremes of Chavismo and the opposition, is clearly reflected in the distribution of responses” (Ponce, 2016, p. 24, author's translation).

Democratic perceptions remained significant during the first decade covered by this study (1998–2008), largely grounded in the regular holding of electoral processes, especially relevant considering that “The value of voting as a democratic instrument and a mechanism for political change is shared by an overwhelming majority of young people (more than 90%)” (Ponce, 2016, p. 25, author's translation). Nevertheless, these perceptions were gradually eroded by increasing violations of freedom of expression, with milestones such as the closure of the independent television channel RCTV, as explained by García-Guadilla and Mallén (2010). Some authors characterize this period as an ambivalent vision of “radical democracy,” directly affecting mechanisms of accountability:

“A significant number of Venezuelans, particularly those previously excluded from the economic, social, and political life of the nation, have been given opportunities to participate in community, workplace, and political activities. At the same time, the traditional mechanisms designed to prevent abuses of power have been discarded in the name of majority rule or ‘radical democracy’” (Ellner, as cited in Ponce, 2016, p. 20, author's translation).

As previously described, Chávez's neopopulist leadership incorporated neo-populist elements and an increasingly confrontational discourse against the independence of state institutions, fostering a State–Party symbiosis (PSUV) in both domestic and foreign policy decision-making and tending toward the concentration of power, to the detriment of the advances achieved through processes such as COPRE, previously discussed. Indeed, "Under Chávez, personalistic leadership reached worrying levels at the expense of party leadership. No democratic president has managed to concentrate so much power and place public institutions so firmly under his authority" (Salamanca, as cited in Ponce, 2016, p. 17, author's translation).

The 2007 Student Movement: The Re-emergence of Youth Political Agency

Following the events of the failed coup d'état of April 2002, and the subsequent calls for a general strike and work stoppage promoted by the business federation Fedecámaras between December 2002 and February 2003, in repudiation of the National Assembly's granting of special powers to the Head of State—which allowed him to govern by decree—as well as the presentation and approval of a package of laws consistent with his political programme and the new Constitution adopted by popular referendum in December 1999, these characteristics of the gradual erosion of the separation of powers, fundamental freedoms, and the functioning of the Rule of Law became increasingly consolidated and were sustained by the broad popular support enjoyed by the governing political movement. However, the first socio-political organizational structures began to emerge—particularly among young people and often outside the foundation of conventional political parties—as a response to democratic erosion. In this regard, "The emergence of the Venezuelan student movement in the public sphere, protesting the government closing of the TV channel RCTV in May 2007, enriched the political conflict with new values and discursive strategies" (García-Guadilla & Mallén, 2010, p. 71).

The 2007 student movement, initially focused on the preservation of freedom of expression—"Its slogan, 'Who are we?' 'Students'; 'What do we want?' 'Freedom,' implied an identity as defenders of liberal political rights" (García-Guadilla, 2020, p. 79, author's translation)—expanded towards broader demands concerning civil and political rights, including within trade union sectors. Unlike more radical movements and forms of political pressure, at that moment "The students proposed national reconciliation and addressed new publics beyond the traditional opposition" (García-Guadilla & Mallén, 2010, p. 71), reaffirming the capacity of youth to generate new and innovative forms of political action and political influence. Nevertheless, "The students did not succeed in deactivating the existing dynamics

of polarization between government supporters and opponents" (García-Guadilla & Mallén, 2010, p. 74, author's translation).

The significance of this movement lies in the capacity of civil society to expand the public space of rights and social awareness regarding those rights (Grzybowski, as cited in Ortiz, Rincón & Antequera, 2013). The chapter inaugurated by this movement demonstrated *that* "In this complex process of the last decade, the student movement and citizens in general have played a prominent role in the recovery of governance and democracy in the country" (Ortiz, Rincón & Antequera, 2013, p. 352, author's translation). This experience would become an important precedent for subsequent cycles of youth mobilization, particularly during the nationwide protests of 2014 and the broader civic initiatives that emerged during the following years.

Youth participation in the 2014 protests

Despite periods of apparent “stability” in terms of large-scale public protests between 2007 and 2014, the context of the partisan transition within the ruling movement following the death of Hugo Chávez on 5 March 2013—who had been re-elected on 7 October 2012—generated a form of political “co-optation” within the PSUV party system through the transfer of leadership to Nicolás Maduro Moros, who had served as Hugo Chávez’s Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2006 to 2012 and as Executive Vice President from 2012 to 2013. Following Chávez’s death and the subsequent presidential elections, acting president Nicolás Maduro won the presidential election of 14 April 2013 as the PSUV candidate with 50.61% of the vote against 49.12% obtained by opposition candidate Henrique Capriles (CIDOB, 2016). This represented a difference of only 1.49%, or 224,739 votes, demonstrating the extreme polarization of the political system and the deep divisions that would shape subsequent political developments, eventually giving rise to increasingly radical proposals and visions within different political factions, amid a growing sense of frustration and distrust toward institutional mechanisms for channelling sociopolitical conflict, as well as a steadily increasing social discontent.

The complex and abrupt transfer of partisan leadership had been politically legitimized through a presidential address broadcast on radio and television in December 2012, in which Hugo Chávez—already weakened by illness—publicly expressed his support and political endorsement of Maduro if “something happened” to him. However, growing public discontent caused by the deterioration of socioeconomic conditions—despite the oil boom of the previous decade—together with Maduro’s lack

of charisma, the emergence of increasingly visible factions within the PSUV, and the consolidation of the opposition around the multi-party coalition Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD), which brought together diverse opposition sectors and later institutionalized the opposition's electoral victories, opened the door to a new wave of anti-government demonstrations. In this regard, "The Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict (OVCS) recorded at least 9,286 protests between January and December 2014, an unprecedented figure in recent decades, equivalent to 26 protests per day throughout the country." (OVCS, 2015, p. 1, author's translation).

The new wave of student protests that began in Venezuela in February 2014 also represented important ruptures with the country's tradition of social movements. Uzcátegui (2014) argues that high levels of insecurity and criminality, together with the shortage of essential products and goods, acted as catalysts for a movement largely rooted in universities. Moreover, "According to estimates by the NGOs Provea and the Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict (OVCS), at least 800,000 people mobilized in 16 states of the country between February and March" (Uzcátegui, 2014, p. 153, author's translation).

Furthermore, these events were followed by a new wave of detentions and repression that led various sectors of society to call for the resignation of Nicolás Maduro, as noted by García-Guadilla (2020), alongside demands that "Students from public and private universities throughout the country demanded the restoration of the right to vote" (García-Guadilla, 2020, p. 82, author's translation). The methodology of these demonstrations adopted multiple forms and strategies, including marches, rallies, vigils, human chains, collective prayers, banner demonstrations, street musicians, assemblies, and street-art interventions, as described by Uzcátegui (2014).

Far from disappearing after the events of 2014, youth mobilization evolved and adapted to an increasingly restrictive political environment. The experience accumulated during these protests would later influence the forms of civic activism, democratic advocacy, and political participation adopted by a new generation of Venezuelan activists, students, and civil society leaders during the subsequent cycles of political conflict and democratic contestation.

Civic activism as a form of democratic engagement (2019–2026)

The progressive shrinking of civic space, accompanied by increasing political persecution (García-Guadilla, 2020), resulted in growing authoritarianism. Under these increasingly restrictive conditions,

civic activism became one of the principal mechanisms through which Venezuelan citizens—and particularly younger generations—continued to defend political rights and democratic aspirations. The Venezuelan presidential election of 20 May 2018 constituted a key turning point that deepened the country's institutional crisis. The process declared Nicolás Maduro the winner for the 2019–2025 presidential term, but it was surrounded by controversy from the moment it was called.

The main opposition political parties, grouped within the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD), together with several of their most visible leaders, were subjected to legal disqualifications that prevented them from competing under democratic conditions. The majority opposition coalition called for abstention, arguing that the minimum democratic guarantees were absent. Former governor Henri Falcón broke with the opposition strategy and decided to participate as a presidential candidate.

At the beginning of the new presidential term in January 2019, the opposition-controlled National Assembly, elected in 2015, declared that Maduro was usurping the presidency. This gave rise to the Venezuelan presidential crisis, during which the Speaker of Parliament, Juan Guaidó, took the oath as interim president and received recognition from more than fifty countries, including the United States and the European Union. During this period, Guaidó appeared to embody the consolidation of a new generation of political leaders capable of leading a transitional process based on the well-known mantra of “end the usurpation, transitional government, and free elections.” The convergence of multiple political, economic, and social pressure factors contributed to a further deterioration of living conditions (ENCOVI, 2025) and accelerated a diaspora that surpassed eight million people according to the United Nations (2025).

In response to both international diplomatic pressure—primarily expressed through economic and political sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union—and domestic demands, various negotiation efforts were promoted over the last decade by political actors with the support and mediation of members of the international community, including the European Union through the so-called Montevideo Mechanism during the tenure of High Representative Federica Mogherini. Beginning in 2021, the government of Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador facilitated negotiations between the Unitary Platform (PU), led by Venezuelan lawyer and politician Gerardo Blyde, and representatives of the national government, whose delegation was headed by Jorge Rodríguez, President of the National Assembly. These negotiations continued for two years, experiencing several advances and setbacks, until the signing of two framework political agreements in Barbados on 17 October 2023

concerning “the promotion of political rights and electoral guarantees for all” and “the protection of the Nation’s vital interests.”

The delegations, accompanied by diplomatic representatives from Norway, Russia, the United States, Barbados, the Netherlands, Colombia, and Mexico, agreed on several points, including respect for the right of each political actor to select its presidential candidate, the implementation of electoral guarantees, and the holding of presidential elections during the second half of 2024.

The Venezuelan opposition, largely concentrated within the Unitary Platform, organized primary elections on 22 October 2023, resulting in the election of María Corina Machado, leader of the Vente Venezuela party, with more than 92% of the vote, thereby reaffirming her leadership within the Venezuelan opposition.

