

Polity IV Country Report 2010: Venezuela

<table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 15%;">Score:</td> <td style="width: 15%;">2009</td> <td style="width: 15%;">2010</td> <td style="width: 15%;">Change</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Polity:</td> <td>-3</td> <td>-3</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Democ:</td> <td>1</td> <td>1</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Autoc:</td> <td>4</td> <td>4</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Durable:</td> <td></td> <td>1</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Tentative:</td> <td></td> <td>Yes</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Score:	2009	2010	Change	Polity:	-3	-3	0	Democ:	1	1	0	Autoc:	4	4	0	Durable:		1		Tentative:		Yes		
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SCODE	VEN	CCODE	101	Date of Report	1 June 2011																				
Polity IV Component Variables																									
XRREG	XRCOMP	XROPEN	XCONST	PARREG	PARCOMP																				
2	1	4	3	3	3																				
Date of Most Recent Polity Transition (3 or more point change)																									
End Date		17 December 2006		Begin Date																					
				16 February 2009																					
Polity Fragmentation: No																									
Constitution	1999																								
Executive(s)	President Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías (PSUV); initially directly elected in February 1999; reelected under new constitution, July 2000; most recently reelected, 3 December 2006, 62.9%																								
Legislature	Unicameral: National Assembly (165 seats, 3 reserved for indigenous peoples; directly elected; most recent elections, 26 September 2010) United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) and allies: 98 Other parties: 67																								
Judiciary	Supreme Tribunal of Justice																								

Narrative Description:¹

Executive Recruitment: Designation (3)

For over 30 years, starting in 1958, Venezuelan politics was defined by the peaceful rotation of power between the two establishment parties, the Christian Democratic Party (COPEI) and the Democratic Action party (AD). However, in late 1980s Venezuela was plagued by depressed oil revenues, a failing economy, and increasing popular dissatisfaction and political turmoil. There were two unsuccessful military coup attempts in 1992 (one led on 4 February 1992, by the current president, Hugo Chávez) followed by the resignation in March 1993 of President Carlos Andrés Pérez after his impeachment for embezzlement (the legislature elected Senator Ramon Velásquez to serve out Pérez's term). Rafael Caldera Rodríguez, who had led the movement to force Pérez's resignation, formed a National Convergence coalition and won the December 1993 presidential election, becoming the first president not elected from either the COPEI or AD

¹ The research described in this report was sponsored by the Political Instability Task Force (PITF). The PITF is funded by the Central Intelligence Agency. The views expressed herein are the authors' alone and do not represent the views of the US Government.

parties. Five years later, in the November 1998 legislative elections, a left-wing populist coalition, the Patriotic Front led by the Movement for the Fifth Republic (MVR), captured a plurality of seats in the lower house and in the December 1998 presidential elections, MVR candidate Hugo Chávez swept into power with 56% of the vote.

The first order of business for the new administration was an April 1999 referendum authorizing the formation of a Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution; upon its approval, elections to the assembly were held in July 1999 that resulted in the Patriotic Front capturing 121 of 128 contested seats. The new constitution was approved by a 71.2% margin in a December 1999 referendum. On 4 January 2000, the bicameral legislature was dissolved and replaced by a 21-member interim body and Chávez remained in control of the transition until new elections could be held. The elections were originally planned for 28 May 2000, but were postponed by the court until 30 July of that year to allow more time to prepare. Chávez won the presidential vote with a 59.7% margin in a runoff election despite the fact that both establishment parties (COPEI and AD) threw their support behind the challenger. Chavez survived a recall referendum spearheaded by opposition parties Fedecamaras (the Venezuelan Federation of Associations and Chambers of Commerce and Industry, an employers' organization), and the Venezuelan Workers' Confederation (CTV), a labor organization).

Tensions in Venezuela triggered a crisis in April 2002 when a general strike was called and mass protests resulted in a violent confrontation and the deaths of 13 anti-government protesters. On 12 April, a group of senior military officers announced that President Chávez had resigned and had been taken into custody. The leaders of the coup installed Pedro Carmon as provisional president. When Carmon attempted to dissolve the legislature and the courts and suspend the constitution he lost crucial support amongst military leaders. In an attempt to regain support by convening the National Assembly, the lawmakers unseated Carmon and replaced him with Diosdado Cabello who had been Chávez's vice president. Cabello immediately returned the office of president to Chávez, who had been rescued by loyalists, in a public ceremony. In December 2005 Chavez supporters in the parliament, who controlled all 167 seats in the legislature, indicated their willingness to remove the cap on the number of times that Chavez can run for the office of president. In December 2006 Hugo Chavez won a third term in office, garnering 63% of the vote. On 15 February 2009, a public referendum was held that approved constitutional changes that further concentrated power in the presidency and removed term limits on public office these changes were enacted the following day.

