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The Legitimacy of the 'Colectivos' and the Police in Venezuela: A Comparative Public Opinion Study[1]

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Abstract

The so-called 'Colectivos' are one of the most prominent and controversial non-state armed groups in Venezuela. This study aims to compare the legitimacy of Colectivos against the level of support for the police, as state armed forces, using data from a survey of a nationally representative sample of public opinion conducted in 2021. For this purpose, data from 1,200 survey respondents is analyzed considering individual-level variables such as gender, education, work status, and political alignment, as well as contextual variables of the respondents, such as state of residence and urbanization level. The study employs a multilevel regression analysis to examine the individual and contextual factors influencing attitudes towards the polices and Colectivos among the Venezuelan population. The findings reveal a substantial lack of legitimacy for both the police and Colectivos. Moreover, the study identifies a moderate positive correlation between attitudes towards the police and Colectivos, indicating that individuals who view the police negatively are more likely to hold negative views towards Colectivos as well. Regarding the individual socio-economic variables, only political alignment was found to influence perceptions of legitimacy, whereby Chavistas viewed both polices and Colectivos more positively than non-chavistas. Additionally, the analysis of territorial differences reveals variations in public opinion towards these groups across different states. The findings highlight a concerning situation for Venezuelan population about the legitimacy of state armed forces and the potential consequences of a failed state. The perception of inefficacy of state armed forces, like the police, can leave the population feeling unprotected and vulnerable. They also indicate a potential fertile ground for non-state armed forces to control and exercise violence. The authors argue that efforts should be made to restore the state's monopoly of violence in a legitimate and effective manner, while considering the underlying political factors and geographical differences that shape public attitudes towards armed actors. By addressing these issues, steps can be taken towards fostering a sense of security and trust among the Venezuelan population

Keywords: Violence; State; armed forces; non-state actors; crime; legitimacy; public opinion.

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La legitimidad de los 'Colectivos' y las policías en Venezuela: Un estudio comparativo de opinión pública

Resumen

Los denominados 'Colectivos' son uno de los grupos armados no estatales más prominentes y controversiales en Venezuela. Este estudio tiene como objetivo comparar la legitimidad que tienen los colectivos al contrastarla con el nivel de apoyo que reciben las policías, como fuerzas armadas estatales, utilizando los datos de una encuesta con una muestra representativa de opinión pública nacional realizada en 2021. Para este propósito, los datos de 1.200 encuestados se analizan teniendo en cuenta variables a nivel individual, como género, educación, estado laboral y alineación política, así como variables contextuales de los encuestados, como el estado de residencia y el nivel de urbanización. El estudio utiliza un análisis de regresión multinivel para examinar los factores que influyen en las actitudes hacia la policía y los Colectivos en la población venezolana. Los resultados revelan una notable falta de legitimidad tanto para la policía como para los Colectivos. Además, el estudio identifica una correlación positiva moderada entre las actitudes hacia la policía y los Colectivos, lo que indica que las personas que tienen una opinión negativa de la policía también tienden a tener una opinión negativa de los Colectivos. En cuanto a las variables socioeconómicas individuales, solo se encontró que la alineación política influye en las percepciones de legitimidad, ya que los Chavistas ven tanto a la policía como a los Colectivos de manera más positiva que los no Chavistas. Además, el análisis de las diferencias territoriales revela variaciones en la opinión pública hacia estos grupos en diferentes estados. Los hallazgos resaltan una preocupante situación para la población venezolana en cuanto a la legitimidad de las fuerzas armadas estatales y las posibles consecuencias de un estado fallido. La percepción de ineficacia de las fuerzas armadas estatales, como la policía, puede hacer que la población se sienta desprotegida y vulnerable. También indican un terreno fértil potencial para que los grupos armados no estatales controlen y ejerzan violencia. Los autores argumentan que se deben realizar esfuerzos para restablecer el monopolio estatal de la violencia de manera legítima y efectiva, teniendo en cuenta los factores políticos subyacentes y las diferencias geográficas que moldean las actitudes públicas hacia los actores armados. Al abordar estos problemas, se pueden tomar medidas para fomentar un sentido de seguridad y confianza entre la población venezolana.

Palabras clave: Violencia; Estado; grupos armados; actores no estatales; crimen; legitimación; opinión pública

Introduction

Max Weber provided one of the most widespread and accepted definitions of the state. According to him, it is a *"human community that successfully holds the legitimate monopoly of violence within a specific territory"* (Weber, 1972, 78). This pragmatic and sociological definition of the state is substantially different from other conceptualizations offered in political philosophy up to that point, which focused on identifying the purposes or aims of the state, such as peace, general welfare, and happiness, as in Leibniz (1988). Other conceptualizations emphasized the voluntary agreement of individuals who relinquish a portion of their freedom to establish a social contract that promotes the common good, as in Hobbes (1984) or Rousseau (2007).

Weber's definition has three components: the first is the monopoly, which refers to the exclusive exercise of violence. It implies that not only can the state exercise violence, but other groups or individuals cannot, as they have been defeated by the human group that successfully holds power and stripped of their capacity to exert violence. The second

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aspect is the legitimate character of the use of violence, which has two interpretations. On one hand, it means that there is recognition and acceptance by other groups and individuals of the state's authority, and they offer obedience to its dictates. On the other hand, the use of violence is regulated and can only be applied according to the rules that exist within that rule of law, in that *Rechtsstaat.* Finally, the third aspect is that this monopoly and legitimacy for the use of violence are delimited to a territory in which the state exercises dominion.

In Latin America, there are extensive territories where the state fails to establish its monopoly of violence, and other "political communities" in Weber's sense, that exercise violent force by displacing the state authorities or sharing the power with the state (Feldmann & Luna, 2022). These groups can be classified into two types: criminal bands driven by profit motives, engaged in drug trafficking, smuggling, or extortion, who exercise their criminal governance in cities or rural areas. Alternatively, there are groups with political aspirations, such as guerrilla groups, who dominate territories where they have displaced the state and establish their own rules, impose punishments, and provide protection to the population. The distinctions between political and economic goals are not always clear, as in most cases, both types of goals coexist, albeit with varying emphasis or prioritization given to one over the other. This differentiation helps determine what is achieved first in order to attain the second objective (Briceño-León, Barreira, Aquino, 2022).

The "Colectivos" in Venezuela belong to that second type of violent groups, professing to have political goals, but they obtain significant economic benefits from the territorial control they have. In these territories, they exercise a monopoly of violence that has allowed them to usurp violence from other armed actors, such as common criminals or rival political groups. In this context, the state refrains from intervening and delegates security, population protection, and social control tasks to the coletivos

Therefore, in Venezuela, we can find the existence of two competitive and/or cooperative groups responsible for the use of force, social control, and population protection: the state armed groups, also known as the police, and the non-state armed groups, known as collectives.

On the one hand, the police is entrusted with the legitimate use of force and violence as an armed group representing the state. Hence, their actions carry legitimacy since they are authorized by the state and operate within the legal framework of the nation. When the police employ violence and ensure the safety of the population, their actions are both lawful and legitimate. The Colectivos, on the other hand, operate as armed groups outside the control of the state, which holds the monopoly over the use of violence within the territory. Consequently, they lack authorization to employ violence and operate outside the framework of the law, resulting in a lack of both legality and legitimacy.

However, this understanding of legitimacy focuses primarily on its formal and legal aspects. From a sociological standpoint, legitimacy involves the recognition of the merits and validity that underpin voluntary obedience. In other words, legitimacy extends beyond legality and encompasses the acknowledgment and acceptance of the collective's authority by the population they claim to protect and control.