Finally, on 4 March 2024, the National Electoral Council called presidential elections for 28 July 2024. However, on 30 January 2024, the Supreme Tribunal of Justice upheld María Corina Machado’s fifteen-year political disqualification, triggering a new stage of political crisis. Competing political narratives emerged, including Machado’s insistence on pursuing her registration before the electoral authority as a presidential candidate—appealing to political resilience and the confidence of her supporters. On 26 March 2024, the leadership of the Unitary Platform confirmed its inability to register Machado and announced Dr. Corina Yoris, philosopher and university professor, as her substitute candidate. Later that same day, Corina Yoris publicly declared her inability to complete her registration through the National Electoral Council’s digital platform under the Democratic Unity Roundtable electoral card. During the early hours of 27 March, the political leadership of the MUD confirmed the registration of former ambassador Edmundo González as a temporary candidate in order to keep what they described as the “electoral route” alive.

The presidential election of 28 July 2024 triggered a severe legitimacy crisis and widespread international controversy due to allegations of electoral fraud. As the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights concluded, “The 2024 presidential election in Venezuela did not comply with international standards and parameters of electoral integrity and cannot be considered democratic” (IACHR, 2024).

Within this increasingly restrictive environment, civic activism continued to serve as one of the principal mechanisms through which Venezuelan citizens—and particularly younger generations—sought to defend political rights, preserve democratic aspirations, and sustain civic engagement despite the

progressive closure of institutional channels of participation. This evolution illustrates one of the central arguments of this research: as democratic backsliding intensified, youth political participation did not disappear but rather transformed its repertoire of collective action in response to changing political opportunities and constraints.

III.2.2 Civic Organizations and Democratic Advocacy Networks in Venezuela

Traditional political party systems continue to hang by a thread; the profound disconnection between society, politicians, and institutions, particularly among younger generations, constitutes a colossal challenge for contemporary democracies.

As we have previously argued, the “salvation” of democracy proposed by populists, who perceive themselves as the rightful holders and embodiment of popular sovereignty, does not simply “halt” the alleged oligarchic degeneration of contemporary democratic regimes, but often leads to anti-democratic projects and processes of power. As Salmorán (2017) warns, rather than presenting themselves as populist parties, these actors frequently adopt alternative labels such as “movements,” “fronts,” or “leagues,” seeking to distinguish themselves from “traditional,” “established,” or “institutionalized” political parties, thereby contributing to the fragmentation of party systems.

Distrust and dissatisfaction towards political parties and traditional politics constitute one of the most vulnerable points of contemporary democracies. As Salmorán (2017) points out, “the disaffection of citizens towards traditional political actors and institutions is a phenomenon that must be empirically investigated.” This trend is particularly visible among younger generations, who often perceive traditional institutions as incapable of adequately channelling their demands, aspirations, and expectations.

It is precisely within this context of crisis of representation, institutional weakening, and growing distrust towards traditional political actors that civil society organizations, youth leadership initiatives, and democratic advocacy networks have acquired increasing relevance in Venezuela. These organizations have progressively assumed functions related to civic education, the promotion of civil and political rights, electoral observation, social mobilization, and the strengthening of democratic culture, particularly among younger generations.

Continuing this theoretical and practical reflection on contemporary democratic challenges, it becomes evident that organized civil society plays a fundamental role in the construction of alternative spaces for participation, capable of strengthening democratic culture and generating new forms of civic engagement.

The finding of this research suggest that civic organizations constitute one of the principal institutional expressions of citizen participation, particularly in contexts where traditional political channels become increasingly constrained. Beyond moments of protest, these organizations frequently promote civic engagement, democratic advocacy, community empowerment, humanitarian assistance, and the protection of fundamental rights. The Venezuelan experience illustrates this dynamic through the emergence of organizations that have developed alternative forms of citizen participation under conditions of democratic backsliding. Among them, *Alimenta la Solidaridad* represents a particularly illustrative case of how civic organizations can simultaneously respond to urgent humanitarian needs while strengthening community leadership, volunteerism, and democratic resilience.

Various values associated with the principle of subsidiarity can therefore be identified and are particularly applicable to civic organizations and democratic advocacy networks, including solidarity, co-responsibility, and the de-statization of the common good (Delsol, 2024), all of which possess profound anthropological and cultural significance. *Alimenta la Solidaridad* is a Venezuelan non-governmental organization (NGO) founded in 2016 in Caracas, specifically in the highly vulnerable communities of Petare, and which today operates in thirteen states across the country.

Alimenta la Solidaridad addresses—through eight programmes—four major challenges: food security (nutrition), community leadership, livelihoods (gastronomic and textile sustenance), and education (educational programmes for mothers). Through its community kitchens, supported by international organizations, partnerships, private companies, and individual donations, it:

"Guarantees a daily lunch that contains 40% of the caloric intake our beneficiaries should consume. In this way, we prevent malnutrition among children, pregnant women, nursing mothers, and older adults. These spaces are the result of the organization of fathers and mothers who make their homes available. They are meeting spaces where different initiatives are developed" (*Alimenta la Solidaridad*, 2024).

The organization also evaluates the nutritional status of beneficiaries through anthropometric training programmes for mothers. Regarding leadership programmes, it places particular emphasis on female empowerment—especially important within a social structure often characterized by the absence of fathers and a predominantly matriarchal dynamic—viewing women as transformative agents within society.

Likewise, Alimenta la Solidaridad promotes entrepreneurship as a mechanism for economic inclusion and financial autonomy, particularly for mothers, who receive training to generate livelihoods through cooking and textile craftsmanship. The organization also provides educational programmes for mothers in reading comprehension, writing, and logical-mathematical reasoning in order to reinforce, from within the household, some of the deficiencies of the public education system in the communities where it operates.

Without a doubt, this initiative of citizen participation vindicates the principle emphasized by Delsol (2024) that "the individual has a right to act," a principle that is philosophically and anthropologically grounded in freedom. Furthermore, it makes use of the mechanisms of communication globalization, both through mass media and multimedia as well as through new forms of communication via the Internet (Castells, 2000, p. 9), in their positive dimension, allowing the organization to project its activities beyond the country's borders—overcoming censorship barriers—in order to raise funds, recruit volunteers, and promote awareness campaigns within a global society founded upon a universal human rights paradigm that requires new mechanisms of collaboration and collective action.

Alimenta la Solidaridad operates through a particularly interesting mechanism. On the one hand, it begins with the assessment of community leaders who possess first-hand knowledge of the most immediate and sensitive realities of their communities, based on specific indicators such as economic conditions, socioeconomic vulnerability, family structure and circumstances, and the nutritional and health conditions of the sector where a new community kitchen is expected to be established.

Subsequently, meetings are held with the beneficiary community, initially explaining the principles of the organization and its activities, establishing an inclusive and bilateral relationship, introducing team members, and laying the foundations for volunteer participation, while defining the rules and commitments necessary for the opening of the community kitchen, which also serves as a multifunctional centre for the training programmes previously mentioned. In this sense, the NGO addresses through

citizen action what Aguirre (2021, p. 9) describes as the "weakening of institutional mediations associated with political parties, legislatures, and autonomous public bodies."

An interesting phenomenon regarding the principle of subsidiarity expressed here is that, in the face of the multidimensional crisis affecting Venezuela—where, according to data collected by Alimenta la Solidaridad (2024), 85% of Venezuelan households experience difficulties related to food insecurity—the founders, staff, and volunteers, by strengthening community capacities, have achieved a high level of impact with remarkable results, including 20.8 million meals served, 12,500 beneficiaries, 865 committed mothers, and 202 community kitchens operating in thirteen Venezuelan states, thereby contributing significantly to food security and human development among their beneficiaries.

However, the organization faces several challenges from a legal and political perspective, particularly if proposed legislation concerning NGOs advances in the National Assembly, which could jeopardize current funding mechanisms based on international donations, private-sector partnerships, and sponsorship programmes for children.

Del Águila (2017) notes that what John Rawls called "reinvigorating the public sense of justice" is precisely what compels the "good enough citizen" to engage in participatory action in any of its forms (Del Águila, 2017, p. 9). In contexts of high state inefficiency and hostility such as contemporary Venezuela, citizen resilience has, consciously or unconsciously, incorporated the principle of subsidiarity into participatory practices, taking the initiative in addressing challenges as complex as malnutrition and limited educational access among socioeconomically vulnerable sectors, as demonstrated by the example of Alimenta la Solidaridad. At the same time, these experiences reveal the advantages of network-based cooperation and the strength of volunteerism, while also demonstrating an inspiring form of societal democratic resilience.

III. 2.3 Digital Mobilization and Informal Networks in Venezuela (1998-2026)

The progressive closure of institutional channels of participation, together with increasing restrictions on civil and political liberties, led Venezuelan society—and particularly younger generations—to explore alternative mechanisms for political expression, civic engagement, and collective action. In this context, digital technologies and social networks gradually evolved from simple communication tools into spaces for participation, organization, advocacy, and democratic engagement. As García, Del-Hoyo, and Fernández explain, "Social networks should not be understood as simple technological tools for the

exchange of messages, but rather as authentic means for communication, interaction, and global participation” (as cited in Moreno Freites & Ziritt Trejo, 2019, p. 30, author's translation).

The growing relevance of digital participation is closely linked to the democratizing potential of technological innovation. According to Moreno Freites and Ziritt Trejo (2019), “Digital technologies facilitate the ability of individuals and groups to connect and share opinions in an exponential, but above all, democratic manner” (p. 31, author's translation). In the Venezuelan case, this phenomenon became increasingly visible as social networks provided citizens with opportunities to engage in public debate, access information, denounce violations of human rights, and contribute to political discussions beyond traditional institutional frameworks.

Social media progressively became an extension of political participation itself. In this regard, “Street mobilizations also have their counterpart on digital platforms, especially Twitter, where users seek to position issues of public interest through so-called tweetstorms” (Burgos, 2023, p. 141, author's translation). Likewise, “Through this digital action, information is disseminated, demonstrations are organized, and the reasons for protest are communicated; thus, this space has been used for activism, denunciation, and access to information” (Burgos, 2023, p. 141, author's translation). Therefore, online participation increasingly complemented traditional forms of political engagement, especially among younger generations more familiar with digital communication environments, while gradually extending its use across different sectors of Venezuelan society.

