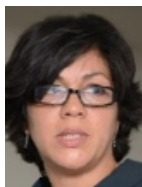


# Venezuela elections 2018: evaluating electoral conditions in an authoritarian regime



*Participating in elections under authoritarian regimes can reap rewards, but electoral conditions in Venezuela have degenerated so drastically that a Maduro victory in 2018 could not be considered democratic, write [Griselda Colina](#) (Observatorio Global de Comunicación y Democracia) and [Jennifer McCoy](#) (Georgia State University).*

As Venezuelans furiously debate whether to go to the polls in an election heavily skewed in favour of President Nicolás Maduro, we must consider what elections mean in an authoritarian regime.



Nicolás Maduro has increasingly ignored the provisions of the constitution and electoral law ([Eneas De Troya, CC BY 2.0](#))

Elections can defeat autocrats in some conditions, mainly when the autocrat believes that they will win and when some factions within the ruling coalition stand up to efforts to commit fraud as a means of staying in power.

## Learning from elections in authoritarian conditions

This was the case in Chile when General Augusto Pinochet lost the 1988 plebiscite to extend his mandate for another eight years. There civil society organisations mobilised voters before members of Pinochet's military junta along with the United States [quashed](#) his brief flirtation with the idea of fraud.

Skewed election processes can also undermine the claim to democratic legitimacy of autocrats, even when the autocrat wins. Russian leader Vladimir Putin's victories in 2012 and 2018 were marred by demonstrated [ballot stuffing](#), the barring of genuine opposition, and inflated turn-out numbers. Thus, even though he remains in power, few international observers believe his mandate is based on competitive elections.

As [Andreas Schedler wrote](#) fifteen years ago, in electoral authoritarian regimes, the autocrat holds manipulated elections to claim democratic legitimacy while ensuring that the incumbent will win. An opposition strategy involves a two-level game, as opponents participate in each election with the chance that they might overwhelm the manipulations and actually win, while also working to change the rules of the larger political game.

Even when they lose, opponents of the regime can [unmask and delegitimise](#) the autocrat's democratic veneer if he or she is forced to resort to fraud and repression to stay in power. Over time, the growing illegitimacy may either force the autocrat to negotiate a change in the rules of the game or produce a split in the ruling coalition, as occurred in Chile.

## Electoral conditions in Venezuela's 2018 elections

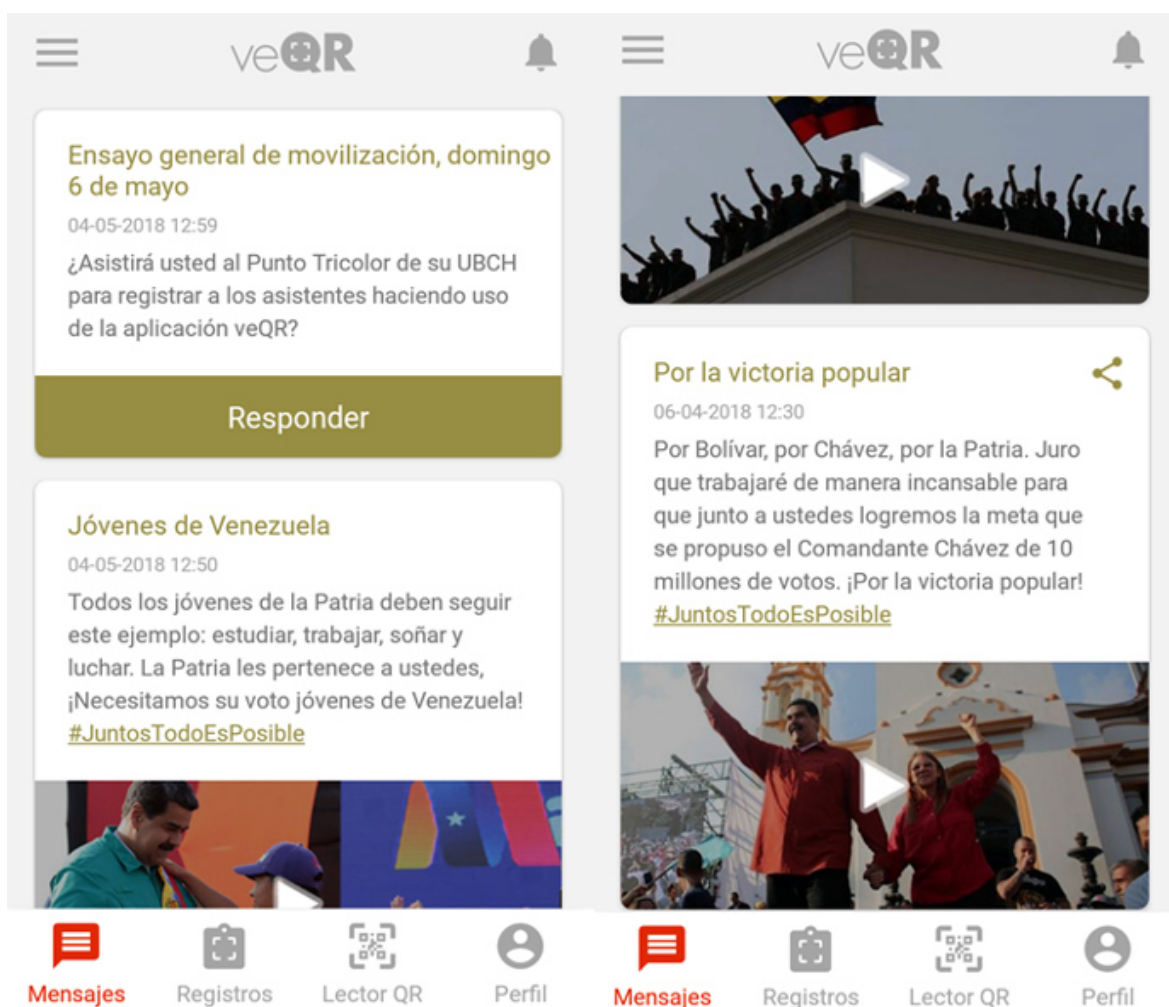
In Venezuela, even with extremely unfavourable conditions, a united opposition has in the past managed to win elections for important mayorships and governorships, as well as dramatically winning a two-thirds majority in the 2015 legislative elections.

