

Voting under Autocracy: Insights from the 2024 Presidential Elections in Venezuela

by **Maryhen Jiménez** | University of Oxford | maryhen.jimenezmorales@area.ox.ac.uk

In authoritarian regimes, elections can help consolidate authoritarian rule (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009). Yet electoral processes may also represent critical windows of opportunity for opposition movements, offering a pathway for societal organization and mobilization as well as possibilities of regime change despite the inherent risks of fraud (Lindberg 2009; Tucker 2007). The strategic engagement in elections, even under less competitive or under uncompetitive conditions, can galvanize popular discontent, reshape political alignments, and challenge the legitimacy of authoritarian incumbents.

After years of grappling with the dilemma between boycotting and applying maximum pressure, or engaging in domestic organization and participation, traditional opposition actors decided to challenge Nicolás Maduro through elections, despite the authoritarian context. Most serious polling predicted a resounding opposition victory in the lead-up to the July 28th election (Seijas 2024), a date strategically chosen by the ruling elite to align with the late Hugo Chávez's birthday. Under chavismo, economic mismanagement, rampant corruption, rising inequality, a humanitarian emergency, and mass migration have all expanded the anti-incumbent base over the past years, even among former supporters. Therefore, when the electoral body (CNE), controlled by regime loyalists, announced victory for Maduro, society and international actors did not trust the results. Independent tallying by the opposition showed a landslide victory (67 percent to 30 percent) for Edmundo González Urrutia, the candidate of the Unitary

Platform and replacement for María Corina Machado, winner of the 2023 opposition primary (Rogerio 2024).

The opposition's success in the presidential election, despite the highly repressive environment and significant 'institutional engineering' employed to guarantee Maduro's win, marks a turning point not only in Venezuela's political landscape but also in our understanding of how opposition movements can challenge authoritarian incumbents to expose their vulnerability. This brief article explores the key factors that contributed to this victory, focusing on the strategic learning within the opposition, their collective shift towards an electoral strategy, and the crucial role of societal mobilization in voting under autocracy.

Venezuela's Authoritarian Landscape

Venezuela transitioned from an imperfect democracy to competitive authoritarianism under Chávez. His successor, Maduro, has pushed the country towards hegemonic authoritarian rule. The ruling elite maintains strict control over the country's institutions, and has developed a cohesive coercive apparatus to neutralize political opposition (Corrales 2023). Surveillance, coup-proofing strategies, as well as a series of privileges and economic spoils maintain most of the ruling elite together (Trinkunas 2021). Traditional opponents as well as chavista dissidents and defector movements have faced harsh persecution, with key leaders harassed, killed, imprisoned, or exiled (Provea 2020; Jiménez 2023). Likewise, journalists and activists have

been targeted with repression, all of which have contributed to creating an atmosphere of fear (FFMV 2023).

The government has also implemented a series of mechanisms to surveil and control society. For example, the use of clientelism and patronage networks has deepened, expanding on Chávez's strategies to maintain political support. These networks distributed economic incentives, including (low-quality) food aid, through programs such as CLAP (Local Committees for Supply and Production), in exchange for continued loyalty. Yet, these clientelist practices are closely tied to surveillance efforts, whereby social benefits represent tools of political control (Penfold-Becerra 2007; Aponte and Martinez 2018; Marcano, Deniz, and Solera 2018).

Violent and non-violent repression has been employed by both authoritarian incumbents since chavismo's first victory. However, the degree and nature of this repression have varied significantly. While Chávez harassed almost all contenders equally, labeling them as "puppets of the U.S." and blaming them for the country's economic and social decline, Maduro has shifted these repression patterns, relying more heavily on violent coercion, co-opting opposition members, and targeting the most vulnerable groups in Venezuela's underprivileged communities, the *barrios*. Particularly after disenchanting chavistas have defected, voting for opposition candidates in the 2015 legislative election, the 2021 regional election, and the 2024 presidential election, the use of violence has become more prevalent (Smilde, Zubillaga, and Hanson 2023). Under the charismatic Chávez, chavismo was a popular movement that claimed to address the roots of inequality and poverty. However, under Maduro, it has transformed into an openly religious, socially conservative, environmentally destructive, and neopatrimonial authoritarian elite bloc that disregards the needs of the population (Bull and Rosales 2023; Jiménez and Aveledo 2024).