The expansion of digital participation also contributed to the emergence of new forms of activism. As Moreno Freites and Ziritt Trejo (2019) note, citizens increasingly protest in digital environments, seeking ways to circumvent authoritarianism, denounce injustices, channel ideas, and pursue democratic objectives. Similarly, Burgos (2023) argues that “Within a repressive context, activism has developed through both civic and political initiatives” (p. 138, author's translation). These developments suggest that digital activism should not be understood merely as a technological phenomenon, but rather as an adaptive response by citizens seeking to preserve spaces for participation under increasingly restrictive political conditions.

The emergence of informal civic networks further strengthened these dynamics. As Moreno Freites and Ziritt Trejo (2019) argue, “Social networks play a decisive role in citizen participation and have great

potential to contribute to political and social change in Venezuela” (p. 35, author's translation). Moreover, “Venezuelan society has found in the Internet and social networks an ideal instrument for citizen participation” (Moreno Freites & Ziritt Trejo, 2019, p. 35, author's translation). Digital communication also played a crucial role during moments of political crisis and social unrest. In a context marked by censorship, restrictions on media freedom, and increasing political polarization, digital platforms provided alternative channels for information dissemination. Moreno Freites and Ziritt Trejo (2019) observe that “In a context of oppression, authoritarianism, and violations of fundamental rights, social networks have become an alternative through which citizens can make visible and communicate to the world what is happening in the country” (p. 35, author's translation). Furthermore, “Through their smartphones, Venezuelan youth report in real time what is happening in different parts of the country and how they have been able to organize and participate actively in political events” (Moreno Freites & Ziritt Trejo, 2019, p. 35, author's translation).

From a broader democratic perspective, online engagement emerged as an important mechanism of participation under conditions of democratic backsliding. Social networks increasingly became spaces where citizens, and particularly young people, could continue exercising forms of political agency despite growing institutional restrictions. As Moreno Freites and Ziritt Trejo (2019) argue, “Social networks represent dynamic digi-impact channels for the citizen participation of university youth (...) mechanisms of participation beyond the reach of government control” (p. 37, author's translation). Likewise, “Social networks have acquired a decisive role in fostering greater social participation among young people through digital media” (Moreno Freites & Ziritt Trejo, 2019, p. 37, author's translation).

The significance of these developments becomes even more evident when considering the progressive erosion of democratic institutions. Burgos (2023) notes that “Amid the intense communicational hegemony that characterizes the country, the digital sphere has become a new space for interaction and deliberation” (p. 146, author's translation). This observation is particularly relevant when contrasted with the argument advanced by Morales et al. (2011), who maintain that “The concept of public opinion is intimately linked to a specific political system, and this can only be one based on the rule of law. Public opinion does not exist in authoritarian states because public debate is nonexistent” (as cited in Rojas-Rendón, 2024, p. 81, author's translation).

The Venezuelan case suggests that, even under conditions of democratic deterioration, digital platforms have contributed to preserving spaces for debate, participation, collective action, and civic engagement. Digital mobilization and informal networks became not only alternative channels of communication but also mechanisms through which Venezuelan youth preserved political agency, sustained civic engagement, and defended democratic values under increasingly authoritarian conditions.

III.3 Barriers and Limitations to Youth Participation in Venezuela (1998-2026)

III.3.1 Restrictions on Civil and Political Liberties in Venezuela (1998-2026)

In their reflection on contemporary Venezuela, Mijares and Cardozo (2020) argue that the civilian ideological apparatus of the PSUV contributed to the dismantling of professional armed forces and weakened a society with democratic aspirations. This situation may be understood as part of a broader process of institutional erosion that progressively affected democratic guarantees and the effective exercise of civil and political rights in Venezuela. In this regard, Martínez (2020) also observes that “Paradoxically, political and historical narratives are sometimes imposed that complicate the analytical distinction between revolutions and coups d’état, generally as a consequence of political propaganda and the (re)construction of historical memory by the victors” (p. 27). This observation is particularly relevant in contexts where the concentration of political power limits political pluralism and conditions public debate.

Jo-ann Peña Angulo (2020) is particularly innovative in emphasizing the relevance of dark political groups and their symbiotic relationship with so-called “soft totalitarianisms”, highlighting the importance of political reconciliation as a prerequisite for the reconstruction of a genuine political community. Likewise, Schmitter (2011) argues that contemporary democracies increasingly face widespread disenchantment, rising distrust toward political actors, corruption, and the advance of anti-politics. Although these challenges are not exclusive to Venezuela, they provide an important framework for understanding the progressive deterioration of democratic guarantees in the country.

In the Venezuelan case, these dynamics have contributed to the weakening of democratic institutions, affecting the conditions necessary for the full exercise of civil and political liberties and limiting spaces for autonomous citizen participation, particularly among younger generations. These restrictions progressively increased the costs associated with political participation, encouraged new forms of civic

engagement outside traditional institutional channels, and conditioned the development of youth political agency throughout the period analysed.

III.3.2 Disillusionment with Institutional Politics

Another of the previously mentioned COPRE's reforms and demands in the Venezuela of the 80s was greater internal democracy within political parties, because the way they had been operating did not fully reflect democratic principles. Candidates were designated by party elites, and consequently party members and grassroots supporters gradually became disconnected from political organizations.

Having previously described the decentralization process that pointed towards the opening of new forms of political influence, including reinforced youth participation between 1989 and 1999, it is possible to identify a first period in which decentralization achieved significant progress and was perceived by the population as necessary since, to a certain extent, it responded to the demands of the political system and partially relieved the burdens of an oversized State. However, despite the fact that the 1999 Constitution ratified the intention and model of a decentralized federal State, as Aveledo (2007) points out, this has not been the case in practice. The political system has experienced a substantial regression in the decentralization process and today finds itself in a situation of inefficiency and near inoperability in many of the responsibilities it has accumulated, while simultaneously fostering the institutional and political conditions necessary for the concentration of power, characteristic of a political project such as that promoted by Hugo Chávez.

Regarding political parties in Venezuela today, we observe an abandonment of efforts aimed at recruiting young cadres, a characteristic that had previously distinguished parties such as COPEI, as well as political recruitment more generally, as was clearly embodied in the early years of Acción Democrática. Political parties traditionally maintained training schools and mechanisms for the recruitment and formation of political militants and future leaders within their own organizational structures.

This situation degenerated into a profound disconnection between political parties and society as a whole which, combined with the accumulation of external debt, financial mismanagement, the slowdown of the decentralization process, and the weakening of economic liberalization, contributed to the triumph of anti-politics, fully inaugurated during the second administration of Rafael Caldera and later reinforced by the success of the outsider Hugo Chávez.

Unfortunately, political parties in Venezuela continue to display a considerable disconnection between their principles, interests, and political programs, and the realities and aspirations of society. In fact, Aveledo (2007) questions whether genuine political parties currently exist in Venezuela and warn of the risks that the absence or weakening of political parties poses to democracy itself.

From the perspective of youth political participation, this disconnect constitutes one of the principal barriers to engagement in institutional politics. The weakening of political parties as spaces for political socialization, leadership formation, recruitment, and representation has reduced the opportunities available for young people to participate meaningfully within traditional political structures, contributing to growing levels of political disaffection and distrust towards institutional politics.

III.3.3 Socioeconomic Constraints

Despite the country's abundant natural resources and its leading role in promoting development initiatives throughout Latin America and the Caribbean during the second half of the twentieth century—not only at the national level but also regionally, including democratizing initiatives such as the Contadora Group launched in Venezuela in 1983 to promote peace in Central America—"Venezuela is currently experiencing the most severe crisis of its contemporary history" (Magdaleno, 2018, p. 154, author's translation).

However, as has been demonstrated throughout this research, from the theoretical and conceptual framework developed in Chapter I to its historical and political contextualization in Venezuela between 1998 and 2026, this deterioration cannot be understood as an isolated process or as the consequence of a single political event. Rather, it reflects the multidimensional and multisectoral interaction of institutional erosion, declining political legitimacy, social fragmentation, inadequate public policies, and the direct and indirect influence of changing geopolitical conditions. Indeed, "This was the context of the 1998 elections: a crisis of political legitimacy and a socioeconomic situation that had left the most disadvantaged groups excluded from the benefits of economic growth" (González, 2012, p. 194, author's translation).

It is also important to emphasize that poverty constitutes a complex and multidimensional phenomenon with direct consequences for the enjoyment of both civil and political rights and economic and social rights. As Aponte Blank (2021) argues, "A person or household living in poverty is not free: decisions

about what food to buy, what work to undertake, or whether children can study are constrained, since the daily priority is focused on securing the minimum necessary for survival. Under such conditions of extreme deprivation, not only are the most basic rights not enjoyed, but the possibilities of demanding those rights are also limited” (p. 4, author's translation).

This reality has become particularly evident in Venezuela. The evidence documented, collected, and analysed throughout this research establishes a clear relationship between the deterioration of the country's socioeconomic situation—which reached unprecedented levels, as "During recent years, poverty rates have steadily increased and, according to ENCOVI, reached 87% in 2017" (Magdaleno, 2018, p. 156, author's translation)—and the progressive weakening of political agency, the deterioration of institutional channels for political participation, increasingly authoritarian patterns of governance, mass migration, and state repression. As Aponte Blank, González, and González (2023) explain, "Within a context of economic collapse and declining oil revenues, together with the decline of the social state, massive impoverishment occurs and a Complex Humanitarian Emergency emerges, expressed in the dramatic deterioration of key indicators such as health, nutrition, and even life expectancy" (p. 9, author's translation).

As Aponte Blank, González, and González (2023) observe, "All credible measurements indicate that since 2016 the highest levels of poverty ever recorded in the country have been reached since efforts to measure this phenomenon began in the 1970s" (p. 18, author's translation). The dismantling of the country's institutional framework, the increasing politicization of public institutions, and the additional restrictions associated with the international sanctions regime further deepened the structural barriers affecting everyday life and opportunities for civic engagement. As PROVEA (2021) concludes, “Without sanctions, Venezuela already needed urgent humanitarian assistance; with sanctions, much more. Even worse, the funds ‘confiscated’ or ‘frozen’ as a result of the sanctions were not redirected to the population living in extreme poverty, who urgently needed them, while the sanctions further aggravated the destructive effects of the crisis of Venezuela’s rentier economy, and anyone living in the country could see that the humanitarian emergency continued to worsen day after day” (p. 61, author's translation).

