



VENEZUELA'S 2018 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS – Q & A

Presidential elections will be held in Venezuela on 20 May, at the same time as elections for municipal and regional legislative councils. This document answers a number of questions raised about the election and provides an overview of Venezuela's democracy and electoral system.

Who is contesting the Presidential election on May 20?

The President of Venezuela is elected for a six-year term by direct election plurality voting (a first by the post system), and is eligible for re-election. Five candidates have been confirmed by the National Electoral Council (CNE) for the vote on May 20.

The current President Nicolás Maduro, of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), is standing for the Great Patriotic Pole alliance, with the support of numerous left-wing and progressive parties.

There are also four opposition candidates running:

- 1) Henri Falcón for the Progressive Advance (AP), Movement for Socialism (MAS) and the Copei (Social Christian) parties. Copei was regularly in government in the decades prior to 1998. Falcón was elected Mayor of Barquisimeto for two terms (2000-2008) and later, governor of Lara State as a PSUV candidate (2008-2012). He then became part of the opposition to the government and was re-elected in 2012 as a candidate of the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) opposition coalition, until he lost the seat in the 2017 elections. He backed Henrique Capriles against Nicolás Maduro in the last presidential election and supported the candidacy of opposition leader Henrique Capriles against Hugo Chávez in the 2012 elections.
- 2) Javier Bertucci, for the group of voters Hope for Change (Esperanza por el Cambio). A leader of the Maranatha Pentecostal Church, he is running as an independent on a vow to "bring Jesus" to Venezuela.
- 3) Alejandro Ratti, an independent candidate and an evangelical pastor.
- 4) Reinaldo Quijada for Popular Political Unity (UPP89). An electrical engineer who claims he is opposed to Maduro and the PSUV but is not opposed to the revolutionary process.

How many parties are participating in the elections?

Seventeen political parties are participating in total in all the elections that are taking place in May in Venezuela.

Absent from the contest due to their own decision is any formal candidate from the coalition of right-wing opposition parties known as MUD (Democratic Unity Roundtable,) who have decided not to stand in these elections.

The MUD has expelled Henri Falcón from its ranks after he registered with national electoral authorities as a presidential candidate, and is currently boycotting the elections, but it has been reported that a number of MUD supporting individuals and organisations are breaking ranks and actively backing Falcón.

Claudio Fermin, head of Falcón's presidential campaign, is reported as saying that MUD members have "expressed sympathy and solidarity and are already committed to Henri Falcón 's cause." Additionally, the long-standing and former governing COPEI party is backing Henri Falcón.

The refusal by element of the right-wing opposition to participate in the elections is not a unique development. Some right-wing opposition parties have boycotted previous elections in Venezuela when they are likely to lose, including the 2005 parliamentary elections for example.

Are opposition parties barred from standing?

Some western media has reported opposition parties being banned in Venezuela, but this is simply untrue.

What is the case is that historically in Venezuela parties are required to register and meet a set of basic requirements to run in an election. This is also common practice internationally.

In order to apply to run in an election, a party needs to show it has the support of at least 0.5% of voters in 12 out of Venezuela's 24 states (this requirement can be found in the [Law of Political Parties, Public Meetings and Demonstrations](#), Chapter II, Article 10).

The reapplication and validation process is not onerous by international standards, at least for larger parties. For example, the 0.5% threshold is a shade above the Californian requirement that a party needs the support of 0.33% of registered voters to qualify to appear on the ballot, but a lot less that of Florida (with only two-thirds of Venezuela's population) which requires 5% of registered voters. Other countries (e.g. Germany and Estonia) also have [electoral law provisions](#) for parties losing their right to contest an election for non-participation.

To ease the requirement for smaller parties of both left and right, Venezuela's Supreme Court has modified the registration requirements by ruling in April 2017 that votes garnered in the previous election would count towards the 0.5% threshold.

Additionally, it is not true to claim that potential candidates have been disqualified for running for political reasons, including the often reported cases of Leopoldo Lopez and Henrique Capriles.