According to Beetham's proposal on political legitimacy (1991, 15-25; 2012, 123), achieving legitimacy, which encompasses both moral and normative dimensions of

power, requires three conditions. Firstly, power must operate within established rules and regulations, which can be referred to as the condition of legality. Secondly, these rules should be justified by commonly held beliefs and values shared by those in power and those subject to it, creating a moral consensus on the functions and permissible boundaries of the use of force. Lastly, there should be clear evidence of the consent given by the subordinates to the specific power relationship, representing the social and practical aspect of legitimacy.

In light of this perspective, Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical framework of the use of force and the role of protecting the population.

Figure 1. **Theoretical framework of the use of force and the role of protecting the population**
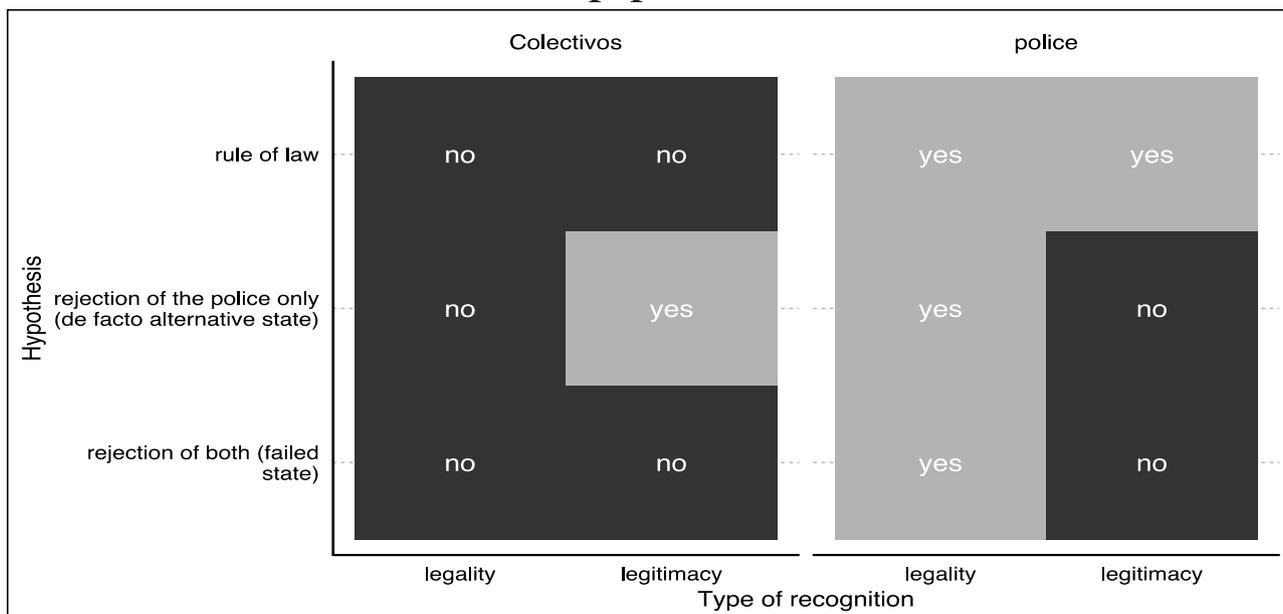
It is possible that despite having legal authority, the police may lack the consent of the population, while non-state armed groups, even without legal authority, can enjoy popular support and legitimacy.

Conversely, non-state armed groups are capable of exerting their criminal governance, which broadly refers to *"the imposition of rules or restrictions on behavior by a criminal organization"* (Lessing, 2021, p. 856). This process involves actors operating outside the official bureaucratic system, employing rules that differ from those of the formally established state. Consequently, *"the lives, routines, and activities of those governed are impinged on by rules or codes imposed by a Criminal Organization"* (Lessing, 2021, p. 856).

There are three ways in which non-state armed groups can exert territorial control: The first occurs when there is a void of state presence in a particular geographical space, often due to the state's limited capacity to exercise sovereignty in remote or hard-to-reach areas. This is frequently observed in isolated rural regions where permanent police or military presence is lacking. In such contexts, non-state armed groups step in to fill the power vacuum left by the state, effectively monopolizing the use of force and gaining

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obedience from the local population.

The second modality arises when an armed group successfully displaces the state's armed forces from a territory, prevailing in armed confrontations against the police or military. This scenario is commonly observed with guerrilla groups in rural areas and criminal gangs like the Maras in Central America, the facções in Brazil, or the *facções* in urban *favelas*.

The third modality involves a coexistence between state and non-state armed groups, established through an agreement between them. This agreement allows the non-state armed group, such as collectives, to operate alongside the state's armed groups while maintaining a certain level of autonomy.

In his classification of armed micro-regimes, Arias (2018: 24-25) identifies four distinct types. (1) Criminal Disorder: This occurs when multiple armed groups engage in conflict without any regulation or control. (2) Divided Governance: In this scenario, a single armed group has established control over a territory but faces competition from the state's armed forces. (3) Tiered Governance: when multiple armed groups carry out acts of violence on behalf of the state, but they have limited autonomy in policymaking and little influence over state policies. (4) Collaborative Governance: This type emerges when an armed group successfully subdues and controls other armed groups within a territory. They operate in collaboration with the state, playing dual roles as both an instrument of state action and an entity that utilizes the state as a means to achieve their objectives. This cooperative dynamic is particularly observed in the case of Colectivos in Venezuela.

However, how do members of the public perceive the actions of the police and coletivos in terms of their role in providing protection? Can the available evidence support the claim that police forces possess both legality and legitimacy in Venezuela, or do Colectivos enjoy greater legitimacy than the police? Do individuals seek protection from either the non-state armed group or the state, depending on the specific circumstances, indicating a dual acceptance of both powers (Blattman et al. 2022)? Alternatively, do individuals lack trust in both entities and feel unsupported, indicating a vacumm of legitimacy of both types of armed forces? Lastly, does support for either armed group vary based on individuals' socio-demographic conditions and/or geographical context? These are the question the present study aims to clarify via the use of public opinion data from a respresentative survey. We begin by providing a background on the Colectivos and their significance. Then, we describe the methods and data, present the results, discuss their implications, and conclude with the study's broader consequences.

The present study focuses on the following research questions:

- How does the level of public support and legitimation for Colectivos compare with that of regular state armed forces in Venezuela?

- Are there significant demographic or geographic differences in public perceptions of the legitimacy of Colectivos compared to regular state armed forces?

- How do perceptions of legitimacy vary across different demographic groups (e.g., age, gender, socioeconomic status) and geographic regions?

- Are there any significant differences in the factors that contribute to the legitimacy of Colectivos and regular state armed forces among the Venezuelan public?

Background

What are the 'Colectivos' and why they can be regarded as important non-state armed groups in Venezuela?

The "Colectivos" in Venezuela are non-state armed groups that have collaborated with the Venezuelan government throughout the 21st century. These groups have been involved in various activities, including political intimidation, violence against opposition groups, and community organization. The origins of the Colectivos predate Hugo Chávez's presidency when they were considered a subversive group advocating for armed political struggle to gain power, opposing the national government (La Piedrita, n.d.). However, their stance shifted once President Chávez came into power, transforming them into allies of the government and the so-called "shield of the revolution" (Fundación Alexis Vive, n.d.).

During the early years of Hugo Chávez's presidency, community organizations were encouraged, and the creation of "Círculos Bolivarianos" supported the government's socialist agenda. Over time, certain groups across the country grew increasingly militant, organizing themselves as local armed factions and adopting the name "Colectivos" alongside existing ones. The Colectivos have garnered significant controversy both within Venezuela and internationally. Some observers consider them to be paramilitary groups operating with impunity, responsible for a range of human rights abuses. The International Criminal Court's report affirms that "the Venezuelan Government is unwilling to genuinely investigate and prosecute the crimes against humanity committed in Venezuela, with total impunity, by state authorities, security forces, and the 'Colectivos' – armed groups allegedly supported and shielded by state authorities" (International Criminal Court ICC-CPI, 2023).