Beyond income poverty and material deprivation, the deterioration of education became another structural barrier affecting youth political participation. One of the most direct consequences of Venezuela's socioeconomic deterioration has been its impact on education and, for this reason, on younger generations. As Magdaleno (2018) notes, "Between 2015 and 2017, educational access among

the population aged 3 to 24 declined from 78% to 71%, equivalent to more than one million children and adolescents out of school" (p. 156, author's translation). This harsh reality has been accompanied by increasing food insecurity, school dropout, the deterioration of public education services, growing difficulties in accessing transportation and other basic services, as well as the loss of professional expectations and the devaluation of university degrees. At the same time, the crisis progressively expanded to middle-class families, further affecting the educational prospects of younger generations (López Sánchez & Hernández Rodríguez, 2001).

From a public policy perspective, social policy failed to prioritize the strengthening of educational access or to address the structural inequalities affecting the education system (González, 2012). Education should not be understood exclusively as a social right but also as one of the principal mechanisms through which young people develop the capacities necessary for civic engagement, democratic participation, and leadership.

The unequal distribution of educational opportunities therefore also affected opportunities for social and political participation among young people. As Aparicio (2009) argues, "Education plays a central role in societal development through its contribution to expanding opportunities for participation, strengthening social cohesion, shaping personal and professional life projects, and sustaining democratic integration" (p. 1, author's translation). Consequently, limitations in access to quality education also translated into unequal opportunities for democratic participation and civic engagement.

These dynamics became even more acute after 2013, when multidimensional poverty deepened and the Complex Humanitarian Emergency developed simultaneously with the process of massive impoverishment (Aponte Blank, 2021). Likewise, the expansion of labour informality—estimated at around 65% of the economically active population by González (2012)—further increased the vulnerability of workers and weakened the already fragile mechanisms of social protection.

Although these challenges have affected young people throughout Latin America, they acquired particularly severe dimensions in Venezuela. As Machinea and Hopenhayn (cited in Aparicio, 2009) observe, "Between 48% and 64% of Latin American urban youth see their future opportunities restricted from within their households of origin" (p. 13, author's translation). In the Venezuelan case, these regional structural inequalities were compounded by democratic backsliding, institutional deterioration,

and the Complex Humanitarian Emergency, further restricting opportunities for youth political participation throughout the democratic backsliding period analysed in this research.

From the perspective of youth political participation, these socioeconomic conditions constituted one of the principal structural barriers to democratic engagement between 1998 and 2026. Under conditions of widespread poverty, economic precarity, institutional deterioration, and humanitarian emergency, political participation increasingly competed with the urgent need to secure basic living conditions. For these reasons, many young Venezuelans saw their opportunities for political engagement, civic leadership, and democratic participation significantly constrained by circumstances that extended far beyond the political sphere itself.

III.3.4 Migration and the Loss of Youth Human Capital

The precarious socioeconomic conditions, political volatility and instability described throughout this research, together with the deterioration of key social indicators, the progressive loss of the State's capacity to respond to citizens' demands, and the unprecedented increase in political repression, generated an unprecedented migration crisis in Venezuela. This represented a profound transformation for a country that, throughout much of the second half of the twentieth century, had been characterized by receiving migrants, particularly from Europe and Latin America, during the post-war period and the years marked by military dictatorships across the region (Aponte Blank et al., 2023).

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2025), "Approximately 7.9 million people have left Venezuela seeking protection and a better life. The majority—6.7 million people—have been received by other Latin American and Caribbean countries" (author's translation). Beyond its humanitarian dimension, this migration process also reinforced the loss of technical capacities, professional expertise, and human capital while contributing to a profound reconfiguration of Venezuela's demographic structure (Aponte Blank, 2021). This phenomenon gradually became part of everyday life, as "Between 47% and 57% of respondents reported that at least one family member had emigrated abroad during the previous five years" (Magdaleno, 2018, p. 158, author's translation).

The departure of millions of Venezuelans, many of them young people, university students, professionals, academics, entrepreneurs, and civil society leaders, reduced the country's capacity to generate new leadership, strengthen institutions, and renew civic organizations at a time when democratic

participation faced increasing restrictions. From the perspective of this research, the migration of a significant proportion of Venezuela's younger generations should therefore also be understood as a loss of human capital capable of contributing to democratic governance, institutional strengthening, and future (re)democratization efforts.

As Aponte Blank, González, and González (2023) argue, "A political project that was supposed to strengthen the social state has instead led to its decline, producing a historical regression that in many respects takes the country back to the limited social state of more than half a century ago" (p. 18, author's translation). Likewise, "Since 2019, real social public expenditure per capita has sunk into a pit that returns this indicator to figures from the country's pre-democratic past, with the serious social consequences that this entails" (p. 19, author's translation). These developments further limited opportunities for younger generations to remain in the country and develop their personal, professional, and civic life projects.

Nevertheless, the Venezuelan diaspora should not be understood exclusively as a consequence of the country's multidimensional crisis. It also represents an important community of young people who have continued their academic, professional, and civic development abroad. Understanding how these new generations—both inside and outside Venezuela—may contribute to future processes of institutional reconstruction and democratic leadership constitutes one of the principal challenges for any future (re)democratization process.

CHAPTER IV: Towards a Working Methodology for Training the Next Generation of Venezuelan Democratic Leaders

IV.1 The Importance of Youth Leadership in Venezuela's (Re)democratization Process from a Civil and Political Rights Perspective

The previous chapters examined the theoretical foundations of democracy, democratic participation, social movements, youth movements, and democratic political socialization, while proposing an operational definition of (re)democratization from a civil and political rights perspective. They subsequently analysed the historical process of democratic backsliding in Venezuela together with the different forms of youth political participation that emerged between 1998 and 2026. Building upon these findings, this section argues that strengthening youth leadership should be understood as one of the central conditions for Venezuela's future process of (re)democratization. Rather than presenting a

comprehensive blueprint for democratic reconstruction, it seeks to identify the principal political, institutional, and social conditions that make the deliberate formation of a new generation of democratic leaders both necessary and possible. On this basis, the following section proposes a working methodological framework for training and empowering the next generation of Venezuelan democratic leaders.

A central lesson of this analysis is that democratic backsliding affected not only the formal institutions of the Venezuelan State but also the mechanisms through which democratic citizenship and leadership had historically been reproduced. As demonstrated throughout Chapters II and III, the progressive weakening of political parties, educational institutions, civil society organizations, and spaces for democratic participation—within an increasingly authoritarian and repressive political environment—transformed the country's processes of democratic political socialization while simultaneously restricting opportunities for younger generations to participate in public life. These dynamics were further aggravated by the country's deteriorating socioeconomic conditions, the emergence of a Complex Humanitarian Emergency, and one of the largest migration crises in contemporary Latin American history. In this sense, the challenge of Venezuela's future (re)democratization extends beyond restoring democratic institutions. It also requires rebuilding the democratic political culture, active citizenship, civic trust, deliberative practices, public leadership, and democratic capacities capable of sustaining those institutions over time.

Following Robert Dahl (n.d.), Venezuela must urgently recover the legitimacy of its democratic institutions by restoring the Rule of Law as the indispensable foundation for democratic coexistence, political pluralism, and institutional accountability. At the same time, it must progressively overcome the messianic personalism and concentration of power that characterized the authoritarian-populist model analysed throughout this research. Recovering democratic legitimacy will gradually contribute to rebuilding citizens' trust in public institutions while creating the conditions necessary for democratic participation to flourish once again. Likewise, much as the process of political reflection that preceded the Punto Fijo Pact sought to establish broad democratic consensus after authoritarian rule, Venezuela will require an equally honest assessment of the institutional, political, economic, and social dynamics that contributed to democratic erosion over the last decades.

From this perspective, politics should progressively cease to be perceived as a "necessary evil," following the reflections advanced by Moisés Naím (2013), and instead recover its democratic purpose as the

principal instrument through which citizens organize collective action, resolve conflicts peacefully, negotiate differences, and pursue the common good. Constitutionalism should therefore once again become the guiding principle of public life, with universities, research institutions, and democratic political actors recovering and strengthening the civic and educational role they historically exercised during previous democratic periods. Democratic leadership should therefore be understood not simply as the exercise of political authority but fundamentally as an exercise of public service grounded in constitutional values, respect for human dignity, democratic accountability, and the effective protection of human rights.

The Venezuelan experience also demonstrates that democratic leadership cannot flourish where democratic institutions remain structurally weakened. Civilian democratic control over the armed forces and security institutions continues to face significant challenges, while judicial independence, institutional autonomy, and constitutional oversight have been progressively undermined. Likewise, the emergence of irregular armed groups exercising coercive functions outside democratic control illustrates the extent to which the institutional architecture of the Venezuelan State has deteriorated. Rebuilding the Rule of Law therefore constitutes not only a legal or institutional objective but also a precondition for creating an environment in which democratic leadership can emerge, develop, and operate freely.

The deterioration of public services, the collapse of educational opportunities, widespread socioeconomic hardship, and the multidimensional crisis analysed throughout this thesis have also profoundly affected Venezuela's capacity to generate social capital and expand opportunities for younger generations. Under these conditions, meritocracy, educational mobility, achievement motivation, and individual initiative become increasingly difficult to cultivate. Democratic reconstruction therefore requires progressively moving beyond paternalistic conceptions of social policy towards a model centred upon equal opportunities, enabling citizens—not "the people" as an abstract political category, but free women and men endowed with rights and responsibilities—to fully develop their capabilities within the framework of a shared national project.

Such a transformation would also contribute to overcoming one of the principal political legacies identified throughout this research: the persistence of clientelist and populist practices through which social programmes frequently became instruments of political mobilization rather than mechanisms for guaranteeing rights or expanding opportunities. Democratic reconstruction therefore requires much more than institutional reform. It also requires rebuilding a democratic civic culture grounded in

constitutionalism, participation, pluralism, civic responsibility, public ethics, dialogue, and respect for human dignity.