The ruling elite's disconnect from the increasingly discontented masses may have led them to miscalculate the risk of losing the election. Government officials appeared genuinely

confident that overt and rampant fraud would not be necessary to retain power. Instead, the strategy seemed focused on discouraging opposition turnout, 'slicing' the opposition vote among regime-friendly candidates, and mobilizing chavista voters in their favor. However, despite these repressive measures, a widespread cross-class demand for change coalesced around González Urrutia, compelling the government to resort to overt electoral theft. The unprecedented post-electoral violence further underscores the regime's determination to cling to power. As of August 28th, Foro Penal, a Venezuelan NGO, reported over 1,600 arbitrary detentions, including more than 100 children (Foro Penal 2024). Government employees have been dismissed, electoral witnesses persecuted, and curfews imposed. Repression has escalated to such an extent that the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has referred to the post-electoral environment as state terrorism (CIDH 2024).

Amidst ongoing crackdowns, the ruling party-controlled National Assembly passed a bill to impose strict monitoring and regulation on non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This legislation aims to restrict the operations of civil society groups and their ability to operate independently. Furthermore, the National Assembly is also pushing for a bill against "Fascism, Neofascism, and Similar Expressions." If passed, this law would pose a severe threat to freedoms of thought, expression, association, dissent, and peaceful assembly, allowing the government to suppress any form of opposition or criticism (Amnesty International 2024).

Strategic Shifts within the Opposition

To fully understand the relevance of the Venezuelan opposition's convergence on an electoral path towards regime change in 2024, it is important to consider the historical divisions that have underpinned the anti-chavista camp. For over two decades, the opposition has been fragmented in its strategic approach to challenging incumbents. These divisions have traditionally revolved around two primary camps: those who favored institutional mechanisms, including participating in elections, and those

who advocated for extrainstitutional pressure, such as protests, strikes, coup d'état, and international pressure (Gamboa 2022; Jiménez 2023). The former group, often associated with a more moderate gradualist approach, believed in building a long-term electoral strategy focused on growing the opposition's support base. In contrast, the latter group long prioritized a more immediate route to power, often disillusioned by the apparent ineffectiveness of participating in elections on an unlevel playing field.¹

While the opposition only boycotted the 2005 legislative elections during Chávez's tenure, it abstained from participating in a coordinated manner in the 2017 local elections and the 2018 presidential elections against Maduro; it also boycotted the 2020 legislative elections. In 2019, traditional opposition actors rallied behind Juan Guaidó, a former legislator from Voluntad Popular, in his claim to be Venezuela's "interim president". This strategic move, backed by over 50 countries, ultimately failed to oust Maduro and further weakened the opposition's ability in its domestic capacity to deliver on promises of change. While the initiative provided certain elites with increased access to international networks and media platforms, it did little to strengthen the local organizational structures of opposition parties across the country (Rosales and Jiménez 2021). Moreover, this strategy had a demobilizing effect on society, as it was not grounded in the sustained development of a grassroots pro-democracy movement. This disconnect left some elites based in Caracas and in exile out of touch with the needs of the broader population.

In 2023, opponents decided to organize a primary to select the opposition's joint candidate for the 2024 election. Despite the risks and obstacles, the primary elections represented a turning point for the opposition. By uniting around a common strategy and a single candidate, the opposition sought to capitalize on Maduro's persistent unpopularity and present a viable alternative to voters. The decision to hold a primary was

aimed at both coordinating the fragmented and weakened opposition elite and reestablishing a connection between the elite and disenfranchised masses. A significant effort by actors promoting the primary was to facilitate a strategic convergence on the electoral path toward change, particularly by engaging hardliners who had long dismissed elections as a viable means of challenging the government. This approach was crucial in contributing to the opposition's future ability to leverage the broad base of discontent. The return towards an electoral strategy was an implicit recognition of the limitations of previous strategic choices, including boycotts and "interim-government."

María Corina Machado, a prominent (former) hardliner within the opposition (Meza 2017), adeptly positioned herself as an outsider candidate during the 2024 primary elections. Machado strategically distanced herself from the failures of the G4 group—Acción Democrática, Primero Justicia, Un Nuevo Tiempo, and Voluntad Popular—during the "interim government." Although initially supportive of Guaidó's strategy, Machado remained largely detached from the operational aspects of the "interim government," thereby avoiding the political repercussions that eroded much of the opposition's credibility since its establishment. Machado's candidacy further benefited from the absence of formidable rivals. Major opposition parties either refrained from presenting candidates or did so ineffectively, allowing Machado to emerge as the dominant figure in the race. The withdrawal of other contenders like Henrique Capriles or Freddy Superlano consolidated her position as the leading candidate in the primary. Moreover, Machado's campaign successfully resonated with a diverse electorate, including disillusioned chavistas and those affected by the regime's repressive measures (Jiménez and Rosales 2023). Her established reputation as a vocal critic of Chávez and her calls for accountability helped solidify her image as a determined leader capable of confronting Maduro at the polls. With over 90 percent of the votes, Machado comfortably

¹ It is important to note that these camps are not rigid; parties and individuals have shifted between these strategies for various reasons in the past.

won the primary, emerging not solely as the opposition candidate but also as the key decision maker in the opposition camp (Santaeulalia and Quesada 2023).