Despite the controversy, the current government of Nicolas Maduro has defended the Colectivos as legitimate community organizations working to safeguard the country's socialist revolution against external threats. The Colectivos continue to play an active role in Venezuelan politics, often being utilized by the government to suppress opposition protests and intimidate regime critics (Zubillaga, Hanson, & Sánchez, 2022). The complex dynamics and implications surrounding the Colectivos provide valuable insights into the intricate socio-political landscape of Venezuela.

Why do non-state armed groups seek legitimacy from the general public?

Non-state armed groups have a vested interest in obtaining legitimacy from the general public for various reasons. By gaining public legitimacy, these groups can enjoy a range of benefits, including increased support, access to resources, and enhanced power dynamics. Public support allows them to attract new members and secure vital resources such as funding, weapons, and supplies. Moreover, legitimacy strengthens their negotiating position, enabling them to engage with governments and other armed factions on more equal footing.

Furthermore, public legitimacy provides these groups with a sense of credibility and

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identity, which is crucial for their long-term survival and success. It bolsters their internal cohesion and resilience, fostering a collective belief in their cause. Additionally, public legitimacy can shape their public image and influence international perceptions, affecting their interactions with external actors and potential allies.

However, gaining legitimacy from the general public is not without its challenges. Non-state armed groups must navigate complex social, cultural, and political contexts to gain acceptance and trust. One of the key expectations from the public is the assurance of protection from violence and delinquency. Non-state armed groups must demonstrate that their actions, values, and goals align with the aspirations and concerns of the communities they seek to gain legitimacy from. This includes addressing the community's security needs and showcasing their ability to maintain order and provide a sense of safety. As these groups often possess or share a monopoly of violence with the state, it becomes crucial for them to establish themselves as reliable and responsible actors in ensuring the well-being and security of the populace. By doing so, they can build trust and legitimacy among the public, solidifying their position within the societal framework.

How can a non-state armed group gain legitimacy?

Non-state armed groups can acquire public legitimacy by presenting themselves as protectors of a particular community or identity group, or by positioning themselves as instrumental in achieving a political or social objective. They can appeal to a wider support base by portraying their actions as part of a larger struggle for societal or political transformation. Furthermore, they may establish parallel systems of justice or conflict resolution to cultivate trust within local communities. The capacity of non-state armed groups to obtain legitimacy is contingent upon factors such as the nature of the conflict, the tactics employed, and the prevailing political and social context.

How can a non-state armed group exert influence on the political landscape of a country?

Non-state armed groups have the capacity to shape and exert influence on the political dynamics of a country in multifaceted ways. One such avenue is through the utilization or mere threat of violence to advance their political or social objectives. This can manifest in diverse forms, including targeting governmental or military entities, engaging in acts of terrorism, or perpetrating violence against civilians. By doing so, these groups aim to establish themselves as significant actors within the political landscape. They may also seek to establish alliances or negotiate with government officials and other stakeholders, leveraging these interactions to advocate for their interests through formal or informal channels. This approach can prove particularly effective in instances where established institutions are perceived as inadequate in representing or addressing the concerns of specific communities or identity groups.

Furthermore, non-state armed groups may seek to influence the political scene by asserting control over territory or valuable resources. They may establish parallel systems of governance or conflict resolution and endeavor to provide social services or other forms of support to local communities. Through these initiatives, they position themselves as legitimate alternatives to the existing government or established institutions, thus

garnering support and loyalty from the local populace. By consolidating their presence and influence within communities, these armed groups can exert significant sway over political processes and decision-making.

Why is it important for the scientific community to understand the state of legitimization among non-state armed groups in comparison with regular state armed forces?

Understanding the state of legitimization among non-state armed groups and comparing it to regular state armed forces is importance for several reasons. Firstly, it provides valuable insights into the factors that shape the legitimacy of non-state armed groups. By examining the elements that contribute to their acceptance and support within society, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the underlying societal conditions and perceptions that influence their existence. Secondly, the comparative analysis between non-state armed groups and state armed forces offers a contextual examination of legitimacy in the realms of governance and security. By exploring the similarities and differences in their legitimacy frameworks, researchers can evaluate the effectiveness and accountability of these armed actors, shedding light on their roles in society.

Additionally, studying the state of legitimization contributes to a broader understanding of conflict dynamics. It helps identify the underlying causes and drivers of armed conflict, gaining insights on the complex interactions between power, violence and legitimacy. This understanding is crucial for developing strategies and interventions that address the root causes and promote sustainable peace.

Moreover, exploring the state of legitimization among non-state armed groups and its comparison to state armed forces offers insights into the relationship between these groups and the communities they operate in. It highlights the dynamics of public perception, trust, and support, which are critical factors in shaping the effectiveness and impact of these armed actors.

Why study the 'Colectivos' in Venezuela?

Studying the legitimization of Colectivos in Venezuela from a scientific perspective is interesting for multiple reasons. Firstly, Colectivos present a distinctive case of non-state armed groups operating within a highly complex political and social landscape characterized by political conflict and a humanitarian crisis. By examining the state of legitimacy of the Colectivos, researchers can gain insights into the factors that contribute to the existence and influence of such groups within a society.

Secondly, studying the Colectivos allows for a comparison with regular state armed forces. This comparative analysis can provide valuable insights into the dynamics of power, governance, and security in Venezuela. Understanding how these non-state armed groups gain and maintain legitimacy in comparison to state forces can shed light on the broader issues of state legitimacy and the functioning of security apparatuses in the country.

Lastly, given the linkages between Colectivos and the Venezuelan government, examining their legitimization can offer valuable perspectives on the intricate relationship

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between the government and non-state armed groups, as well as broader political and social dynamics within Venezuela. By delving into the legitimization of Colectivos, we aim to advance theoretical frameworks and deepen our understanding of how non-state armed groups attain legitimacy, influence governance, and shape the society overall.

Methods & Data

Empirical Approach: Legitimacy and Public Opinion Surveys

Public opinion surveys can provide valuable data on the attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of the general public towards non-state armed groups such as the Colectivos. By conducting surveys, researchers can gather information on the level of support and legitimacy for these groups compared to the regular state armed forces, as well as the factors contributing to their legitimacy. Surveys can also help identify any significant demographic or geographic differences in public perceptions regarding the legitimacy of the Colectivos compared to the regular state armed forces and how they influence public perceptions of their legitimacy.

Using public opinion surveys to study the state and quality of legitimization of non-state armed groups makes sense because it allows researchers to collect quantitative data that can be statistically analyzed. This provides a nationally representative and systematic approach to studying Venezuelan public opinion, which can complement the experiential evidence obtained through qualitative interviews. Additionally, surveys can be conducted on a larger scale, reaching a broader and more diverse population than other research methods.

Data Collection

This study utilized data from a nationally representative public opinion survey conducted in Venezuela between the months of February and March 2021. The survey was administered to a randomly selected sample of adults aged 18 and above, with a total sample size of 1200 respondents. The sample was stratified by geographic region to ensure adequate representation of different regions in Venezuela. Data was collected through face-to-face interviews using a standardized questionnaire.

Variables

The main dependent variable in this study is the level of public support and legitimacy for the Colectivos and state police in Venezuela. This variable was measured using a fully labeled scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) in response to the following statement: "[The Colectivos/the police] protect us from crime." This variable essentially captures the legitimacy of both state and non-state armed forces in the appropriate use of force for the protection of the population, derived from Weber's previously discussed view of the state. The Colectivos represent non-state armed forces, while the police represent the regular armed forces of the state. Additionally, the same

question is included, but in relation to the perception of neighbors as a point of further comparison, regarding unarmed civilian actors whose role does not involve protection against violence but rather results from a self-defense process.