Throughout the previous chapters, this dissertation has also demonstrated that democratic resilience ultimately depends not only upon governments or institutions but upon citizens capable of assuming responsibility for public life. Venezuela must therefore progressively move from an external locus of control towards a stronger culture of civic responsibility, recognizing that the future of democracy depends not exclusively upon governments or political elites but also upon the active participation and commitment of society itself. Such a transformation would allow the country to generate a form of national wealth extending far beyond the exploitation of natural resources while strengthening the civic commitment necessary to sustain democratic institutions across generations.

Another important lesson emerging from this research concerns the importance of long-term investment in democratic education. Venezuela progressively abandoned educational policies capable of strengthening the country's human capital, civic culture, and democratic leadership, despite previous experiences such as the Gran Mariscal de Ayacucho Scholarship Programme, which reflected a long-term national commitment to developing individual capacities through broad political consensus (De Almea, 1977; OECD, 2020). Recovering that long-term vision also requires restoring the role of political parties, not merely as electoral organizations but as institutions responsible for democratic political socialization, civic education, leadership recruitment, democratic representation, and public debate. Equally important is society's willingness to recognize past mistakes, acknowledge democratic failures, and collectively commit itself to rebuilding a more pluralistic, free, equitable, and democratic political system.

Building upon the historical experience analysed in Chapter II, this research also argues that a renewed *Comisión Presidencial para la Reforma del Estado (COPRE)*—or a comparable plural, technically independent, and nationally representative institutional mechanism—could play an important role within a future process of democratic reconstruction. Bringing together universities, political parties, civil society organizations, local governments, professional associations, the private sector, and younger generations, such a body could facilitate long-term institutional reform, democratic dialogue, decentralization, citizen participation, constitutional modernization, and the reconstruction of democratic political consensus while helping rebuild trust between citizens and democratic institutions.

The findings suggest that Venezuela's future (re)democratization cannot depend exclusively upon constitutional reforms, political negotiations, or electoral processes. Although all remain indispensable, none is sufficient on its own. Sustainable democratic reconstruction ultimately depends upon citizens capable of sustaining democratic institutions across generations. From this perspective, investing in youth leadership should not be understood simply as an educational or generational objective but as one of the principal democratic imperatives emerging from this research. The following section therefore develops a working methodological framework intended to contribute to this objective by identifying the principles, competencies, and institutional arrangements necessary for training and empowering the next generation of Venezuelan democratic leaders.

IV.2 A Methodological Framework for Training and Empowering Venezuelan Youth as Democratic Leaders

Building upon the theoretical and empirical findings developed throughout this research, this section proposes a working methodological framework for training and empowering the next generation of Venezuelan democratic leaders. Rather than adapting an existing leadership model to the Venezuelan context, the proposed framework emerges directly from the principal conclusions of this research. As demonstrated throughout Chapters II and III, democratic backsliding progressively weakened not only the country's democratic institutions but also the mechanisms through which democratic citizenship, political socialization, civic participation, constitutional culture, and democratic leadership had historically been reproduced. Against this background, rebuilding democracy requires considerably more than restoring constitutional institutions or organizing competitive elections; it also requires rebuilding the democratic human infrastructure capable of sustaining democratic governance across generations.

Accordingly, this framework understands democratic leadership as a long-term process of democratic political socialization rather than the simple acquisition of political or managerial skills. Its objective is not merely to prepare future political elites, but to strengthen democratic citizens capable of exercising public leadership, civic responsibility, democratic accountability, and contributing to the construction of a shared national project grounded in common democratic values and constitutional commitments. Such leadership may be exercised from multiple sectors of society, including public administration, youth movements, civil society organizations, academia, journalism, community organizations, political parties, local governments, and international institutions. Democratic leadership is therefore conceived

as the capacity to strengthen constitutional democracy through public service, institutional commitment, dialogue, respect for human dignity, and the effective protection of human rights.

Rather than prescribing a standardized curriculum, the framework identifies six interconnected methodological dimensions derived from the principal findings of this research. These dimensions progressively reinforce one another through a continuous process of democratic learning, civic engagement, institutional participation, and public leadership. Together, they integrate democratic knowledge, constitutional values, practical experience, collaborative leadership, and institutional engagement into a flexible methodology capable of being adapted across different educational, institutional, and community contexts. This framework remains firmly grounded in the principal institutional, political, and societal weaknesses identified throughout Venezuela's process of democratic backsliding between 1998 and 2026.

Democratic Civic and Constitutional Literacy

Every democratic leadership process requires a normative foundation. For this reason, the first dimension of the methodology focuses on civil and constitutional literacy. The findings presented above demonstrates that democratic leadership requires considerably more than political participation alone; it requires a comprehensive understanding of constitutionalism, democratic institutions, civil and political rights, the broader human rights framework, democratic accountability, electoral systems, accountable public administration, and the Rule of Law. Democratic education should therefore equip younger generations with the knowledge necessary not only to understand democratic institutions but also to defend, strengthen, and improve them during periods of both democratic stability and democratic crisis. Constitutional literacy should enable future democratic leaders to recognize early signs of democratic erosion while contributing to the development of institutional cultures capable of preventing future authoritarian backsliding.

Constitutional literacy also requires understanding that democratic transitions are never the product of a single institution. As Morales Antoniazzi and Pérez (2026) correctly observe, "Democratic transition in Venezuela cannot rest on the unilateral action of a single power." Democratic reconstruction instead requires coordinated action among public institutions, political parties, civil society organizations, universities, local governments, and citizens themselves. Constitutional literacy, combined with civic

engagement, therefore becomes the normative point of departure of the proposed methodology rather than a merely theoretical component of democratic education.

Democratic Political Socialization and Civic Culture

Understanding democracy does not automatically generate democratic behaviour. Democratic institutions ultimately depend upon citizens capable of internalizing democratic values and reproducing them through everyday civic life across different sectors of society. This suggests that the second methodological dimension seeks to rebuild democratic political socialization and civic culture through a participatory, bottom-up approach that encourages democratic ownership rather than the reproduction of imposed ideological agendas, as participants should approach communities with intellectual humility, recognizing that democratic leadership begins by listening before proposing solutions.

One of the principal findings of this dissertation is that democratic backsliding in Venezuela between 1998 and 2026 progressively dismantled the institutions historically responsible for cultivating democratic citizenship. Political parties gradually abandoned many of their educational and leadership-development functions; universities—particularly public institutions—experienced profound institutional deterioration; civic participation became increasingly restricted through authoritarian practices and state repression; and many young Venezuelans redirected their civic engagement towards civil society organizations, humanitarian initiatives, advocacy networks, community-based projects, and digital activism. In many cases, these emerging forms of participation also contributed to raising international awareness of Venezuela's multidimensional humanitarian crisis while preserving democratic spaces that had largely disappeared within formal political institutions. Rebuilding these democratic learning environments therefore constitutes one of the principal objectives of the proposed framework.

This understanding closely reflects Rodríguez's conception of democratic political socialization, who argues that "In a participatory society, political socialization is not so much the transmission of conceptions and ideologies, but rather the transmission of personal decision-making criteria that contribute to dignified coexistence" (as cited in Díaz Gómez, 2004, p. 175, author's translation). Democratic education should therefore avoid ideological indoctrination and partisan loyalties, instead cultivating constitutional values, democratic judgement, civic responsibility, ethical public service, dialogue, critical thinking, and respect for pluralism. The objective is not to educate future followers of

particular political projects, but to prepare autonomous democratic citizens capable of engaging critically with public affairs while remaining committed to constitutional principles and democratic coexistence.

Similarly, Díaz Gómez (2004) argues that "The challenge is to constitute and institute a new social subject that is more democratic, dialogical, respectful of differences, and committed to building civility" (p. 176, author's translation). He further maintains that "It is necessary to advance toward processes of individual autonomy, which involve the development of critical judgment and the formation of moral character capable of embracing equity, justice, and emancipation" (p. 176, author's translation). These reflections closely align with one of the principal conclusions of this dissertation: Venezuela's long-term democratic reconstruction requires rebuilding democratic political culture before democratic institutions themselves can be fully consolidated. Democratic institutions may be re-established through constitutional reform, but only a democratic political culture can ensure their long-term legitimacy, resilience, and sustainability.

Democratic Leadership through Civic Participation

The third methodological dimension recognizes that democratic leadership cannot be developed exclusively inside classrooms. One of the principal findings of Chapter III is that many of the democratic competencies demonstrated by Venezuelan youth between 1998 and 2026 emerged through autonomous and, in many cases, self-organized forms of civic participation rather than through formal political institutions. Humanitarian action, student organizations, volunteer initiatives, advocacy campaigns, community engagement, local democratic participation, and digital activism became alternative democratic spaces through which younger generations continued exercising leadership despite the progressive closure of institutional political opportunities.

Drawing from these findings, this framework treats democratic participation as the principal environment in which democratic leadership is developed. Instead, it understands civic participation itself as one of the principal educational mechanisms through which democratic leadership is formed. Leadership is not simply taught; it is progressively experienced through democratic practice. Indeed, community-based projects should constitute a core component of the training process, complemented by public deliberation, volunteer service, participatory governance, civic innovation, collaborative problem-solving, and democratic advocacy.

Every community experiences democratic challenges differently. For this reason, participants should begin by listening rather than proposing solutions. Rather than beginning from predefined institutional solutions or externally imposed agendas, participants should adopt a bottom-up approach that starts by listening directly to communities, understanding local needs and priorities, and identifying the structural challenges affecting democratic life. Leadership formation should therefore encourage participants to co-create innovative and collaborative responses together with local actors, integrating interdisciplinary knowledge, cross-sectoral cooperation, and diverse political and social perspectives. Such an approach not only strengthens democratic problem-solving capacities but also promotes mutual understanding across ideological differences by placing the common good above partisan interests and encouraging evidence-based public action.