Beyond her strategic shift towards an electoral approach, following her victory, Machado further moderated her previously confrontational rhetoric, adopting a more inclusive and conciliatory narrative. She de-emphasized her “liberal” ideology and instead focused on broad promises, such as improving living conditions and reuniting families separated by migration. Machado has also underlined themes of national unity, respect for private property, and the protection of human rights, thereby broadening her appeal across a wider political spectrum. She sustains the battle for freedom as a spiritual one, where good will prevail over evil (Machado 2024). Given that Machado’s arbitrary disqualification from running for office was not lifted before the 2024 election, the opposition coalesced around a new candidate, González Urrutia, a former diplomat. This consensus signaled the opposition’s learning, as it resisted the temptation to abandon the electoral path.

The opposition’s strategic learning extended beyond the selection of a unified candidate to enhancing its ability to defend and evidence the electoral results. Anticipating the likelihood of fraud, it developed and implemented sophisticated mechanisms aimed at safeguarding the votes. These measures included witnesses scanning and storing voting records to counter potential manipulation by the regime. By collecting voter tallies, the opposition has been able to reinforce the veracity of the electoral outcome (Kronick 2024), both crucial elements for mobilizing continued support for change.

Social Mobilization around the Election

The strategic moderation of hardliners and the opposition’s return to the electoral path are crucial factors in understanding the electoral victory, but they do not provide a complete explanation. Equally important was the role of societal mobilization. When opposition elites decided to organize primary elections to

challenge the presidential incumbent, it spurred a significant level of civic engagement, despite the inherent risks. Citizens became active in the electoral process, with some mobilizing spontaneously and others doing so through established organizations. The decision by the opposition to participate in the elections reinvigorated civic participation and fostered a renewed sense of empowerment among the population.

Over the past several years, society began to see itself as an agent of change, particularly after the repeated repression of protests and the failures of previous strategies, such as electoral abstention and the “interim government.” Survey data underscores this shift in public sentiment. In October 2023, 63.6 percent of respondents believed that the electoral route was the best path to change, with 59.3 percent expressing confidence in society’s ability to achieve political transformation. By July 2024, these figures had risen to 82.6 percent and 63.2 percent, respectively (Delphos 2024).

The electoral mobilization around Machado and González Urrutia, and also the parties within the Unitary Platform streamed the existing widespread discontent with the socio-economic and political situation in Venezuela. The desire to replace authoritarianism with democracy, state control with individual freedoms, and human rights abuses with respect for the rule of law, galvanized voters across different socio-economic backgrounds. The re-engagement with the electoral process did more than just consolidate existing support; it drew in new supporters from groups that had previously been skeptical of electoral participation and/or traditional oppositions. Among these new supporters were disillusioned chavistas—individuals who had once supported Chávez but became increasingly alienated by the authoritarian turn and economic mismanagement under Maduro. These former loyalists, having lost faith in the regime’s promises and witnessing the deepening crisis, found an option to vote for in the coordinated opposition. Additionally, the return to the electoral path attracted left-leaning intellectuals who had

historically been critical of the opposition due to ideological differences and distrust in previous strategies (Rodríguez Rosas 2024).

As the campaign progressed and the possibility of electoral success became more tangible, participation and enthusiasm grew, even among the most skeptical voters. This growing momentum was crucial in mobilizing a wide array of citizens who, motivated by a shared desire for change, contributed to a support that transcended traditional political alignments. The expanding pro-change base not only energized the campaign but also helped restore the opposition's credibility.

Conclusion

Despite repression and a series of obstacles, the Venezuelan opposition managed to secure a landslide victory in the 2024 presidential election. Hardliner's strategic moderation and the convergence of opposition elites on seeking change through elections channeled society's desire to vote chavismo out of power. By re-engaging with the electoral path, the opposition restored its credibility both domestically and internationally, earning support from a wide array of ideologically-diverse actors who had previously been skeptical. This renewed commitment to peaceful and institutional change, in contrast to previous strategies of maximum pressure and boycotts, has unified diverse elements of Venezuelan society and brought new momentum to the country's struggle for democracy. The 2024 elections, therefore, stand as a significant milestone in the ongoing battle for political transformation in Venezuela, offering valuable lessons for opposition movements in other authoritarian contexts.

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