Executive Constraints: Slight to Moderate Limitations (3)

The new Venezuelan constitution that came into effect on 30 December 1999, increased executive authority substantially; it increases executive control over the central bank, the military, and the legislature. The constitution replaces the old bicameral legislature with a unicameral assembly, eliminating the Senate which had been controlled by establishment politicians and "lifetime senators." The Patriotic Front governing coalition in the legislature provides a two-thirds legislative majority for the Chávez administration. In November 2000, the legislature passed an enabling law granting the president power, for one year, to rule by decree in areas of industrial and economic policy and government administration. Executive authority was further increased in December 2000 when a national referendum authorized the president to suspend union leaders and schedule elections for their replacement, thus eliminating potentially dangerous opponents. A ceiling to presidential power may have been reached in May 2001 when the ruling coalition's second largest party, the Movement to Socialism (MAS), threatened to leave the coalition in response to Chávez's proposal to declare a state of emergency in Venezuela. The constitution provides for an independent judiciary, but, in practice, it is inefficient and sometimes corrupt; judges are subject to influence from a number of sources.

In the December 2005 legislative elections supporters of President Chavez won all 167 seats in the National Assembly after five of the main opposition parties boycotted the electoral process. This election gave Chavez a 2/3 majority necessary to change the constitution at will. Also contributing to the sense that Chavez was seeking to turn Venezuela into a one-party socialist state was the decision on December 18, 2006 to form an umbrella party that would unify all pro-Chavez political supporters. Chavez has pressured most of his coalition partners to join this new organization, the PSUV. After his reelection to a third term in office in December 2006, the National Assembly granted Chavez sweeping powers to rule by decree for the next 18 months. The opposition boycotted the vote.

Political Participation: Factional/Restricted Competition (6)

President Chavez's ascension to power has been based on his appeal to the urban and rural poor and the downwardly mobile middle class. The elections of 1999 and 2000 demonstrated a profound realignment in institutional politics in Venezuela: old establishment parties rapidly lost favor with the electorate and fell further into infighting while the new populist front reshaped governing institutions to their favor. The new opposition has not been able to mount an effective challenge to the Chávez government or its policies. Ironically, the most serious challenges to the regime have come in the form of labor strikes, as oil workers, teachers, and steel workers have all mounted mass strikes and demonstrations against government policies in 2000 and 2001.

As a result of the failed coup in 2001, political participation in Venezuela has become increasingly factional in nature. Opposition attempts in 2003 and 2004 to force Chavez's resignation through recall elections were unsuccessful. The anti-Chavez contingent, arguing that the electoral system is biased in favor of the President and is badly in need of reform, took to the streets in protest in 2005. These protests triggered violent counter-protests by supporters of Chavez. All the major opposition political parties boycotted the December 2005 legislative elections and only 25% of registered voters turned out at the polls.

Venezuela has long suffered under a highly unequal system of land distribution where 1% of the population controls over 46% of the arable land. Faced by mounting rural poverty, land invasions by landless peasants has spiked in recent years. Under Chavez, new laws have been passed to allow the state to seize "underused" ranches without compensation. Chávez's brand of populism has especially rankled relations with the United States as Chávez continues to cavort with the leaders of dissident regimes, such as Cuba, Iraq, Iran, Libya, and China. In recent years Chavez's "Revolution for the Poor" has become increasingly militaristic in nature as Chavez supporters have organized citizen-soldier brigades in preparation for an "impending" attack on Venezuelan soil by the United States.

After his reelection to office in December 2006, President Chavez stepped up his campaign to turn Venezuela in to a one-party socialist state. In addition to seizing over 300,000 hectares of land in an effort to promote his agrarian reform program, Chavez pushed forward on his efforts to nationalize many key sectors of the economy (e.g., telecommunication, energy and banking). Moreover, his decision to take off the air one of Venezuela's oldest television networks and replace it with one that "better reflected the socialist revolution," produced massive demonstration in the streets of Caracas in May 2007. Seeking to consolidate his rule and the revolution he had promised to lead, throughout 2007 he prepared the nation for a referendum on his rule and his policies. Chavez initially proposed amending 33 articles of the constitution, but the National Assembly added another thirty-six changes. Among the main changes proposed were (1) allowing the indefinite re-election of the president; (2) increasing the presidential term from six to seven years; (3) introducing changes to the country's administrative structure; (4) ending the autonomy of the central bank; (5) placing the president in charge of administering the country's international reserves; and (6) reducing the maximum working week from 44 to 36 hours. Surprisingly, the referendum on these issues, held on 2 December 2007, was narrowly defeated.

The regional elections of November 2008 produced a minor setback for President Chavez. The opposition won control of five states, including the two most populous, and the mayoral office of Caracas. Chavez supporters, nonetheless, retained 17 of the country's 22 governorships. Shaken by the results of these elections, in December 2008 one of Venezuela's main opposition leaders, Manuel Rosales, was charged with corruption and misappropriation of funds. Rosales, mayor of Maracaibo, the second largest city in the country, had stood against Chavez in the 2006 presidential election. The indictment came two weeks after the President said he would seek the constitutional changes necessary to allow him to stand for indefinite re-election. Constitutional amendments were voted on in a public referendum on 15 February 2009 and enacted the following day that removed term limits on public office and further concentrated authority in the executive. President Chavez moved against opposition leaders and media (e.g., Globovision) and continued his policy of nationalizing "strategically important" and "resource rich" industries, aided by his party's (MVR) control of the legislature.