The historical experience of the Venezuelan student movement strongly reinforces this methodological approach. Student organizations consistently sought to "promote autonomy in decision-making and organizational work within student organizations" while simultaneously "work[ing] toward the formation of professionals and students who are critical and aware of national realities" (Movimiento 20, as cited in López Sánchez & Hernández Rodríguez, 2001, pp. 648–649, author's translation). Likewise, Arellano (2017) documents how student movements became central democratic actors through the defence of freedom of expression, autonomous political participation, and dialogue initiatives. These experiences illustrate that democratic leadership is progressively acquired through democratic practice rather than abstract instruction alone. The methodological framework proposed in this dissertation builds directly upon these historical lessons by combining the autonomy traditionally demonstrated by Venezuelan youth movements with a more structured educational process capable of strengthening democratic leadership over the long term.

Democratic Leadership for Institutional Transformation

Civic participation, however, is only one part of democratic leadership; while it constitutes the principal environment through which democratic leadership is developed, democratic leadership seeks to strengthen democratic institutions. More importantly, the fourth methodological dimension moves from democratic participation towards democratic governance and institutional transformation. Democratic leadership should not be understood as charismatic authority or electoral success alone, but rather as the capacity to strengthen democratic institutions, facilitate dialogue, negotiate differences, solve complex public problems, and generate democratic consensus under conditions of uncertainty. Equally important,

democratic leaders must remain committed to protecting constitutional rights and freedoms, particularly those of political, social, or electoral minorities whose rights should never depend upon shifting political majorities.

As participants become more familiar with democratic institutions, the programme should progressively introduce an adaptive leadership approach capable of embracing institutional complexity rather than reducing democratic challenges to the simplistic narratives frequently associated with populist politics. Future democratic leaders should be trained to cultivate a culture of negotiation rather than political confrontation, transforming conflict into constructive deliberation through dialogue, coalition-building, ethical decision-making, strategic communication, collaborative governance, systems thinking, and evidence-based public policy. As Morales Antoniazzi and Pérez (2026) emphasize, "International law, Inter-American law, and the Venezuelan constitutional framework provide solid legal pillars" (author's translation). Democratic leadership must therefore remain simultaneously grounded in constitutional legitimacy, democratic accountability, and international human rights standards.

Particular attention should also be devoted to strengthening institutional integrity through decentralization, judicial independence, accountable public administration, anti-corruption policies, and democratic oversight. Rather than approaching institutional reform exclusively through constitutional or legal redesign, the proposed methodology encourages participants to translate community-based learning into concrete civic initiatives capable of strengthening public institutions from the bottom up. In this way, institutional transformation becomes closely connected to citizens' everyday experiences and democratic expectations instead of remaining a purely legal or political exercise.

The objective is not simply to understand democratic institutions; ultimately, leadership formation should prepare participants not merely to understand democratic institutions but to strengthen, improve, and transform them through constitutional means while generating tangible community impact. Democratic governance should therefore be understood as the practical capacity to translate constitutional principles, moral responsibility, and human rights standards into public policies and institutional practices that respond effectively to citizens' needs while reinforcing democratic legitimacy over time.

Democratic Networks, Institutional Cooperation, and Collective Action

Recognizing that democratic leadership is fundamentally collaborative rather than individual is the foundation of the fifth methodological pillar. Throughout Venezuela's democratic history, universities,

civil society organizations, political parties, professional associations, community organizations, journalists, humanitarian actors, and international organizations have all contributed, in different ways and at different moments, to preserving democratic spaces during periods of authoritarian deterioration. Taken together, democratic leadership initiatives should not seek to develop isolated leaders but rather strengthen the networks, relationships, and institutional partnerships through which democratic leadership can generate long-term collective impact.

The contemporary processes of globalization and the growing interconnection fostered by digital technologies further reinforce this collaborative perspective. Future democratic leaders should therefore be capable of operating simultaneously at the local, national, regional, and international levels, adopting what may be described as a *"glocal democratic leadership approach"*. Such an approach enables local democratic challenges to be addressed while simultaneously drawing upon international experiences, transnational advocacy networks, comparative public policies, and global human rights standards. Democratic reconstruction in the twenty-first century increasingly depends upon leaders capable of connecting local realities with international democratic communities of practice.

Building upon the historical experience analysed in Chapter II, this dissertation also proposes the creation of a renewed Comisión Presidencial para la Reforma del Estado (COPRE), or a comparable plural, technically independent, and nationally representative institutional mechanism capable of facilitating democratic dialogue, constitutional modernization, decentralization, institutional reform, citizen participation, and long-term democratic planning. Unlike previous institutional reform initiatives, however, such a mechanism should also integrate the knowledge, expertise, and practical experience accumulated by universities, civil society organizations, youth movements, professional associations, humanitarian actors, and community organizations. Beyond its institutional responsibilities, a renewed COPRE could therefore become a permanent platform for democratic learning, intergenerational political socialization, and collaborative policy design.

As Morales Antoniazzi and Pérez (2026) further argue, democratic reconstruction should "build bridges with other voices within the human rights community of practice" while simultaneously encouraging broader regional democratic cooperation. Likewise, the historical experience of Venezuelan student movements demonstrates the importance of building alliances beyond universities through sustained cooperation with workers, professionals, community organizations, religious institutions, the private sector, and democratic political actors. Democratic leadership should therefore be understood not as the

capacity to lead institutions in isolation but as the ability to facilitate cooperation among diverse sectors of society around shared democratic objectives.

Democratic Memory, Reconciliation, and Democratic Resilience

No process of democratic reconstruction in Venezuela can ignore the legacy of authoritarianism between 1998-2026. The sixth and final methodological dimension recognizes that democratic leadership also requires confronting the legacies of authoritarianism. Venezuela's future democratic reconstruction demands considerably more than institutional reform; it requires recognizing the right to truth, rebuilding public trust, strengthening civic coexistence, promoting democratic accountability, and establishing effective guarantees of non-repetition capable of preventing future democratic erosion.

Accordingly, democratic leadership education should incorporate a strong transitional justice perspective, integrating historical memory, democratic accountability, anti-corruption, human rights documentation, reconciliation facilitation, institutional reform, and democratic ethics as essential components of democratic citizenship. As Acceso a la Justicia et al. (2020) argue, "The success of the transition should not be considered solely on the basis of replacing the principal actors of the authoritarian regime; rather, it must encompass the enormous effort of rebuilding an entire political and institutional framework." Democratic reconstruction therefore requires rebuilding institutions while simultaneously rebuilding democratic culture, public trust, constitutional legitimacy, and civic responsibility.

Within this perspective, a future Truth and Reconciliation Commission could become not only a transitional justice mechanism but also a democratic educational institution capable of preserving historical memory, promoting victims' participation, documenting human rights violations, proposing institutional reforms, encouraging national reconciliation, and strengthening guarantees of non-repetition. Such a process should not be understood exclusively as a mechanism for addressing the past, but also as a democratic learning process capable of strengthening future generations' commitment to constitutional democracy and human rights. Likewise, addressing corruption remains indispensable, particularly considering that "Corruption in Venezuela has contaminated all sectors of national life" (Acceso a la Justicia et al., 2020, p. 10, author's translation).

Although each methodological dimension serves a different purpose, they all share the same educational philosophy grounded in experiential learning, deliberative dialogue, interdisciplinary education,

mentorship, adaptive leadership, collaborative governance, reflective practice, systems thinking, and learning by doing. These pedagogical approaches should not be understood as independent methodological pillars but rather as complementary educational strategies that accompany participants throughout the entire learning process. Similarly, diversity should not be treated merely as an inclusion objective but as a democratic learning resource that exposes participants to different institutional realities, disciplines, political perspectives, communities, and lived experiences, thereby strengthening their capacity to operate effectively within pluralistic democratic societies.

In this regards, democratic leadership should be understood as a fundamentally collaborative civic capacity rather than an individual attribute. Kouzes and Posner argue that highly effective leaders consistently challenge existing processes, inspire shared visions, enable others to act, model democratic behaviour, and encourage collective participation (as cited in Villalva & Fierro, 2017, p. 157, author's translation). Likewise, Villalva and Fierro (2017) conclude that "Democratic leadership promotes teamwork, dialogue, consensus-building, and the fulfilment of responsibilities by all members of the group" (p. 159, author's translation). These characteristics closely resemble the forms of democratic leadership repeatedly identified in Chapter II and III among Venezuelan youth movements, whose contribution depended less upon hierarchical authority than upon their capacity to mobilize citizens, facilitate cooperation, generate trust, defend democratic values, and build bridges across political and social divisions under increasingly adverse political conditions.

More broadly, this dissertation argues that democratic reconstruction is mainly a human process. Constitutions, institutions, and elections remain indispensable, but their long-term sustainability depends upon citizens capable of defending them, improving them, and transmitting democratic values to future generations. From this perspective, investing in youth leadership is not simply an educational-political strategy; it constitutes an investment in Venezuela's democratic future. The framework proposed throughout this chapter seeks to contribute to that objective by translating the principal findings of this research into a practical methodology capable of strengthening the country's democratic human infrastructure.

IV.3 Guiding Principles of the Framework

The methodological framework proposed in the previous section is not intended as a technical leadership programme detached from Venezuela's democratic reality. Rather, it is grounded upon a coherent set of

constitutional, democratic, and human rights principles that emerge directly from the theoretical foundations developed in Chapter I and the historical analysis undertaken throughout Chapters II and III. Together, these principles provide the normative foundations of the proposed methodology while responding to the principal institutional, political, and societal challenges identified throughout Venezuela's democratic backsliding between 1998 and 2026. Although presented separately, they should be understood as mutually reinforcing dimensions that collectively contribute to rebuilding the country's democratic human infrastructure.

IV.3.1 Constitutionalism and the Rule of Law

The evidence examined here argued that democratic leadership cannot exist independently of constitutional institutions capable of guaranteeing rights, limiting political power, and ensuring institutional accountability. Venezuela's democratic deterioration progressively weakened judicial independence, the separation of powers, constitutional guarantees, and the autonomy of public institutions. In this sense, democratic reconstruction requires restoring the Rule of Law not only as a legal objective but also as the normative framework through which democratic leadership should be exercised.