Leopoldo Lopez was sentenced to a 13-year prison sentence in 2015 for his role in leading the violent extreme-right wave of actions in 2014 known as 'La Salida' ('The Ousting,') explicitly aimed at toppling the elected government. This left 43 dead, including government supporters and passers-by. Lopez was tried, convicted and sentenced to prison, but later granted house arrest.

In April 2017, the Comptroller General found that Henrique Capriles was barred from public office for 15 years on the grounds of receiving international financing for electoral campaigns (an illegal offence in Venezuela and many other countries.)

Who oversees elections in Venezuela and how often do elections take place?

Regular elections are held at all levels of government in line with constitutional requirements. The National Electoral Council (CNE) oversees elections. The CNE is a non-partisan body responsible for all aspects of the electoral process, including establishing the date, registering voters, facilitating and monitoring campaigns, organising voting equipment and auditing the vote together with party representatives. Poll workers are drawn by lottery from the electoral register.

Contrary to claims that Venezuela is a dictatorship, these elections will be the 25th national election or referendum since 1998, more than any other comparable country. Last year, Venezuela held 3 different sets of elections at national, state (regional) and municipal level.

In terms of Presidential elections, Since Hugo Chávez was elected President in 1998 (with 62.46% of the vote against Henrique Salas's 31.48%), there have been a further four presidential elections, where the results for the leading two candidates were:

2000:	Hugo Chávez, 3,757,773 (59.76%)	Francisco Arias, 2,359,459 (37.52%)
2006:	Hugo Chávez, 7,309,080 (62.84%)	Manuel Rosales, 4,292,466 (36.9%)
2012:	Hugo Chávez, 8,191,132 (55.07%)	Henrique Capriles, 6,591,304 (44.31%)
2013:	Nicolas Maduro, 7,587,579 (50.61%)	Henrique Capriles, 7,363,980 (49.12%)

How is voter registration encouraged in Venezuela and what are the levels of participation?

Under the constitution, all Venezuelans over the age of 18 have the right to vote. Additionally, long-term resident non-nationals over 18 (resident over 10 years) have the right to vote in regional and local elections.

Voters register their fingerprints and identity card details onto the Electoral Register, and these are verified during the voting process.

Participation in elections expanded considerably under the Chávez-led government. In 1998 only 11 million Venezuelans were registered to vote. It is estimated that about 38% of potentially eligible voters were disenfranchised, mostly poorer and socially excluded citizens.

Thanks to the vigorous efforts by the authorities, it has been reported that up to February 2018 the total number of voters registered was 20,374,829 in the country and 107,284 abroad (out of a total population of 31,828,110). Thus an estimated 98% of eligible voters have been registered.

Access to polling stations has also increased, with numbers increasing from 8,000 to 14,000 and better provision made for disabled voters.

How does voting take place in Venezuela?

Elections in Venezuela are routinely and widely audited and a number of measures are in place to ensure against fraudulent behaviour.

Each polling station has a number of stand-alone DRE voting machines. Each citizen is identified by his or her fingerprints and the touch-screen voting machine is only activated if the fingerprint matches the voter's ID on the database. The machine provides a printed receipt that is checked by the voter before being placed in the ballot box.

This rigorous system prevents fraudulent behaviour, such as double voting or identity theft, and provides an audit trail to check the results. Since there are two records of every vote it is virtually impossible to stuff or destroy ballot boxes without producing a mismatch between manual and electronic counts.

After the poll closes, the total number of votes cast is checked for consistency with the paper record, the machines are connected to the network to count the votes for each candidate, and a number of machines are selected at random for a 54% audit of both paper and electronic results at each polling station. Finally, an audit report is produced and signed by staff and observers, officially sealed and handed to the military for delivery to the CNE, with copies to the two candidates with the highest number of votes.

Venezuela's rigorous systems of registration, voting and auditing elections has been praised by observers, with Nobel prize-winner former President Jimmy Carter describing it in 2012 as "the best in the world". The Director of The Carter Centre noted that the post-election audits had never had any significant discrepancy between the paper receipts and the electronic votes."