Additional variables include demographic factors such as gender, education, employment status, and political affiliation, as well as geographic characteristic such as federal state of residence and urbanization levels of the area of residence, where respondents where interviewed.

Data Analysis

The initial phase of the analysis focuses on estimating and comparing the level of legitimacy enjoyed by both state and non-state armed forces. Descriptive statistics are employed to summarize the distribution of key variables, encompassing measures of central tendency and dispersion. The correlation between the legitimacy of the Colectivos and the police is also examined. T-tests are used to compare the average level of legitimacy of the Colectivos in constract with the regular state armed forces. This study of means is subsequently disaggregated across different interest groups to observe if there are any significant demographic or geographic differences in perceptions of legitimacy.

In the second phase of the analysis, we employed Multilevel Regression Analysis (MLRA) to investigate the relationships between our predictor variables (socio-demographics and geographical characteristics) y and the outcome variable (legitimacy of state and non-state armed forces), considering the hierarchical nature of the data (geographical differences). Because the attitudes towards police and Colectivos may vary across the states, it is important to control for the context effect while simultaneously considering demographical differences, like sex, working conditions or political affiliation. MLRA is suitable for analyzing data with nested structures, where individuals are nested within higher-level units (Hox 2010: 5; Heck et al. 2010: 1 ff.). In this case, respondents live in federal states across the country (entidades) with different context and characteristics, including different local police and specific non-colectivos that act locally, increasing the importance of controlling for context whiles studying predictors of attitudes towards state and non-state armed actors.

The general formula for MLRA can be represented as follows (Langer 2010, 754)[2]:

Level 1 (Individual-level):

$$Y_{ij} = b_{oj} + b_1 X_{1ij} + e_{ij}$$

Level 2 (Group-level):

$$b_{0j} = b_0 + b_{01j} Z_{1j} + u_{0j}$$

$$b_{1j} = b_1 + b_{11} Z_{1j} + u_{1j}$$

In the formula, Y_{ij} represents the outcome variable for individual i in group j. The intercept and slope coefficients (b_{oj}, b_{1j}, etc.) depict the individual-level parameters that vary across groups. $X1_{ij}$, $X2_{ij}$, etc. denote individual-level predictors for individual i in group

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2 Integrated formula: $Y_{ij} = b_0 + b_{01j} Z_{1j} + b_{1j} X_{1ji} + b_{1j} (Z_{1j} X_{1ji}) + u_{1j} X_{1ij} + u_{oj} + e_{ij}$

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j. e_{ij} represents the individual-level error term. At the group-level, the intercept and slope coefficients (b_{oj}, b_{1j}, etc.) are modeled as a function of group-level predictors (Z_{1j}, Z_{2j}, etc.) with their respective coefficients (γ_{oo}, γ_{o1}, etc.). u_{oj} indicates the random effects capturing the variation between groups. Through MLRA, we can gain insights into how individual-level predictors and group-level factors contribute to the variation in the outcome variable, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing support for Colectivos and regular state armed forces in Venezuela.

To avoid instability in the estimation of the MLRA, the number of groups (in this case, federal states) should be considered. It is expected higher number of units increases the stability of the estimated model, although there are no strict criteria for the number of groups in the Level 2. Hox (2010: 235) suggest a minimum of 30 units while Haddler (2004: 68) suggest a minimum of 10 units. In the present study, the number of units of the Level 2 falls within an acceptable range to conduct the MLRA, with 22 federal states included in the sample of the presented survey. To reduce the risk of instability in the models, the specifications of the models were kept to a minimum. This includes limiting the number of predictors included in the model, as well, restricting the model to fixed effects without specifying random slopes (b_{1j}, b_{2j}, etc.).

In addition to the coefficient estimates for the independent variables, there are other estimates from the multi-level regression model that should be considered. These include the variance components and the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC). The variance components provide information about the amount of variability in the dependent variable that is attributed to different levels of the model. In this case, the variance component for the random intercept at the state level indicates the extent of variability between states that is not accounted for by the independent variables in the model. The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) measures the proportion of total variability in the dependent variable that can be attributed to the state level. It quantifies the degree of similarity or correlation between observations within the same state. A higher ICC suggests a stronger clustering effect, indicating that observations within the same state tend to be more similar to each other. The ICC is estimated with the following formula (Hox 2010: 53):

In this equation, σ^2_u represents the estimated variance component at the higher level, which captures the variability between the higher-level units (e.g., groups, clusters, or regions). It quantifies the differences or similarities among the units.

On the other hand, σ^2_e represents the estimated variance component at the lower level, which accounts for the residual variability within the higher-level units. It reflects the individual differences within each unit.

By dividing the variance between higher-level units by the sum of the variance between higher-level units and the variance within higher-level units, the ICC provides a measure of the proportion of total variation attributed to the differences between units. The resulting ICC value ranges from 0 to 1, where a higher value indicates greater similarity within units, and a lower value indicates more heterogeneity within units. In this paper, the ICC indicates how much variance can be attributed to the state-level, i.e. how much variance the contextual factors can statistically explain. According to the rule of thumb, it is only meaningful to conduct a multilevel analysis when the ICC reaches 0.10 or higher, meaning that 10% of the total variance can be explained by contextual factors. Some researchers suggest a minimum ICC value of 0.05 (Heck 2010: 47).

The models for the MLRA were estimated using the R software (R Core Team, 2021) and the package "lme4" (Bates et al., 2015).

Limitations

It is important to note that this study has several limitations, including the potential for response bias and the limited scope of the survey questionnaire. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the data limits the ability to draw causal inferences about the relationships between variables. Finally, the use of a Likert scale to measure perceptions of legitimacy may not fully capture the complex and nuanced attitudes of the Venezuelan public towards Colectivos and regular state armed forces.

Results

Levels of Support and Legitimacy

The boxplot presented in Figure 3 provides a comprehensive comparison of support levels for regular state armed forces and Colectivos among the Venezuelan population. The plot illustrates the distribution of responses to the survey question, "Do you agree or disagree that [the Colectivos/the police] protect us from crime?" Responses are measured on a scale ranging from 1 (completely agree) to 4 (completely disagree).

The analysis reveals that the average level of support for Colectivos is lower than that for regular state armed forces, with respective values of 4 and 3. Furthermore, the interquartile range (IQR) for Colectivos appears to be narrower than that for regular state armed forces, indicating a lower variability in responses concerning Colectivos. Additionally, the box plot highlights the presence of outliers in the data for Colectivos, suggesting that some respondents hold strong supportive or opposing views towards them.

Overall, the boxplot indicates a notably low level of support for both regular state armed forces and Colectivos within the Venezuelan public. However, there is a slightly higher level of support observed for the police.

It is worth noting that the boxplot also reveals that support levels for neighbors in terms of crime protection are higher than both the police and Colectivos, with a median value of 2. This suggests that neighbors are perceived as a more dependable and effective source of crime protection compared to state or non-state armed actors.

The lack of support for the role of the Colectivos and police in protecting the populace from violence leads us to characterize these attitudes as clear indicators of strong rejection rather than endorsement of their (in)actions.