This also requires overcoming political practices based upon zero-sum competition in favour of a democratic culture centred on constitutional dialogue, negotiation, institutional cooperation, and respect for political pluralism. Democratic institutions should once again function as spaces for deliberation rather than permanent confrontation. As Acceso a la Justicia et al. (2020) argue, "The reinstitutionalization of the Judiciary constitutes one of the focal points that must be the subject of political negotiation in order to begin working, with flexibility and pragmatism, on its institutional transformation as an instrument for guaranteeing rights and freedoms" (p. 6, author's translation). Within the proposed methodology, constitutionalism therefore becomes not simply an area of study but the normative reference guiding democratic leadership itself.

IV.3.2 Human Rights and Democratic Citizenship

This research understands human rights as both the ethical foundation and the ultimate purpose of democratic leadership. The historical analysis demonstrate that Venezuela's democratic backsliding was accompanied by widespread and persistent violations of civil and political rights together with the

progressive deterioration of economic, social, and cultural rights. Democratic reconstruction therefore cannot be limited to institutional reform; it must also promote truth, justice, reparations, guarantees of non-repetition, and the restoration of human dignity through a comprehensive process of transitional justice.

From this perspective, democratic leadership should contribute to strengthening democratic citizenship grounded in the indivisibility and universality of human rights. As Maingon, D'Elia, and Virtuoso (2006) observe, "Without social and cultural citizenship, civil and political citizenship is not possible" (p. 35, author's translation). Likewise, Acceso a la Justicia et al. (2020) conclude that "Human rights violations in Venezuela have been massive and persistent" (p. 9, author's translation), emphasizing that "Justice and reparation for victims must encompass the full range of fundamental rights, that is, not only civil and political rights but also economic, social, and cultural rights" (p. 9, author's translation). Accordingly, the proposed methodology understands democratic leadership as a form of public service committed to protecting human dignity and strengthening democratic citizenship across generations.

IV.3.3 Pluralism, Dialogue, and Democratic Coexistence

One of the principal conclusions emerging from the historical analysis is that prolonged political polarization gradually transformed political competition into ideological antagonism, frequently confusing the interests of the State with those of successive governments while weakening the culture of democratic deliberation.

Democratic reconstruction therefore requires rebuilding a political culture capable of recognizing disagreement as a legitimate component of democratic life rather than a threat to it. Dialogue, negotiation, tolerance, and constitutional coexistence should progressively replace antagonistic political narratives, strengthening institutions capable of guaranteeing accountability regardless of political majorities. As Maingon, D'Elia, and Virtuoso (2006) argue, "Society is composed of a plurality of subjects who build bonds of equality and solidarity in a democratic manner" (p. 35, author's translation). Within the proposed methodology, pluralism therefore functions not simply as a democratic value but as a practical leadership competency necessary for governing increasingly diverse and complex societies.

IV.3.4 Active Citizenship and Civic Responsibility

Democracy ultimately depends upon active citizens rather than passive beneficiaries of public policies. Throughout this dissertation it has been argued that democratic participation extends far beyond electoral processes, requiring continuous civic engagement capable of strengthening civil society, generating social capital, and holding public institutions accountable. Democratic leadership should therefore promote a culture of civic co-responsibility in which citizens recognize themselves not only as rights holders but also as active contributors to democratic life. As Maingon, D'Elia, and Virtuoso (2006) observe, "Each person is a subject with the capacity to reflect upon and question their place in society, as well as to act, participate, and exert influence in all matters that allow them to occupy a dignified, secure, and rights-based position within it" (p. 35, author's translation).

IV.3.5 Subsidiarity and Community Empowerment

The final guiding principal concerns subsidiarity and community empowerment. One of the central lessons emerging from this dissertation is that democratic resilience cannot be generated exclusively through central government institutions. Sustainable democratic reconstruction depends upon communities capable of organizing collectively, strengthening local institutions, generating social capital, and addressing public challenges through collaborative action.

Accordingly, democratic leadership should progressively strengthen municipalities, local governments, universities, civil society organizations, and community initiatives as essential democratic learning environments. This principle also reflects the bottom-up philosophy underpinning the methodological framework developed throughout the previous section, recognizing that democratic leadership is strengthened through continuous interaction with communities rather than exclusively through formal political institutions. Resilient democratic institutions emerge from resilient democratic communities capable of sustaining constitutional democracy across generations.

IV.4 Operationalizing the Methodological Framework: Building a Democratic Leadership Ecosystem

The methodological framework proposed in Chapter IV cannot be implemented through a single programme or institution. Rather, it requires the articulation of a democratic leadership ecosystem in

which universities, civil society organizations, political parties, local communities, the private sector, public institutions, and international partners assume complementary and mutually reinforcing responsibilities. As argued throughout the previous sections, democratic leadership is not produced through isolated training activities but through continuous processes of democratic political socialization, civic participation, institutional engagement, public service, and collaborative learning. That's why operationalizing this framework requires connecting institutions that have often worked independently while creating new spaces for cooperation capable of strengthening Venezuela's democratic human infrastructure over the long term.

Rather than assigning exclusive responsibilities to individual actors, the proposed implementation strategy understands each institution as contributing to different dimensions of the methodological framework. Universities provide democratic knowledge and constitutional literacy; civil society organizations transform knowledge into civic practice; political parties recover their educational and representative functions; local communities become laboratories of democratic participation; the private sector contributes innovation and organizational capacity; while international partners facilitate technical cooperation, comparative learning, and democratic assistance. Together, these institutions create an ecosystem through which democratic leadership may be progressively developed across generations.

IV.4.1 Universities as Democratic Leadership Hubs

Universities should constitute the principal institutional platform for implementing the proposed methodology. Throughout Venezuela's democratic history, institutions such as the Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV), Universidad Católica Andrés Bello (UCAB), Universidad Metropolitana (UNIMET), Universidad Simón Bolívar (USB), Universidad de Los Andes (ULA), Universidad del Zulia (LUZ), and Universidad de Oriente (UDO) have consistently contributed to the defence of academic freedom, democratic debate, civic engagement, and leadership development during periods of political instability. Their historical legitimacy places them in a unique position to become the principal incubators of the next generation of democratic leaders.

Building upon the methodological framework proposed in this dissertation, universities should move beyond traditional classroom instruction by integrating interdisciplinary programmes combining constitutional law, human rights, democratic governance, public policy, negotiation, adaptive leadership,

political communication, ethics, systems thinking, and democratic innovation into different curriculums. However, democratic leadership should not remain confined to academic programmes. Constitutional clinics, human rights clinics, democratic innovation laboratories, public policy labs, electoral observation initiatives, civic hackathons, parliamentary simulations, negotiation exercises, service-learning projects, and interdisciplinary-transdisciplinary community research should become integral components of democratic leadership education. Student organizations, research centres, university extension programmes, and interdisciplinary institutes should once again become spaces where democratic citizenship is experienced rather than merely discussed. Institutions such as the “Academia de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales” and specialized constitutional and public policy research centres may further contribute by strengthening constitutional literacy, evidence-based policymaking, and institutional design.

IV.4.2 Civil Society Organizations as Co-Educators of Democratic Citizenship

Throughout the period analysed in this dissertation, civil society organizations progressively assumed many of the democratic functions that weakened public institutions were no longer able to fulfil. Organizations including *PROVEA*, *Acceso a la Justicia*, *Transparencia Venezuela*, *Espacio Público*, *Foro Cívico*, *the Observatorio Electoral Venezolano*, *Sin Mordaza*, *Mi Convive*, and numerous local community organizations accumulated extensive experience in civic education, democratic advocacy, electoral observation, public integrity, humanitarian response, conflict mediation, and human rights protection.

Rather than functioning exclusively as advocacy organizations, these institutions should become co-educators within the proposed methodological framework. Their accumulated practical experience offers opportunities that cannot be replicated inside classrooms. Through mentorship programmes, internships, policy advocacy initiatives, electoral observation missions, community engagement, democratic innovation projects, citizen monitoring mechanisms, and participatory research, younger generations may experience democracy through direct civic action while simultaneously strengthening democratic institutions.

This approach also reflects the historical role traditionally played by Venezuelan student movements. As López Sánchez and Hernández Rodríguez (2001) argue, "The student movement should reclaim its

historical role as a center for discussion and ideological proposals, becoming an essential actor in the guidance of society" (p. 650, author's translation). Similarly, the words expressed during the democratic mobilizations of 2007 continue to capture the democratic vocation of younger generations: "This movement is here to stay and to tell the country that there is a courageous and dignified youth willing, with humility and commitment, to take charge of its future and its present" (Sánchez, 2007, as cited in Arellano, 2017, p. 91, author's translation).

IV.4.3 Political Parties as Schools of Democratic Leadership

Representative democracy cannot function without democratic political parties. Nevertheless, one of the principal conclusions emerging from this research is that Venezuelan political parties progressively abandoned many of their traditional functions of political socialization, civic education, leadership recruitment, and programme development. Future democratic reconstruction therefore requires political parties to recover their educational role while simultaneously renewing their own internal democratic culture.

Youth organizations within political parties should evolve beyond electoral mobilization structures to become permanent schools of democratic leadership capable of promoting constitutional values, public policy analysis, negotiation, democratic deliberation, ethical public service, and evidence-based policymaking. Such educational processes should avoid ideological indoctrination while encouraging critical thinking, pluralism, intergenerational dialogue, merit-based leadership recruitment, and cooperation across political differences. Democratic parties should therefore prepare future democratic leaders not simply to compete electorally but to govern constitutionally.

IV.4.4 Communities as Laboratories of Democratic Practice

One of the central premises of this dissertation is that democratic leadership is learned primarily through democratic practice. Thus, local communities should become one of the principal environments through which the proposed methodology is implemented. Municipal governments, neighbourhood associations, parish organizations, youth councils, volunteer networks, cultural organizations, and local civic initiatives should provide opportunities for participants to engage directly with democratic challenges affecting their own communities. Participatory diagnoses, community consultations, deliberative forums,

civic innovation laboratories, local policy design exercises, participatory budgeting initiatives, mediation processes, and collaborative problem-solving projects allow democratic competencies to emerge through practical experience rather than theoretical instruction.