Are there any additional safeguarding arrangements being made for these elections?

As well as the conditions for conducting elections in Venezuela outlined earlier, discussions between the CNE and the presidential candidates (both Nicolas Maduro and his opponents) have resulted in agreeing some additional electoral guarantees for the elections in order to maximise democratic participation and confidence in the electoral process.

The CNE has agreed to safeguard equal access to both private and public, national and international media, as well as social media coverage.

The CNE re-opened the electoral register for further voter registration, both within Venezuela and in embassies and consulates abroad so that Venezuelans with a local visa outside the country can vote.

Voting centres which had been relocated following violent outbreaks in July 2017's Constituent Assembly elections are to be moved back to their original location, and to avoid voter intimidation or activists attempting to influence voters, political party kiosks will also be kept 200 metres away from voting centres on election day.

The agreement also guarantees that audits of the electoral process will be carried out in a "not inferior" way to those carried out during the previous regional and municipal elections, which involved audits supervised by representatives of all participating political parties as a standard operating practice. Fifteen audits have been scheduled for the 20 May presidential election.

Will Venezuela's elections be internationally observed?

Venezuela has called on international bodies to observe the electoral process to verify its transparency leading up to and including election day. To this end, the CNE has committed to creating a delegation to observe "all phases of the electoral process" with participants from United Nations and "other mutually agreed upon international bodies and organisations".

A delegation of Samuel Moncada, Venezuela's ambassador to the UN, and Henri Falcón, opposition presidential candidate, jointly requested the UN send a mission to observe the vote.

President Maduro has also invited the European Union to send a delegation to observe the May 20 presidential elections, and Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza has extended a formal invitation to Federica Mogherini, the head of EU Foreign Affairs, to observe the elections.

Former Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, who mediated the talks between the Venezuelan government and MUD in the Dominican Republic, has [confirmed](#) his attendance to observe the process.

Venezuelan elections are normally monitored by as many as 150 international observers. Since 1998, they have been drawn from organisations such as the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the Carter Centre, the Latin American Council of Electoral Experts (CEELA) and the Inter American Union of Electoral Councils (UNIORE).

International observers' reports are widely and publicly available, such as these examples from [December 2003](#), [November 2008](#), [February 2009](#), [July 2017](#), [October 2017](#), or the most recent in [December 2017](#).

What is the United States' position on the Presidential election?

The US State Department provides regular statements on Venezuela, with occasional direct interventions by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson (until his sacking in early March and replacement by Mike Pompeo, previously CIA director) and President Trump himself.

The US position has altered substantially in the last twelve months. From March 2017 to June 2017 the State Department issued a number of press statements calling for immediate elections in Venezuela.

However, after the government's successes in elections last year, the US position began to change.

When presidential elections were announced, the US State Department declared that the contest was [illegitimate](#) and that its results would not be [recognised](#). It has even been reported that they threatened to sanction opposition candidate Henri Falcón for contesting the election!

The US appears to have abandoned belief in the right-wing opposition or any candidate being able to defeat Maduro in the elections. Instead, the US appears in its language and pronouncements to favour 'regime change' through military means or by facilitating the conditions for a coup.

In August, President Trump said military intervention in Venezuela was an option. In November, Washington's ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, declared that "the crisis in Venezuela today poses a direct threat to international peace and security."

Most recently, former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said: "In the history of Venezuela and South American countries, it is often times that the military is the agent of change when things are so bad and the leadership can no longer serve the people."

As part of this approach, the Trump administration is reportedly considering even more drastic measures than the existing severe economic sanctions in place against Venezuela. Thus Tillerson also suggested that an oil embargo might be imposed if Venezuela proceeds with the election. Such an embargo would have a devastating effect on the economy, because Venezuela continues to export close to a third of its oil to the United States. The effect would be to further severely constrain its ability to import foodstuffs and medicines to feed and protect its population, especially the most vulnerable.