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Figure 2. **'Colectivos' and Police Defend People from Delinquency** Note: 4-point scale and including non-response items
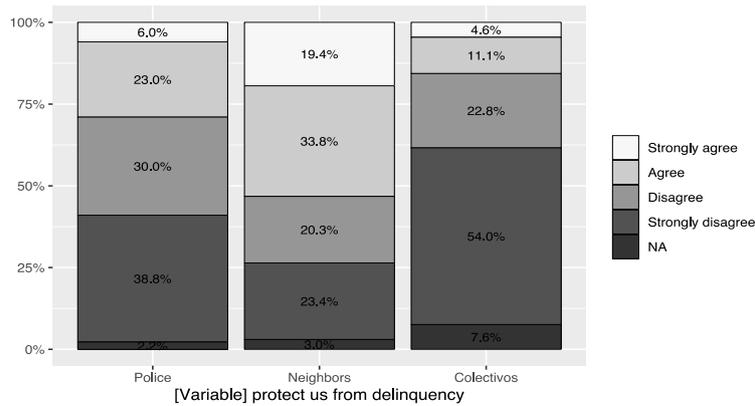

Figure 3. **Boxplot of Views about 'Colectivos' and Police Protect People from Delinquency**
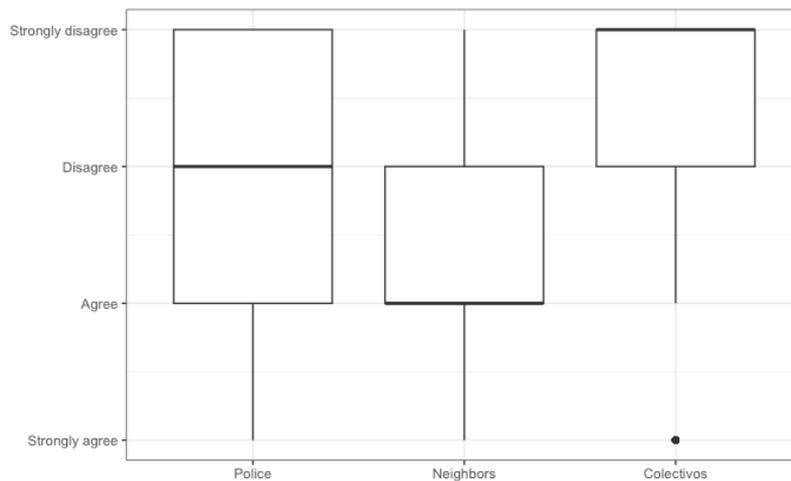
Note: Correlations between attitudes towards the Colectivos and the police

Additionally, we examined the correlation between people's attitudes towards the police and Colectivos. The heatmap in Figure 4 provides a visual depiction of the frequency of cross-tabulations between opinions regarding the police and Colectivos, highlighting areas where there is a substantial level of agreement or disagreement between the two groups. A strong positive correlation was discovered, with a Kendall Tau coefficient of 0.4 ($p < 0.01$). This indicates a significant strong association between the two variables. It suggests that individuals who hold a negative opinion of the police are more likely to harbor a negative opinion of Colectivos, and vice versa. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that many individuals maintain distinct views about the police and Colectivos, signifying that these two groups' perceptions are not necessarily interchangeable within the Venezuelan population.

Figure 4. **Relationship between Attitudes towards Police and 'Colectivos'**
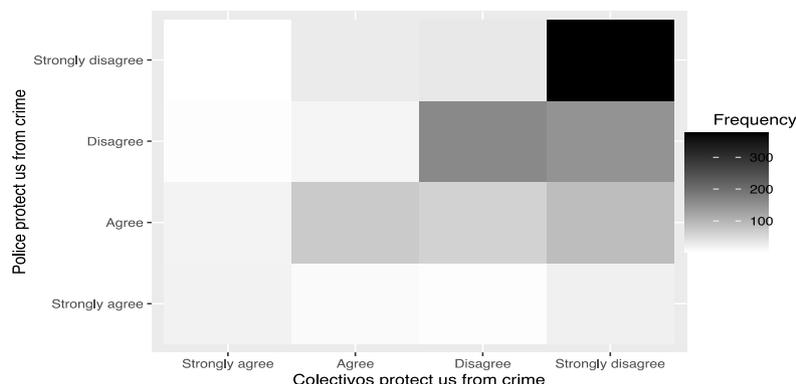
Socioeconomic and sociopolitical differences

In this section, we delve into the influence of socioeconomic and sociopolitical factors on the formation of attitudes towards Colectivos and the police. We specifically investigate how variables such as gender, education, employment status, and political affiliation are associated with perceptions of legitimacy and support for these groups. By examining the impact of socioeconomic and sociopolitical factors on attitudes towards Colectivos and the police, we aim to gain a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics of public opinion and identify potential drivers behind the support for armed actors in Venezuela.

Figure 3 provides an overview of the results of the mean analysis for all variables. The finding show tha both the police and the Colectivos are perceived by the population as failing to protect them from crime. This perception holds true across all socioeconomic categories, with a stronger disapproval of the Colectivos' role in protection compared to the police. Both groups are subject to subject to a negative evaluation in terms of their effectiveness in ensuring public safety.

When examining the data by gender, it is noteworthy that the sentiment of insufficient protection by the police is equally shared among men and women. However, concerning the Colectivos, men exhibit a slightly higher level of rejection compared to women.

Analyzing the differences based on the respondents' educational background, a notable pattern emerges. Those with higher levels of education, who have completed higher studies, display a lesser disapproval of the police but a stronger disapproval of the Colectivos compared to individuals with middle or basic education.

The employment status of the respondents also yields interesting insights. The unemployed group expresses a greater level of rejection toward both the police and the Colectivos, in contrast to those who are currently employed.

Lastly, the analysis of political affiliations uncovers a gradient in terms of rejection levels. The lowest rejection is observed among supporters of the governing party, known as "Chavistas," who perceive the police and the Colectivos as providing a relatively higher level of protection. On the other end of the spectrum, rejection intensifies among those who identify as opposition to the government, and it further rises among individuals who

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do not align themselves with either the government or the opposition ("neither-nor"). Notably, this gradient not only highlights increasing levels of rejection but also reveals a narrowing difference between the police and the Colectivos, particularly among politically independent or indifferent individuals whose opinions regarding both groups' effectiveness in protection converge.

Figure 5. Comparison of Means of Attitudes towards the 'Colectivos' and the Police by Socio-Economical and Socio-political Characteristics of Respondents
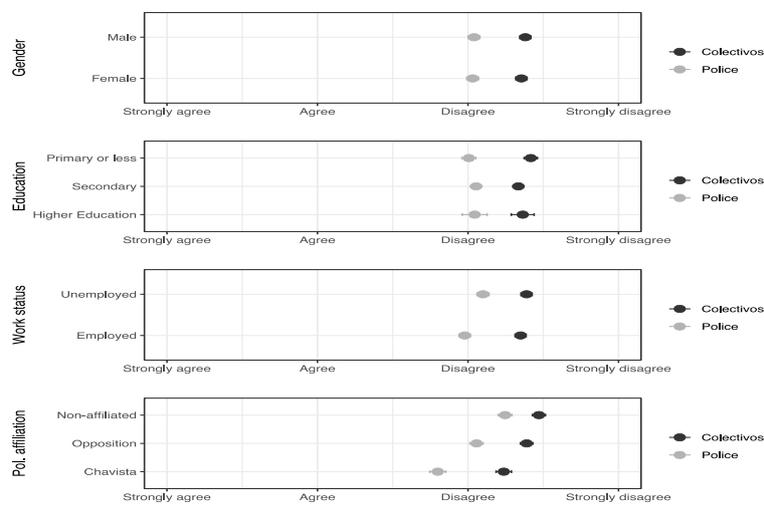
Notes: standard deviation shown; weighted by post-stratigication weights

Territorial differences

In this section, we examine the findings of our study on the perceptions of Colectivos and the police in different regions of Venezuela. We analyze the population's opinions regarding the legitimacy of these groups in relation to their geographical location, taking into account potential differences between states (Figure 6) and the level of urbanization (Figure 7).

