



Venezuela — Va-PoReg Country Report

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[officially known as the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela]

10/12/1899 Start Military Autocracy: Venezuela gained its independence from Spain on 07/05/1811.¹ Male suffrage was introduced in 1858. On 10/12/1899 Venezuela became a military autocracy under Cipriano Castro. Juan Vicente Gómez was vice president in this time. After Castro had to leave the country due to health issues, Gómez became president with US support.² From 12/19/1908 to 08/13/1913 Castros tried to overthrow Juan Vincente Gómez several times after his health had improved.³ These coups were not successful and Gómez was able to remain president of Venezuela.⁴ Gomez largely ruled indirectly eliminating free press and opposition until his death on 12/17/1935. Following the death of the president, the Council of Ministers appointed Minister of War Eleazar Lopez Contreras as provisional president, pending confirmation by a compliant Congress on 01/02/1936. His inauguration was met with protests, which were swiftly suppressed, and all forms of “open political activity” were outlawed in 1937. In 1941, Minister of War General Isaías Medina Angarita assumed the presidency after Lopez (Deas 1986: 676-78, Ewell 1991: 727, 732-33, Casey et al. 2020: 17). Political liberties were absent according to LIED. V-Dem’s PCLI indicates political liberties as absent until 1935, as not really present from 1936 to 1940, in an ambiguous state from 1942 to 1944 and as somewhat present for 1945. According to LIED, no multiparty executive and legislative elections were held in 1900. From 1901 to 1913, executive and legislative elections were held, yet they were not classified as multiparty. From 1914 onward, LIED records only legislative elections, which were not multiparty. No executive elections were held during this specified period. From 1922 onward, both executive and legislative elections were conducted, yet they were not classified as multiparty. From 1936 to 1944, LIED records multiparty executive and legislative elections. Until 1935, V-Dem’s JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were absent, and V-Dem’s LCE is similarly interpreted as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also absent. From 1936 onwards, V-Dem’s JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, and V-Dem’s LCE is similarly interpreted as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also limited.

10/18/1945 End Military Autocracy/Start Non-Electoral Transitional Regime: Medina Angarita was deposed and Rómulo Betancourt seized power in a junta (Lachapelle et al. 2020: 17, Ewell 1991: 742). On this date, President Isaías Medina Angarita was overthrown by a combined force of a military rebellion and a popular movement led by the political party Democratic Action (Acción Democrática). Unlike typical military coups that establish a junta of officers, this event established a mixed Revolutionary Government Junta led by the civilian Rómulo Betancourt as interim president. This period, known historically as El Trienio Adeco, was explicitly transitional in nature. Its primary objective was not to establish permanent autocratic rule, but to prepare the country for multiparty elections.⁵ In 1946 universal female suffrage was introduced.⁶ Polity5 doesn’t provide a classification until 1935. From 1936 onward, the executive encountered slight limitations on decision-making power imposed by other institutions. According to LIED, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during the specified period. In the specified timeframe, LIED identifies political liberties as absent, whereas V-Dem’s PCLI is classified by us as suggesting that political liberties are somewhat present.

10/27/1946 End Non-Electoral Transitional Regime/Start (Male) Electoral Hybrid Regime: On this date, Constituent Assembly elections were held in Venezuela, following a coup the year before which launched El Trienio Adeco. The result was a victory for Democratic Action, which won 137 of the 160 seats in the Assembly. Voter turnout was 86.6%.⁷ Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held in 1947, which aligns with the observations of LIED. The election was considered competitive by LIED. However, no cleanliness was scored according to V-Dem's CEI. Nevertheless, the overall conditions were free and fair (V-Dem EF&FI). Besides, LIED classifies the political liberties as absent, but V-Dem's PCLI points out that they are somewhat present. On 07/05/1947 a new constitution was ratified. Regarded as the nation's first genuinely democratic constitution, it introduced direct and universally free elections. Notably, it was the first Venezuelan constitution to grant women's suffrage, along with extending voting rights to illiterate individuals and all citizens aged 18 and above.⁸ For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were moderate, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were limited. As per Polity5's classification, the executive's authority was subject to minor institutional constraints during this time.

