

Scholar of Venezuelan politics ‘tells it like it is’

February 14, 2018 3:15 PM

Faith Dawson fdawson@tulane.edu



David Smilde is the Charles A. and Leo M. Favrot Professor of Human Relations in the Sociology Department of the Tulane University School of Liberal Arts. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

David Smilde began researching Venezuela as a graduate student on a Fulbright scholarship. Twenty-five years later, he is one of the most sought-after experts on Venezuelan politics.

Smilde, the Charles A. and Leo M. Favrot Professor of Human Relations in the [Sociology Department](#) of the Tulane University [School of Liberal Arts](#), is also a senior fellow of the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), a nongovernmental organization. He serves as the curator of WOLA's blog, [Venezuelan Politics and Human Rights](#).

The blog is a source of independent analysis of Venezuela and is read by journalists and policy makers.

Tulane University

According to Smilde, Venezuela's current President Nicolás Maduro, and his predecessor, the late Hugo Chávez, both chipped away at the country's democratic institutions and concentrated power. At the same time they addressed poverty and made people feel included. Smilde said it's important to examine these events, using social-scientific tools such as the analysis of poverty and inequality.

"If we can drive the discussion to become more concrete and accurate, it can oblige political actors to play the democratic game, by which we mean holding elections, respecting checks and balances, dialogue and nonviolence," Smilde said. "Democratic shortcuts or deviations from democracy are enabled by conspiracy theories and misrepresentations that allow political actors to say 'My opponent is not democratic; therefore I'm not going to be democratic.'"

Smilde has written [opinion pieces](#) for major publications and testified before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the effectiveness of sanctions. He has also written three books on Venezuela and has brought many Venezuelan scholars to Tulane to talk and write about their experiences.

"There might be a time when I dislike what a government is doing, but if it seems to be working I need to say so," said Smilde about his writings. "Likewise, there might times when I like what a government is doing, but if the evidence contradicts their claims of success, I'm going to tell it like it is."