The results obtained reveal two distinct patterns. Firstly, there are differences in perceptions between the police and the Colectivos, and secondly, the degree of positivity or negativity of these perceptions. These differences allow us to categorize the states of the republic into two groups. In some states, such as Vargas, Zulia, Yaracuy, Monagas, Falcón, and Apure, there is no significant difference in the evaluation of the protection provided by the police and the Colectivos. However, in other states, we observe divergent opinions regarding the police and the Colectivos.

Among the states with no significant difference, the magnitude of disapproval may vary, with some leaning towards complete disagreement with the protection offered by the

police or Colectivos (e.g., Zulia and Apure), while others lean towards partial disagreement (e.g., Monagas). Falling between these extremes are states like Vargas, Yaracuy, and Falcón.

In states where significant differences exist, there is a more positive perception of the police's performance in safeguarding the population compared to the Colectivos. People in these states tend to feel less protected by the Colectivos than by the police. The states of Táchira, Cojedes, and Apure show a higher level of rejection towards the Colectivos, but it is in Guárico and Aragua where the largest disparity between the two groups is observed. In these states, the evaluation of the police is relatively better (though still negative) compared to the highly negative perception of the Colectivos.

Furthermore, when considering the territorial perspective and exploring whether the perception of protection offered by the police and Colectivos varies based on the size of cities (large or small) or urban areas (neighborhoods in larger cities), no significant differences were found. Across all spaces, there is a widespread high level of rejection towards the idea that either of these armed actors provides adequate protection. However, the police tend to receive slightly more positive attitudes compared to the Colectivos.

Figure 6. Comparison of Means of Attitudes towards the 'Colectivos' and the Police by State of Residence
Note: standard deviation shown; weighted by post-stratigication weights
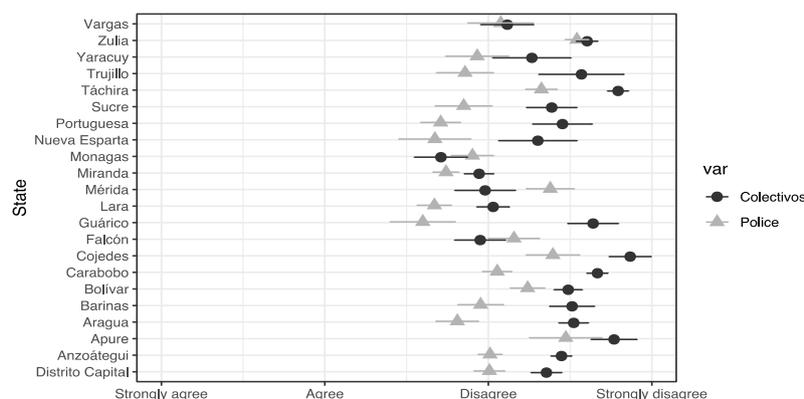
Figure 7. Comparison of Means of Attitudes towards the 'Colectivos' and the Police by Levels of Urbanization of the Area of Residence
Note: standard deviation shown; weighted by post-stratigication weights

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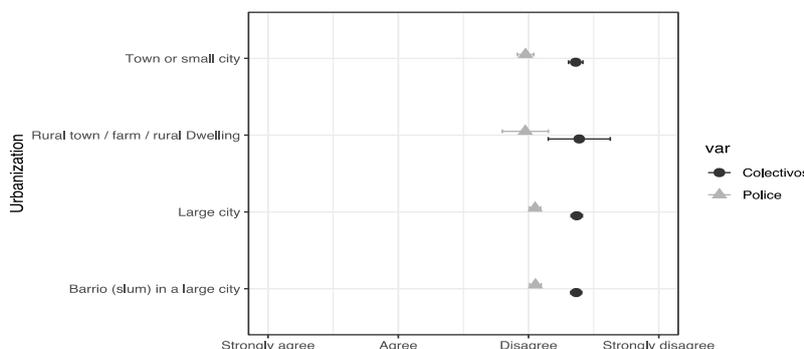
Regression Models

This section presents the findings of the multilevel regression analysis (MLRA). Table 2 displays the MLRA results for the independent variable of attitudes towards the police and the Colectivos. Columns 1 and 2 represent the outcomes of the models using the original 4-point scale items for attitudes towards the police and Colectivos as dependent variables, respectively. Additionally, columns 3 and 4 exhibit the results for a logarithmic transformation of the dependent variable, addressing the issue of skewness observed in the original variable. By applying the logarithm, the data is transformed into a more symmetrical distribution, which can enhance the validity of statistical analysis.

Table 1 provides a summary of the results obtained from the model with random intercepts and fixed slopes for Level 1 predictors based on respondents' demographic characteristics, while also considering the random effects at the state level. The model aims to investigate the relationship between the dependent variable (attitudes towards police and Colectivos, respectively) and the specified independent variables, taking into account potential variations between different states. The model is represented by the equation: $Ylegitimacy = b_0 + \beta_1 gender + \beta_2 education + \beta_3 work + \beta_4 political + u_0 + \varepsilon$.

In this equation, Ylegitimacy represents the dependent variable for the legitimacy of the police and Colectivos. The coefficients b_0, b_1, b_2, b_3, b_4 correspond to the fixed effects associated with each Level 1 predictor (gender, education, working status, political affiliation). The term u_0 represents the random intercept at the state level, which accounts for the variability across different states. The term ε represents the residual or error term, capturing the unexplained variation in the model.

It is important to note that the equation assumes a linear relationship between the predictors and the outcome variable, and the random intercept (u_0) captures the variation in the intercept across different states.

To analyze the data, the independent variables for gender, work, education, and political affiliation have been transformed into binary variables through a process known as "dummification." This transformation converts categorical variables into separate binary variables, where each category or level is represented by 0 or 1. For instance, the original "gender" variable with categories "male" and "female" has been transformed into two binary variables, with "male" represented by 1 and "female" represented by 0. By dummifying the predictors, it becomes possible to include categorical variables in the regression model, treating each category as a distinct predictor. This allows for examining the effects of each category on the outcome variable while controlling for other variables in the model.

In the results of all the models, the differences in sex, education, and work status of the survey respondents did not significantly affect the attitudes towards the police or the Colectivos ($p > 0.1$) when controlling the effect of the other predictors in the model and the differences between states. These results align with those from the separate mean comparison in the previous section, where it was observed that differences for sex, education and work status showed little differences.

Among all demographic characteristics examined, the political affiliation of respondents emerges as the only significant factor influencing their attitudes towards both the police and the Colectivos. In columns 1 and 2, which correspond to the original 4-point-scale variables, the coefficients for the political affiliation categories "Opposition" and

"Neither-nor" (political non-alignment) demonstrate positive and statistically significant effects (with b values ranging from 0.178 to 0.363, and p values ranging from < 0.05 to < 0.001). These findings suggest that both individuals affiliated with the Opposition and those who identify as Neither-nor tend to strongly reject the role of both the police and the Colectivos compared to Chavistas. Furthermore, among the Opposition and Neither-nor groups, the latter exhibit a more pronounced rejection towards the legitimacy of the actions of both state and non-state armed forces in protecting the population from violence.

When examining attitudes towards the police and the Colectivos comparatively, the impact of political affiliation is more pronounced in shaping attitudes towards the police. The coefficients associated with political affiliation exhibit larger magnitudes and greater significance at higher levels of confidence ($p < 0.001$ for coefficients of Opposition and Neither-nor). This indicates that political affiliation has a stronger influence on individuals' attitudes towards the police compared to their attitudes towards the Colectivos. The findings emphasize the importance of political alignment in shaping perceptions of law enforcement.

Interesting, most substantial disparity in attitudes exists between "Neither-nor" and "Chavistas" regarding the police, rather than towards the Colectivos. This implies that while both groups generally hold more negative views towards both the police and the Colectivos compared to Chavistas, the divergence in perspectives between Neither-nor and Chavistas is more pronounced when it comes to the police. This finding aligns with the earlier section's results, which indicated that Chavistas tend to hold significantly more positive views regarding the police's role in protecting the population from crime.