12/14/1947 Continuation Electoral Hybrid Regime: On 12/14/1947 presidential elections with universal suffrage were held, which were considered free and fair. It was won by Rómulo Gallegos of Democratic Action and therefore saw Democratic Action formally elected to office.⁹ Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held in 1947, which aligns with the observations of LIED. LIED indicates the elections as competitive. They scored somewhat cleanliness for this year (V-Dem CEI). According to V-Dem's EF&FI the elections were free and fair. Political liberties were absent according to LIED, and V-Dem's PCLI changed to an ambiguous score. According to Polity5, during this period, the executive encountered slight limitations on decision-making power imposed by other institutions. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were moderate, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were limited.

11/24/1948 End Electoral Hybrid Regime/Start Military Autocracy: President Rómulo Gallegos reduced military influence in the government and signed a polarizing land reform. The loss of influence of the military was the motivation behind a military coup led by Lieutenant Colonel Delgado Chalbaud and Lieutenant Colonel Pérez Jiménez¹⁰, that ousted the elected government of president Gallegos, suspended the constitution and Congress, and installed a military ruling group (Burggraaff 1972: 101-9, 115, Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 105).¹¹ From 1948 to 1950 Chalbaud headed the junta. In 1950 Pérez Jiménez achieved de facto control. Political liberties were absent according to LIED and V-Dem's PCLI until 1958, when the PCLI switched into a range that, in our interpretation, indicates that political liberties were somewhat present. As per Polity5's classification, the executive's authority was subject to minor institutional constraints during this time. Until 1949, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, and V-Dem's LCE is similarly interpreted as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also limited. From 1950 onwards, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were absent, whereas V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were limited. According to LIED, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held from 1949 to 1951. Thereafter only legislative elections were held, but they were not categorized as multiparty. No executive elections were present.

01/23/1958 End Military Autocracy/Start Non-Electoral Transitional Regime: Marcos Pérez Jiménez resigned and fled the country in response to weeks of massive demonstrations by several sectors of society that caused the military to abandon him (Trinkunas 2000: 89). A military transitional government agreed to include civilian political leaders in an interim government and began plans to restore democracy (Taylor 1968: 52-60, Burggraaff 1972: 154-166, Coronil 1997: 65-66, Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 105).¹²

12/07/1958 End Non-Electoral Transitional Regime/Start Electoral Democracy: On this date, free and fair general elections were held.¹³ Following the fall of the Pérez Jiménez dictatorship in 1958, Venezuela entered a period of electoral democracy underpinned by universal suffrage, elite pacts, and regular elections. Suffrage was inclusive from the outset and remained stable throughout the period. Reforms in 1989 decentralized the system by introducing direct elections of governors and mayors (Ellner 2003), while the 1999 constitution under Chávez expanded participatory mechanisms such as referenda, including the 2004 recall vote. Although these instruments promised deepened democracy, their use remained largely executive-driven. Political competition from 1958 through the 1980s was framed by the Punto Fijo Pact, which ensured power alternation between Acción Democrática (AD) and COPEI while excluding radical actors like the Communist Party (Karl 1987). The Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV) was deliberately excluded from the power-sharing arrangements among the signatory parties (AD, COPEI, and Unión Republicana Democrática) due to its Marxist-Leninist program and alignment with Soviet and Cuban influences, despite its role in the resistance against the Pérez Jiménez dictatorship. After the PCV and its splinter Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR) launched armed insurgencies rejecting the electoral process, including the 1962 naval rebellion and subsequent guerrilla campaigns, President Rómulo Betancourt banned both parties on 05/09/1962 (Karl 1987). This exclusion of anti-democratic extremist parties is defensible under democratic principles and does not constitute a democratic deficit requiring downgrading to hybrid regime status. However, the Punto Fijo system evolved into a restrictive two-party dominance termed "partyarchy" (partidocracia) (Coppedge 1994), which constrained pluralism through AD and COPEI's extensive control over intermediary institutions including labor unions, peasant federations, and media outlets via clientelistic networks sustained by oil revenues. This system systematically limited political space for actors outside the AD-COPEI duopoly while maintaining competitive elections with regular power alternation. Despite these liberal-democratic deficits, electoral authorization functioned effectively throughout this period: competitive multiparty elections translated into real executive alternation, including COPEI victories in 1968 (Caldera 29.1%) and 1978 (Herrera Campins 46.6%) defeating incumbent AD governments, Rafael Caldera's 1993 victory outside the AD-COPEI duopoly on a National Convergence platform (30.5%, defeating AD's 23.6% and COPEI's 22.7%), and Hugo Chávez's decisive 1998 defeat of the traditional parties (56.5%). The 1993 election is particularly significant as it demonstrates that parties outside the duopoly possessed realistic paths to executive power: Caldera won on a platform explicitly attacking the "partidocracia," proving electoral pathways to alternation remained structurally open even to anti-establishment candidates. When opposition candidates won presidential elections, they assumed office with full constitutional powers and could implement their governing programs, as evidenced by Caldera's 1968 policy changes including guerrilla negotiations, his 1993 anti-neoliberal agenda implementation, and Chávez's 1998 ability to convene a Constituent Assembly. The patronage system created advantages for AD-COPEI through control of state resources and clientelistic networks, but these advantages operated through resource distribution rather than electoral manipulation preventing opposition competition; when voters rejected traditional parties due to economic crisis and corruption (1993, 1998), patronage networks could not prevent opposition victories. Venezuela therefore qualifies as Electoral Democracy rather than Liberal Democracy during this period, as electoral institutions produced legitimate power alternation while liberal constraints on executive authority and associational autonomy remained structurally weak due to pervasive party penetration of civil society. The system maintained competitive multiparty elections with high participation (consistently 80-90%+ through 1988, declining to 60.2% in 1993), peaceful transfers of power following electoral defeats, narrow victory margins demonstrating genuine competition (Caldera won 1968 with only 29.1%, Caldera won 1993 with only 30.5%), and international recognition of electoral integrity. Liberal legitimation, while underdeveloped compared to consolidated democracies, functioned sufficiently to provide meaningful though limited constraint on executive power: the Supreme Court maintained independence from the executive through 1998 (court-packing occurred only after 1999 constitutional change), legislative oversight functioned (evidenced by the 1993 impeachment of President Carlos Andrés Pérez for corruption), media freedom allowed criticism of government and coverage of opposition viewpoints, and civil society organizations maintained autonomous functions despite party