For the elections on 20 May 2018, however, the opposition has been split between an important segment calling for a boycott and a smaller camp backing an electoral bid by Chavista-turned-dissident Henri Falcón. Maduro thus starts with a huge advantage even before any manipulation.

How should we interpret the government's claim to have met opposition demands for early elections and improved electoral conditions, meaning that any victory should be considered legitimate?

Fundamentally, the government is seeking to keep itself in power through a [systematic effort to weaken the vote as a democratic instrument](#).

On the one hand, public institutions have been transformed into promoters of abstention and distrust of the process. And on the other, they have acted as agents of voter coercion through discretionary provision of social assistance linked to voting (as illustrated below).



Screen captures showing government use of the public social-assistance app VeQR in support of Maduro's candidacy. VeQR is linked to the ruling party's Fatherland Card. (6 April 2018, left, and 4 May 2018, right)

Via the Supreme Court and the National Electoral Council, the government has also repeatedly violated its own electoral laws and constitution since 2016:

- holding in contempt the opposition-controlled National Assembly
- annulling the constitutional right to petition for a presidential recall referendum
- postponing governor elections
- subordinating the supposedly independent electoral branch to an illegitimate National Constituent Assembly

In 2017, the government resorted to even more explicitly [fraudulent](#) and repressive measures: they inflated the number of electronic votes registered in the unilateral exercise to select the National Constituent Assembly; they refused to install a duly-elected opposition governor; and they manually changed the votes in the election of another governor.

After the recall referendum effort was quashed in October 2016, the opposition and many in the international community called for early elections that would cut short Maduro's term, scheduled to end January 2019.

However, as negotiations over electoral conditions in the Dominican Republic in late 2017 and early 2018 floundered, the government unilaterally called early elections, without accompanying measures to ensure a competitive process.

This caught the opposition flat-footed and left them unable to select a candidate and campaign competitively. A new, express legitimisation process ordered by the National Constituent Assembly eliminated the largest opposition political parties and coalition.

## **Cosmetic improvements amid democratic degeneration**

The government did make cosmetic improvements to the process, such as reinstating voting centres it had closed for the 2017 elections and promising fairer access to the media in a country with few independent media. But the Electoral Council's actions have left the process with a number of fundamental flaws:

- A state of exception remains in place giving the government the authority to restrict rights, including public meetings and rallies.
- Major opposition candidates and parties remain barred from participating, in violation of Venezuela's own constitution and electoral law.
- The voter registration period has been shortened from 156 days in the last regular presidential election (2012) to 20 days.
- The time allowed for notification and training of randomly selected voting-table clerks and regional electoral bodies has been cut drastically, undermining the ability of citizens to serve in their intended role as independent watchdog. If the citizens selected fail to appear, the voters first in line – often from the ruling party – replace them.
- Voter coercion is enabled by a new identification system and the presence of government party “check-in” points that violate electoral laws: the “Fatherland Card”, which offers access to social services, was introduced in the vote for the July 2017 Constituent Assembly, and in 2018 voters are being [actively encouraged](#) to bring it along with their national ID to party “check-in” points. Since the ruling party has access to the VeQR platform associated with this card (as illustrated above), a link is created between voting, the government, and the possibility of losing access to vital subsidised food bags.

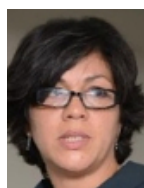
In the weeks leading up to the vote, some influential figures within the opposition have called on supporters to vote for Falcón. Others have reacted to the wider opposition boycott by expressing their decision to participate but without explicitly endorsing Falcón.

When Venezuelans go to the polls on Sunday, a massive movement of citizens towards participation may yet surprise both the government and the boycotting opposition. If the past is any indication, however, the abstentionism provoked by parts of the opposition and the government's control of the process – along with the cruel incentives for a hungry population to cling to access to subsidised food and state jobs – is likely to produce another victory for Maduro.

Those watching on from outside Venezuela should not be fooled by the government's claims of a democratic victory.

*Notes:*

- *The views expressed here are of the authors and do not reflect the position of the Centre or of the LSE*
- *This article was modified on 18 May 2018 to clarify that the Fatherland Card is no longer permitted as an alternative to national ID when voting*
- *Please read our [Comments Policy](#) before commenting*



**Griselda Colina** – *Observatorio Global de Comunicación y Democracia*

Griselda Colina is Director of the Observatorio Global de Comunicación y Democracia (OGCD), a Venezuelan NGO founded in 2015. From 2010 to 2015 she served as the Technical Coordinator of the Carter Center Office in Venezuela, where she coordinated the writing of the Carter Center study mission electoral reports in 2012 and 2013. She also authored the Carter Center's Media Monitoring Manual and the 2012 Freedom of Expression in Venezuela for Freedom House.



**Jennifer McCoy** – *Georgia State University*

Dr Jennifer McCoy is Distinguished University Professor of Political Science at Georgia State University. A specialist on democratisation and polarisation, mediation and conflict prevention, election processes and election observation, as well as wider Latin American politics, Dr McCoy has authored or edited six books and dozens of articles. A long-time Venezuela analyst, her latest book (with Francisco Diez) is [International Mediation in Venezuela](#) (USIP, 2011).