Organizations such as Fe y Alegría, Cáritas Venezuela, the Venezuelan Red Cross, neighbourhood development associations, humanitarian organizations, and local volunteer networks as NEA EIRENE possess extensive experience in education, humanitarian assistance, community organization, and social innovation. These organizations can therefore become fundamental partners in strengthening civic responsibility, rebuilding social capital, promoting dialogue, and restoring trust at the local level, thereby translating constitutional principles into everyday democratic practice.

IV.4.5 Public–Private Partnerships and Democratic Innovation

The long-term sustainability of democratic reconstruction also depends upon active cooperation between public institutions and the private sector. Democratic leadership cannot rely exclusively upon public funding or international cooperation. It equally requires investment in human capital, innovation, entrepreneurship, organizational excellence, and institutional sustainability.

Organizations such as Fedecámaras, Consecomercio, regional chambers of commerce, private universities, business foundations, entrepreneurship incubators, and socially responsible enterprises can contribute by financing scholarships, democratic leadership fellowships, civic innovation laboratories, public policy competitions, research initiatives, and youth entrepreneurship programmes linked to democratic development. Beyond financial support, these institutions also contribute organizational knowledge, strategic planning, innovation management, accountability mechanisms, and leadership practices capable of strengthening democratic governance while expanding opportunities for younger generations.

IV.4.6 International Cooperation and Democratic Learning

Finally, international cooperation should accompany—but never substitute—domestic democratic reconstruction. Sustainable democratic transitions cannot be externally imposed; they must remain

nationally owned while benefiting from comparative experience, technical cooperation, and international solidarity.

Institutions such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the Organization of American States (OAS), the European Union, International IDEA, the Carter Center, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), the Kofi Annan Foundation, and international academic networks may contribute through institutional strengthening, leadership exchanges, electoral assistance, comparative constitutional expertise, democratic governance programmes, and technical cooperation. Rather than exporting institutional models, these partnerships should facilitate peer learning while respecting Venezuela's constitutional traditions and democratic priorities.

Future transitional justice institutions should likewise become integral components of this democratic learning ecosystem. A future Truth and Reconciliation Commission, for example, should not only document past violations but also preserve democratic memory, promote victims' participation, facilitate national dialogue, recommend institutional reforms, and strengthen guarantees of non-repetition. As Acceso a la Justicia et al. (2020) argue, "The success of the transition should not be considered solely on the basis of replacing the principal actors of the authoritarian regime; rather, it must encompass the enormous effort of rebuilding an entire political and institutional framework" (p. 12, author's translation). Democratic assistance should therefore strengthen domestic capacities while contributing to the long-term consolidation of democratic institutions.

IV.5 Long-Term Democratic Reconstruction: Conclusions and Recommendations

This dissertation set out to examine the role of Venezuelan youth social movements in fostering democratic resilience throughout the country's process of democratic backsliding and their potential contribution to a future process of (re)democratization from a civil and political rights perspective. The theoretical, historical, and empirical analysis developed throughout the preceding chapters leads to one central conclusion: Venezuela's democratic crisis cannot be understood exclusively as the erosion of constitutional institutions or electoral competition. Rather, between 1998 and 2026 the country experienced a multidimensional process of democratic backsliding that progressively weakened democratic institutions, human rights, democratic political socialization, civic trust, democratic culture, and the institutional mechanisms through which democratic citizenship had historically been reproduced.

Building upon these findings, this dissertation argues that Venezuela's future (re)democratization should not be conceived merely as a political transition between governments or as the restoration of constitutional institutions. While both remain indispensable, they are insufficient on their own. Sustainable democratic reconstruction requires rebuilding democratic culture, civic capacities, institutional relationships, and public leadership capable of sustaining constitutional democracy across generations. Democratic institutions may be restored through constitutional reform, but only democratic citizens can preserve their legitimacy, strengthen their resilience, and ensure their continuity over time.

The historical-conceptual analysis presented throughout Chapters II and III demonstrates that Venezuelan youth occupied a paradoxical position during this period. Younger generations simultaneously became one of the sectors most affected by democratic deterioration—through shrinking civic space, educational decline, socioeconomic hardship, forced migration, and systematic restrictions on civil and political rights—while also emerging as one of the country's principal sources of democratic resilience. Student movements, humanitarian initiatives, civil society organizations, electoral observation, community leadership, digital advocacy, and international networks all became alternative spaces through which democratic participation continued despite increasingly restrictive political conditions. Democratic leadership therefore did not disappear during democratic backsliding; rather, it adapted to new institutional realities and developed new forms of civic engagement.

The historical evolution examined throughout this research further suggests that this relationship between democratic renewal and the emergence of new generations of public leaders is not unprecedented in Venezuela. The civic mobilization of the Generation of 1928, the political agreements that made possible the democratic transition initiated in 1958, and later institutional reform efforts such as the Comisión Presidencial para la Reforma del Estado (COPRE) reflected, in different historical contexts, a common understanding: democratic institutions require continuous renewal through citizens capable of adapting them to changing political realities. Although the challenges confronting Venezuela today differ substantially from those of previous democratic periods, the country's own democratic experience demonstrates that institutional reconstruction and democratic leadership have historically evolved together.

One of the principal contributions of this research is therefore to argue that young people should not be understood merely as beneficiaries of future democratic reforms but as essential protagonists of Venezuela's long-term democratic reconstruction. Democratic leadership cannot be improvised during

moments of political transition. It requires sustained investment in democratic political socialization, constitutional education, civic participation, ethical public service, institutional trust, and democratic culture long before democratic transitions occur. Investing in younger generations should therefore be understood not simply as an educational objective or a youth policy, but as a strategic democratic imperative.

Building upon these findings, this research proposes a *Human Rights-Based Methodological Framework for Training and Empowering the Next Generation of Venezuelan Democratic Leaders*. Rather than adapting existing leadership models to the Venezuelan context, the framework emerged inductively from the theoretical foundations, historical evidence, and empirical findings developed throughout this research. It conceives democratic leadership not as the preparation of future political elites but as a continuous process of democratic political socialization through which citizens progressively acquire the knowledge, values, competencies, and civic responsibility necessary to strengthen constitutional democracy from multiple sectors of society.

At its core, the proposed framework brings together democratic civic and constitutional literacy, democratic political socialization, community-based civic participation, institutional transformation, collaborative democratic networks, and democratic memory into a coherent methodological proposal grounded in civil and political rights. Rather than functioning as isolated components, these dimensions progressively reinforce one another through experiential learning, public deliberation, adaptive leadership, collaborative governance, community engagement, and learning by doing. The ultimate objective is therefore not merely to prepare future leaders but to contribute to rebuilding Venezuela's democratic human infrastructure: the network of citizens, institutions, relationships, democratic practices, and civic values capable of sustaining constitutional democracy over time.

The evidence further argues that democratic reconstruction should remain grounded in a coherent set of constitutional and democratic principles. Constitutionalism and the Rule of Law must once again become the normative foundations of public authority. Human rights should remain at the centre of democratic governance, recognising their universality, indivisibility, and their essential role in processes of truth, justice, reparations, reconciliation, and guarantees of non-repetition. Political pluralism should progressively replace polarization through dialogue, negotiation, and constitutional coexistence. Democratic participation should extend beyond electoral processes to become a permanent expression of

civic responsibility, while accountability, transparency, subsidiarity, and community empowerment should guide institutional reform and strengthen democratic resilience from the local level upwards.

Translating this framework into practice equally requires rebuilding a collaborative democratic ecosystem. Universities, civil society organizations, political parties, municipalities, community organizations, professional associations, independent media, humanitarian organizations, the private sector, and international partners all possess complementary capacities that, when articulated around a shared democratic purpose, can contribute far more effectively than any institution acting independently. Democratic reconstruction therefore depends less upon institutional substitution than upon sustained cooperation among autonomous actors committed to strengthening democratic governance and expanding opportunities for younger generations.

Although this dissertation is grounded in the Venezuelan experience, its findings also contribute to broader discussions on democratic backsliding, democratic resilience, youth political participation, political socialization, democratic leadership, and post-authoritarian reconstruction. The Venezuelan experience illustrates that authoritarian consolidation affects not only constitutions and public institutions but also the social processes through which democratic values, civic identities, political participation, and public trust are transmitted across generations. Conversely, it demonstrates that democratic resilience frequently survives within universities, civil society organizations, humanitarian initiatives, local communities, and youth movements long before institutional democratization becomes politically possible. These findings may therefore inform comparative research on democratic reconstruction in other societies experiencing democratic erosion.

This dissertation also presents certain limitations. Its qualitative design does not seek statistical generalization, but rather analytical understanding grounded in the Venezuelan experience. Likewise, the methodological framework proposed here should be understood as a working model requiring further refinement through pilot programmes, comparative analysis, and empirical evaluation. Future research could examine its implementation in post-authoritarian contexts, assess the long-term impact of democratic leadership programmes, compare democratic political socialization across different regional settings, and further explore the relationship between civic education and democratic resilience over time.

The central argument advanced throughout this dissertation is that democracy is never sustained exclusively through constitutions, elections, or political institutions. Democratic systems endure because

successive generations learn to value constitutionalism, exercise democratic citizenship, defend human rights, respect political pluralism, and assume responsibility for the common good. Constitutional reforms may restore democratic institutions, but only democratic citizens can preserve their legitimacy, resilience, and democratic character over time.

For this reason, Venezuela's future (re)democratization should ultimately be understood as an intergenerational national project rather than as a single political transition. Rebuilding democracy requires rebuilding the democratic human infrastructure capable of sustaining it across generations. The deliberate formation of a new generation of democratic leaders—committed to constitutionalism, human dignity, public service, democratic dialogue, and civic responsibility—therefore constitutes not simply an educational proposal, but one of the principal democratic challenges and opportunities emerging from this research. If democratic backsliding was, in part, the consequence of the gradual erosion of Venezuela's democratic human infrastructure, then its long-term democratic reconstruction will ultimately depend upon society's collective capacity to rebuild it.

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