network penetration. By the 1990s, economic crisis and corruption scandals discredited the traditional parties, culminating in the collapse of the party system and the rise of Hugo Chávez in 1998 (Morgan 2011). Executive constraints initially relied on a mix of constitutional checks and informal power-sharing within dominant parties. Though the 1961 constitution formalized horizontal accountability, presidential power remained strong. Episodes like Caldera's 1994 suspension of constitutional rights revealed the fragility of institutional checks in times of crisis. Civil and political rights were comparatively robust during the early democratic period. Venezuela became a haven for exiles, and freedoms of expression, association, and the press were largely respected. However, state repression during guerrilla conflicts in the 1960s and the violent suppression of protests during the 1989 Caracazo revealed the limits of rights protections. V-Dem's CEI declares the election with a somewhat cleanliness between 1959 and 1998. In 1999 cleanliness was present. V-Dem's EF&FI indicates free and fair elections from 1958 to 1962. Afterwards, the overall conditions scored somewhat freedom and fairness for ten years, from 1973 again free and fair elections until 1999 are indicated. As per FH's classification for the period between 1972 and 1991, the country is considered free with a score ranging from 2 to 4, which we also interpret as free in our framework. As classified by FH for 1992 to 1995, the country is partly free with a score ranging from 6 to 7, which we place in the rather free category. According to FH, for the years 1996 to 1998, the country is rated as free with a score of 5, which we interpret as rather free in our framework. Political liberties were present from 1970-1997, following LIED, whereas V-Dem's PCLI indicates their presence between 1959 and 1998. According to the Polity5 indicator, from 1958 to 1967, the executive faced substantial limitations on decision-making power. From 1968 to 1998, the executive's constraints fell into Intermediate Category 3, between substantial limitations and executive parity or subordination. Until 1998, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were comprehensive.