It is important to acknowledge that while the models indicate significant effects of political affiliation, the magnitude of these effects remains relatively small within the context of the 4-point-scale used for the dependent variable. Therefore, although there are significant difference, the general inclination towards rejecting the role of both the police and the Colectivos persists across the population.

The estimation of the intraclass correlation (ICC) reveals noteworthy findings regarding the influence of geographical location on attitudes towards the police and the Colectivos. After the introduction of level 1 predictors, results indicate that a substantial portion of the observed variance can be attributed to the clustering of respondents within states. For attitudes towards the police, the ICC of 0.06 indicates that 6% of the variance can be explained by the geographical context. Similarly, in the case of attitudes towards the Colectivos, the contextual effect of states accounts for up to 10% of the total variance. These results suggest that while the impact of geographical location and state differences is moderate, it still plays a meaningful role in shaping attitudes towards the police, and the impact becomes even more pronounced when examining attitudes towards the Colectivos.

Observing the results from columns 3 and 4, the use of logarithmic models yields similar results and enhances the model fit, as evidenced by lower AIC values for both police and Colectivos. Interestingly, the significance of the Opposition coefficient in the attitudes towards Colectivos diminishes with the logarithmic transformation, indicating that this particular coefficient may not be as stable as the others. Conversely, there are no observed changes in the significance of the coefficient for Neither-nor, suggesting its robustness in influencing attitudes towards both the police and the Colectivos.

The analysis reveals consistent and stable attitudes towards the police and Colectivos

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across the population, with subtle variations based on political attitudes and the federal states of Venezuela. The results also emphasize the significance of political (non)affiliation and the respondents' state of residence in explaining differences in the attitudes towards armed groups. Political affiliation plays a larger role explainign the attitudes towards th police, while the geographical location of respondent explain a larger portion of the variation in attitudes towards the Colectivos.

Table 1. **Multilevel Regression Model for Attitudes Towards Police and 'Colectivos'**

	Police	Colectivos	Police (log)	Colectivos (log)
(Intercept)	2.788***	3.264***	0.956***	1.132***
	(0.125)	(0.126)	(0.050)	(0.050)
Gender (Male)	-0.007	-0.021	-0.003	-0.007
	(0.053)	(0.051)	(0.022)	(0.021)
Education (Secondary)	0.016	0.000	0.008	-0.006
	(0.085)	(0.083)	(0.035)	(0.034)
Education (Higher Edu.)	-0.035	0.045	-0.011	0.007
	(0.090)	(0.088)	(0.037)	(0.036)
Work (Unemployed)	0.057	-0.047	0.016	-0.013
	(0.056)	(0.054)	(0.023)	(0.022)
Pol. Aff. (Opposition)	0.257***	0.178**	0.107***	0.065*
	(0.066)	(0.064)	(0.027)	(0.026)
Pol. Aff. (Neither-nor)	0.363***	0.237***	0.154***	0.095***
	(0.067)	(0.065)	(0.027)	(0.026)
SD (Intercept, State)	0.221	0.275	0.077	0.097
SD (Observations)	0.888	0.832	0.363	0.337
Num.Obs.	1173	1109	1173	1109
R2 Marg.	0.027	0.014	0.029	0.012
R2 Cond.	0.084	0.111	0.071	0.088
AIC	3115.1	2813.9	1024.1	815.0
ICC	0.06	0.10	0.04	0.08

$+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001$

Standard errors within parentheses

Discussion

The first point of discussion relates to the low levels of legitimacy observed in the survey results for both the police and the colections. The perceived inefficiency of the state's armed forces, including the police, indicates a population that feels abandoned and vulnerable, devoid of the necessary protection against crime and violence. While the Colectivos, as non-state armed groups, might serve as de facto enforcers of government power despite lacking official recognition as legitimate armed forces, they also lack widespread legitimacy in the national public opinion in providing security to the public. The absence of legitimacy for both groups creates a power vacuum, exposing the population to the influence of other local non-state armed groups, such as criminal gangs or violent individuals, who seek to exploit this void. Consequently, the lack of legitimacy of state forces has paved the way for the emergence of alternative forms of power, which could prove even more violent and perilous than the groups they aim to supplant.

While the surveyed population generally expresses rejection towards both the police and the Colectivos, there are subtle differences worth noting. For example, it was observed that men feel slightly less protected by the Colectivos compared to women. This divergence can be attributed to the particular attention given by non-state armed groups to safeguarding women, as well as the stereotypical perception of men as potential threats. Additionally, respondents with higher levels of education displayed a slight stronger disapproval of the Colectivos and a milder disapproval of the police, as opposed to those with only primary or secondary education. This suggests a possible association between higher education and a greater appreciation for the rule of law or the legal system, as well as increased human capital that facilitates the higher educated in utilizing the system. Similarly, individuals without employment considered both the police and the Colectivos to offer less protection compared to those who were employed. This perception could stem from the heightened vulnerability of the unemployed, leading them to feel unsupported or unprotected by either the state or the Colectivos.

The most significant differences are observed in the gradient of rejection among government supporters, political opposition, and politically unaligned individuals. These findings highlight the importance of ideological positioning when interpreting the political role ascribed to the Colectivos by the government over the past two decades. The correlation observed, where individuals who do not feel protected by the police also do not feel protected by the Colectivos, and vice versa, can be attributed to this gradient of political positions. It suggests that both the police and the Colectivos are primarily perceived as serving a political agenda, focused on safeguarding the government and the "revolution," rather than prioritizing the well-being of the citizens themselves.

The regression models used yield three noteworthy results. Firstly, although there are minor variations in responses based on gender, educational levels, and employment status, these variables do not significantly influence attitudes or provide an explanation for the differences in the attitudes towards the police or the Colectivos. This can be attributed to the fact that none of these variables play a relevant role in the political segmentation of the country. The differences observed in separately are insignificant, when controlling for the political alignment of the respondent, which is the main explanatory variable of the attitudes towards the legitimacy of the police and the Colectivos. The political affiliation of the respondents showed significant effects in all models, revealing a stronger rejection among the opposition and the non-affiliated compared to self-identified Chavista government supporters. Although government supporters also do not feel protected by either the police or the Colectivos, there is a greater acceptance among them that the police and Colectivos provide protection compared to the other two political groups, namely the opposition and the non-affiliated.

It is unsurprising to find that political alignment plays a significant role in explaining attitudes towards the police and Colectivos, given the political polarization in the country and the politicization of armed groups in Venezuela. However, it is interesting to observe that the magnitude of differences between Chavistas, the opposition, and the non-affiliated is not as pronounced as one might expect. This suggests that the attitudes towards these groups are more similar than anticipated, even within the polarized political context of Venezuela

Furthermore, contrary to expectations within the politically polarized context of the country, the opinions of the politically unaligned do not fall in the middle ground between the Chavistas and the opposition. Despite identifying as "neither-nor," they align

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themselves with one extreme. The evaluation of the police and the Colectivos leads to a new polarization, with the Chavistas on one pole and the politically unaligned on the other. In fact, the politically unaligned display a stronger rejection of the Colectivos and the police compared to the political opposition.

The other variable that proved to be significant in explaining the variance in attitudes towards the police and Colectivos was the geographical location of the respondents. This aspect is particularly interesting because, while rejection is widespread throughout the country and is segmented by political position, it is not uniform across all regions. This variation reflects the different actions taken by the police and Colectivos in various areas. One important factor is the presence of Colectivos, which are not found in all cities. Consequently, the opinions of some individuals are not based on firsthand experiences but are instead influenced by political discourse and references. Moreover, the activities of Colectivos have not been consistent across the entire territory, as some regions have witnessed a greater involvement in politics and violence compared to others. Similarly, the performance and acceptance or rejection of the police vary among different regions, even though there is a national police force. Regional or municipal police forces also exist, and their effectiveness and public perception differ significantly from one area to another.