12/30/1999 End Electoral Democracy/Start Electoral Hybrid Regime: The entry into force of the Bolivarian Constitution, approved by 72% in a referendum on 12/15/1999, marked the transition from electoral democracy to an electoral hybrid regime. While suffrage remained inclusive and elections continued to be held regularly, the new constitutional framework systematically weakened liberal-constitutional constraints. Key changes included the abolition of the bicameral legislature in favor of a unicameral National Assembly, expansion from three to five branches of government, and transitional provisions allowing simple-majority appointment of Supreme Court justices, circumventing the constitutionally mandated two-thirds requirement (Corrales/Penfold 2007). In practice, the 1999-2000 transitional National Assembly packed the Supreme Court with government loyalists using simple majority votes rather than the constitutionally mandated two-thirds supermajority. On 04/12/2002 military and businessmen plotted a coup to evict Chavez during ongoing protests against controversial bills concerning oil and land reform. Opposition leader Pedro Carmona seized the interim presidency and declared the constitution and legislature suspended. On 04/13/2002 a pro-Chavez street movement and sectors of the military peacefully evicted the coup plotters less than 48 hours later from power and restored Chavez to constitutional rule in a counter coup.¹⁴ This is counted as a failed coup and not a regime period. Subsequent court-packing legislation in 2004 expanded the Court from 20 to 32 justices and enabled their removal by simple majority, completing judicial subordination. Under Chávez, despite formal guarantees, freedoms were curtailed through legalism: the 2004 media law, politicization of the judiciary, and blacklisting of referendum petitioners signaled the shift toward a hybrid regime (Corrales 2015, Hawkins 2016). Criminal Code amendments in March 2005 extended *desacato* provisions criminalizing criticism of public officials, systematically restricting media freedom.¹⁵ Despite these developments, the regime remained on the hybrid side of the democratic threshold. Opposition parties retained legal status, competed in elections, and achieved substantial electoral victories with real institutional effects. The opposition won 7 of 23 governorships in 2000 regional elections, 5 of 22 governorships (41% popular vote) in 2008 regional elections, 64 of 165 National Assembly seats (47% vote) in 2010, and most decisively, 112 of 167 National Assembly seats (58% vote, achieving two-thirds supermajority) in December 2015

parliamentary elections. Opposition candidates controlled strategically important states including Zulia, Miranda, and Carabobo throughout the period. The 2004 presidential recall referendum, though resulting in Chávez's retention (58%), demonstrated genuine electoral competitiveness as international observers confirmed the electoral process's basic integrity despite government advantages (Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014). Multiparty executive and legislative elections continued to be held, in line with LIED classifications, and opposition forces won governorships, parliamentary seats, and nationally significant offices throughout the 2000s and early 2010s. Freedom House maintained Venezuela's "Partly Free" classification throughout 1999-2016, consistent with electoral hybrid regime status. The December 2005 parliamentary election boycott by opposition parties, while handing the government all seats, represented a strategic opposition decision under manipulated conditions rather than regime-imposed exclusion of competitors. The opposition returned to electoral participation in 2006 presidential elections and subsequent contests, demonstrating that electoral pathways remained accessible. On 04/19/2013 Nicolás Maduro won the presidential election to formally succeed Chávez (Lansford 2021). A constitutional crisis followed. V-Dem's CEI shows the two following years after 1999 the scores fell back to somewhat cleanliness before they switched again to ambiguous since 2002. V-Dem's EF&FI indicates since 2000 the elections slide back to somewhat free and fair conditions. Per FH's scoring for 1999-2001, the country is classified as partly free with a score of 8, which we categorize as rather not free. As classified by FH for 2002-2004, the country is partly free with a score ranging from 6 to 7, which we place in the rather free category. According to FH, for 2005 to 2008, the country is partly free with a score of 8, which we interpret as rather not free. As classified by FH for 2009-2016, the country scores between 9 and 10 as not free, which we interpret as rather not free. Since 1998, LIED identifies political liberties again as absent, while V-Dem's PCLI is classified by us as indicating that political liberties are somewhat present until 2009, before they switched to ambiguous until 2015. Since 2016, political rights are not really achieved. From 1999 to 2005, the executive's authority was significantly constrained by institutional checks. From 2006 to 2008, the executive experienced moderate limitations on authority, placing it in the second intermediate category. From 2009 to 2012, the executive faced slight limitations on power during this period. From 2013 to 2016, the executive's constraints were categorized as Intermediate Category 2, between slight and substantial limitations. In 1999, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating moderate constraints on the executive. From 2000 to 2015, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also limited. From 2016 to 2017, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were absent, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were limited.