Finally, a noteworthy distinction arises when respondents are asked about their neighbors rather than the police or Colectivos. In such cases, the overwhelming majority believes that neighbors fulfill a protective role. This contrast is significant as it demonstrates the emergence of responses rooted in citizen solidarity and self-protection mechanisms, which have arisen due to the perceived lack of protection provided by state armed groups like the police or government-appointed entities such as the Colectivos.

Conclusions

This study provides a significant insight into the Venezuelan public opinion regarding the legitimacy of Colectivos and state armed forces. The findings highlight a negative evaluation of the police's role in using force to protect the population, despite their legal mandate. This sets a baseline for assessing the legitimacy of Colectivos as an alternative, albeit illegal, force. The results also reveal that Colectivos lack legitimacy in their use of violence to safeguard Venezuelans, leaving the population vulnerable to crime and violence without proper protection. The comparison between these two armed groups allows for a better understanding of the interaction between legality and legitimacy in the use of violent force within a state.

Based on the findings related the levels of legitimacy, we reflect on conditions of the Venezuelan state considering Weber's definition (Weber, 1972). The restricted legitimacy of the police as the state's representative in wielding the monopoly of violence and ensuring citizen protection, along with the limited recognition of Colectivos as an alternative protection force associated or sanctioned by the government, and the significant consensus among the population that neighbors provide protection, point to the existence of what can be termed a failed state (Rotberg, 2013) and a citizen-driven response of self-defense (Black, 1998).

In his interpretation of failed states, Rotberg (2013, 385-387) asserts that nation-states, born out of the Peace of Westphalia and founded on the principle of national sovereignty, were intended to provide essential public goods that individuals or groups would struggle to secure on their own. According to Rotberg's framework, these public

goods can be categorized into five types: 1) Security and protection, 2) Rule of law and transparency, 3) Participation and respect for human rights, 4) Sustainable economic development, and 5) Human development. Among these five factors, Venezuela has clearly experienced shortcomings in the first three. The first factor concerns the provision of security for defending borders and safeguarding citizens, encompassing both national security and public safety. The second factor addresses adherence to laws, the constitution, and the limitation of legitimate use of force, in accordance with the principles of the Rechtsstaat. The third factor pertains to guaranteeing the respect for human rights of the country's inhabitants by the state (Briceño-León, 2022).

Fukuyama (2004) narrows down the term "failed state" to cases where national sovereignty is directly threatened, preferring instead to use the concept of a "weak state" to describe shortcomings in state functions. He argues that state weakness should be understood as a lack of institutional capacity to effectively implement and enforce policies, rather than solely focusing on the extent of the state's coverage. Fukuyama emphasizes that this weakness often stems from a deficit of legitimacy within the political system itself (Fukuyama, 2004, 96).

Both interpretations offer valuable insights into the presence and legitimacy issues of the police and Colectivos in Venezuela. However, it is worth noting that Rotberg and Fukuyama primarily attribute the state's failure or weakness to external forces, while in the Venezuelan context, we propose that internal factors, namely the decisions and actions of the national government, have played a significant role in creating this state of weakness or deficiency.

The results of this study point to a failure or a weakness of the Venezuelan state in monopolizing violence and wielding it provide security to the Venezuelan community, which create a void in the society. This absence of state has been a deliberate political choice of the Bolivarian revolution, aimed at dismantling the previous regime and constructing a new form of state, often referred to as socialist or communal. While it is true that certain territories, such as the Amazonas or Bolívar regions in the southern part of the country, or the border areas, have historically had limited state presence (Briceño-León, 2015; Vila & Pimenta, 2019), in the rest of the country, the state has exerted varying degrees of influence, ranging from more robust to precarious. However, what has changed is that in all of these spaces, the state has failed to fulfill its security functions. This failure is particularly evident in the mining zones of the south or the border regions, where the presence of guerrilla groups or paramilitary organizations is conspicuous. These groups have engaged in confrontations, kidnappings, and even negotiated with the state, exchanging captured soldiers from the national army, as witnessed in Apure state in early 2021 (Insight Crime, 2021; Fundaredes, 2021).

The failed state is the deliberate outcome of the government's actions to dismantle the previously established institutional framework, leading to the state's inability to ensure security and protection for its population. This incapacity is particularly striking considering that during the more than twenty years of the so-called Bolivarian revolution, the state apparatus expanded both in size and in the areas it aimed to control. In Fukuyama's terms, Venezuela witnessed an expansion of state coverage driven by a statist and centralizing vision that sought to restrict individual rights, hinder the role of civil society, diminish the authority of local government entities such as municipalities and governorships, and limit

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private sector participation in the economy. However, this expansion was accompanied by a decline in the state's capacity to effectively implement public policies and ensure not only security, protection, and law enforcement, but also the provision of essential public services such as electricity, water, education, and healthcare (Naim & Toro, 2019). As a result, the state failed to provide even the most basic level of protection to its citizens, leading to a complex humanitarian crisis (UNOCHA, 2023), an exodus of 7.1 million refugees and migrants (UNHCR, 2022; R4V, 2022), and one of the highest rates of violent deaths in the world (UNODC, 2021).

The failed state additionally provided a foundation for the establishment of a parallel governance structure (Bevir, 2012), allowing the national government to operate beyond the constitutional limits and institutional checks and balances. These parallel structures have emerged in various domains. For instance, in the healthcare sector, the Barrio Adentro mission, implemented by the Cuban government, created a distinct parallel structure alongside the Ministry of Health. This parallelism was evident in the separate reporting of epidemiological statistics, with one column for the Ministry and another for the Barrio Adentro mission. Similarly, in the military realm, the creation of the "Milicias" established a parallel force that operated independently of the Ministry of Defense, existing alongside the regular army. Additionally, in the field of citizen security, the Colectivos emerged as parallel actors alongside the official police forces, further blurring the lines of authority and control.

The Colectivos were utilized to politically repress demonstrations, as well as to establish a network of social and political control that would monitor and identify opposition members, transmitting this information to security agencies or suppressing social protests (Provea, 2019). The Colectivos emerged as both a symbol of protection and a tool of state repression. They have served as a facade where roles are interchangeably assumed with the police, at times with collective members donning police uniforms and integrating into the police force. Conversely, there are instances where police officers disguise themselves as Colectivos to carry out actions that exceed legal boundaries. It is due to this role that political affiliation carries significant weight in assessing their legitimacy in the findings.

It is crucial to emphasize that despite the state's failure, individuals still uphold a sense of law and the principles of the rule of law. This explains why there is a prevailing belief in the police, as people hold onto an idealized image of what the police should represent, despite their failure to fulfill their primary duty of protecting the citizens and instead prioritizing the safeguarding of the government. Simultaneously, this has spurred the emergence of diverse non-state armed groups as a means of self-defense, as they aim to compensate for the inadequate protection and lack of legitimacy exhibited by the police and collectives.

Finally, the differences in the attitudes towards the police and Colectivos vary slightly across different groups. Socio-economic, socio-political and territorial variables help to explain some of these variation. The regression models implemented in this study showed that political affiliation and geographical location significantly shape attitudes towards the police and Colectivos in Venezuela. Chavistas show greater acceptance, while the opposition and politically unaligned express stronger rejection. Remarkably, the politically unaligned displayed the highest degree of criticism towards both the police and the Colectivos, rejecting these groups even more than the opposition. Geographically, attitudes vary due to differing experiences and actions of the police and Colectivos across regions.

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