08/04/2017 End Electoral Hybrid Regime/Start Electoral Autocracy: The decisive regime transition occurred when the Constituent National Assembly (ANC), elected in a boycotted July 2017 election, assumed power on this date. This transition represents strategic restructuring by the incumbent government, as the Maduro government deliberately used constitutional mechanisms to nullify opposition electoral victories and eliminate institutional constraints. On 08/08/2017, the ANC declared itself the supreme governing authority, and between 08/18 and 08/19/2017 permanently stripped the opposition-led National Assembly of all legislative powers, completing the institutional nullification of the opposition's 2015 electoral victory. This transition followed a clear preparatory sequence beginning with the Supreme Court's removal of four opposition deputies on 01/11/2016, eliminating the opposition's two-thirds supermajority, and TSJ Ruling 156 of 03/29/2017 transferring legislative authority to the Court before partial reversal on 04/01/2017 following mass protests. From this point forward, electoral victories ceased to provide any institutional capacity to translate into governing authority. Although elections continued to be held, opposition success was rendered institutionally irrelevant, satisfying the defining criterion of electoral autocracy. Venezuela's status by Freedom House declined in 2017 from partly free to not free, with scores between 11 and 14 placing the country in the not free category for the rest of the assessed regime period. Subsequent elections occurred under conditions of systematic candidate disqualification, media repression, and institutional subordination,

with V-Dem's CEI indicating no cleanliness at all since 2017 and V-Dem's EF&FI showing no freedom and fairness since 2017. Maduro was re-elected in 2018 in presidential balloting marked by fraud and voter intimidation (Lansford 2021), with major opposition candidates disqualified and the MUD coalition boycotting; the 2020 parliamentary elections, boycotted by the opposition, produced 30.5% turnout and restored PSUV control of a powerless National Assembly. A constitutional crisis followed when opposition leader Guaidó announced on 01/23/2019 that he was formally assuming the role of interim president under Article 233 of the Constitution of Venezuela, with the backing of the National Assembly, until free elections could be held. He received formal recognition of legitimacy from almost 60 governments worldwide, including the United States, Canada and various Latin American and European countries. However, other nations, including Russia, China, Iran, Syria, Cuba and Turkey continued to recognize Maduro. On 01/06/2021 the European Union stopped recognizing Guaidó as president, without recognizing Maduro as the legitimate president, and threatening further sanctions. Guaidó was not able to remove Maduro from power.¹⁶ The Venezuelan presidential election on 07/28/2024, held amid prior disqualification of leading opposition figures, became an international flashpoint. The government-controlled electoral council (CNE) declared incumbent Nicolás Maduro the winner for a third term, but this result was immediately rejected by the unified opposition and much of the international community. Independent analysis and parallel vote tabulations showed strong evidence of a landslide victory for opposition candidate Edmundo González, with the CNE failing to publish supporting vote tallies. The contested outcome triggered a massive crackdown on dissent, culminating in an arrest warrant for González, who was forced to seek asylum in Spain. This highly polarized event reinforced Venezuela's authoritarian trajectory and deepened its political crisis. Executive and institutional constraints collapsed completely during this period: from 2016 to 2017, V-Dem's JCE indicates that judicial constraints on the executive were absent while legislative constraints were limited; from 2017 onward, both judicial and legislative constraints on the executive were absent according to V-Dem's JCE and LCE. Polity5 recorded slight limitations on executive decision-making power from 2017 to 2018 but includes no data for the following period.

Electoral Autocracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Additional sources (Alvarez 2006, Boeckh 2003, Boeckh 2005, Brewer-Carías 2010, Coppedge 1994, Coppedge 2005, Kornblith 2006, Myerson 2008, Welsch 2005, Zimmerling 2005, Peeler 1985, Schultze 2000, Sonntag 2001, Zagorski 2003)

Notes

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venezuelan_independence

² <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Juan-Vicente-Gomez>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juan_Vicente_G%C3%B3mez

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cipriano_Castro

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/El_Trienio_Adeco

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_suffrage

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1946_Venezuelan_Constituent_Assembly_election

⁸ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constitution_of_Venezuela_\(1947\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constitution_of_Venezuela_(1947))

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1947_Venezuelan_general_election

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcos_P%C3%A9rez_Jim%C3%A9nez

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1948_Venezuelan_coup_d%27%C3%A9tat

¹² <https://choosedemocracy.us/case-study-venezuela-january-1958/#.Y480uH2ZMuU>

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1958_Venezuelan_general_election

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2002_Venezuelan_coup_d%27%C3%A9tat_attempt

¹⁵ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2005/03/23/venezuela-curbs-free-expression-tightened>

¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juan_Guaid%C3%B3

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