



# Venezuela's Disputed Election and the Path Forward

By the Center for Economic and Policy Research

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Center for Economic and Policy  
Research  
1611 Connecticut Ave. NW  
Suite 400  
Washington, DC 20009

Tel: 202-293-5380  
Fax: 202-588-1356  
<https://cepr.net>

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# 1. Executive Summary

Venezuela is facing a new political crisis that could potentially erupt into a damaging, protracted civil conflict. Following the July 28 presidential election, two incompatible sets of results have been published: one by the country's electoral council, showing incumbent President Nicolás Maduro winning by nine percentage points; the other by the Venezuelan opposition, showing Edmundo González winning by a 37-point margin. While the opposition has published thousands of purported tally sheets that appear to support their claim, Venezuela's electoral authority has yet to publish a detailed breakdown of results. Without these detailed results, it is impossible to independently confirm the announcement of a Maduro victory by Venezuela's authorities.

In their response to the unfolding situation in Caracas, international actors, in particular the US, must avoid repeating the profoundly harmful policies of the past. These policies, including support for military coups and other unconstitutional efforts to remove the elected government, have deeply undermined democracy and contributed substantially to increased polarization. Far-reaching economic sanctions have fueled a humanitarian emergency and caused tens of thousands of deaths — or more. It is critical that external actors proceed with caution and even-handed diplomacy and support efforts to renew dialogue between opposition and pro-government leaders in order to achieve a peaceful and sustainable political solution.

Going forward, the best opportunity for bringing about a peaceful resolution of the current crisis appears to be the effort led by Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia, who have initiated a high-level dialogue with both the Venezuelan government and opposition and are supporting a Venezuelan-led solution to the crisis.

## 2. Introduction

The events that have taken place since Venezuela's recent election have resulted in a perilous situation that threatens to boil over into a severe and prolonged crisis with potential regional implications. Two incompatible sets of results have been presented, one by the opposition showing its candidate winning, and the other by Venezuela's electoral authority and government, which have proclaimed current president Nicolás Maduro the victor.

Detailed and reliable electoral data, including a breakdown of results from each voting table, are key to adjudicating claims of electoral fraud.

Without these detailed results, it is impossible to independently confirm the announcement of a Maduro victory by Venezuela's authorities. The electoral council has claimed that a cyberattack has delayed the publication of disaggregated results. In the meantime, the opposition has published purported tally sheets from a [reported](#) 83.5 percent of voting tables, which point to a victory for Edmundo González even in the event that the government won heavily in the remaining precincts. These present a serious challenge to the official results and it is now incumbent upon the authorities to release detailed voting tallies, as required by the country's electoral law.

These conflicting post-election narratives have sparked [mostly peaceful](#) mass demonstrations by supporters of both candidates, but there have also been reports of [serious violence](#), including killings, on [both sides](#). There are also concerning reports of hundreds of arrests of opposition activists in the days following the election.

Political leaders from both the government and opposition have made troubling pronouncements that are not conducive to a peaceful resolution of the current dispute within a constitutional framework. For example, González and opposition leader Maria Corina Machado have called for [what amounts to a military coup](#). This would repeat the errors that many opposition politicians made in 2019 when they called on the armed forces to turn against the government and support the installation in the presidency of Juan Guáido, a member of the National Assembly who was never elected president. Extra-constitutional efforts of this sort should be vigorously opposed internationally. Likewise, the government needs to ensure that security forces adhere to international human rights standards when responding to protests and disturbances; they should also refrain from carrying out arbitrary detentions.

The US government should not respond to the current crisis by applying more of the failed, harmful policies of the past, including additional broad economic sanctions — which have [taken the lives](#) of tens of thousands of Venezuelans and fueled the migration of millions more. These failed policies include military coup attempts, such as those that US administrations supported in 2002 and 2019. Recognizing a parallel government, or imposing more sanctions on Venezuela,

will only make the crisis much more difficult to resolve; in fact, these policies helped create the current crisis. It is concerning that some US government officials have made [statements](#) that appear to recognize the victory of the opposition candidate — a position that can only contribute to a further escalation of the current crisis.

Instead, the Biden administration — as well as any other external actors who want to avoid further escalation and potential loss of life — should strongly support the efforts of Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia to seek a peaceful, negotiated solution to the crisis. In a positive development last week, State Department official Mark Wells [announced that](#) the US was supporting these dialogue efforts and was “now focused solely on getting the parties to talk and be part of a peaceful transition.”

This is also consistent with [President Biden’s statement](#) at the beginning of the crisis. But as will be noted below, this apparent diplomatic approach is a striking turnaround from the past 25 years of Washington’s dealings with Venezuela — as well as with other countries in the region. Given the United States’ deplorable record, there is a strong possibility that Washington’s apparent reluctance to escalate the conflict could be reversed, especially after the US election in November (and even before there is a new administration in Washington).

Both sets of voting results put forward present a minority representing a sizable political force. The official results [show](#) the opposition as the preferred option of 43 percent of the population. The opposition tallies, that reportedly amount to 83.5% of the total, [show](#) their candidate winning 67 percent and the government winning 30 percent of the vote. If one assumes that those tallies are accurate, the remaining 20 percent of precincts may tilt more toward the government, increasing its share when they are included.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of the final outcome, the current pro-government coalition would retain control of the National Assembly and most regional and municipal governments, which were elected in 2020 and 2021 respectively.

A diplomatic, negotiated solution that respects Venezuela’s constitution and provides acceptable guarantees for the minority would appear to be essential to stopping the slide toward a deeper crisis, one that would have ramifications far beyond the country’s borders. Given the inevitable spillovers such a crisis would cause, including increased migration, it is not surprising that a

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<sup>1</sup> Given that tally sheets are generally collected by party representatives, it is possible that those tally sheets not obtained by the opposition came from comparatively more pro-Maduro precincts.

robust diplomatic initiative in favor of dialogue has been taken by the governments of Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico.

Some opposition leaders have welcomed interventions by Brazil's President Lula, who is spearheading this diplomatic initiative, indicating that the trio of countries — whose governments have had good relations with the Maduro government — could be a trusted interlocutor.

The trio of countries' [two statements](#) have called on the authorities to release the full disaggregated electoral results, to allow institutional processes to move forward, and urged both sides to avoid further inflaming the situation. They have said that they would be willing to help facilitate dialogue leading to agreements that benefit the Venezuelan people and with respect for Venezuela's sovereignty. Despite sending [mixed signals](#), the US Department of State has — as noted above — recently expressed more support for this initiative and should continue to do so.

Other international actors should also support these efforts led by the three Latin American governments.

### 3. The Venezuelan Vote

Venezuela's latest presidential elections, held on July 28, have seen both sides claim victory. The second official bulletin released by the National Electoral Council (CNE) [reported](#) that Maduro had been reelected with 52 percent of the vote versus 43 percent for leading opponent Edmundo González. However, unlike in past elections, the CNE has so far failed to release a breakdown of the results at the voting table (*mesa de votación*) level. The opposition, however, has [announced](#) that it has won 67 percent of the vote against Maduro's 30 percent. It has released about 84 percent of what it claims to be the voting tally sheets — produced for each voting table — from across the country to support its figures.

The Venezuelan voting system itself is one of the most robust and reliable in the region, [if not the world](#), with myriad built-in processes for validating the result. Many of these [audit processes](#) have either not been followed, or have not been conducted publicly with oversight, as has been the case in previous contests.

One of the most important protections built into the Venezuelan electoral system is provided by its system of tally sheets. Printouts of these are normally made available to opposition and pro-government poll observers once the voting process is finalized and can be used to confirm the accuracy of the electronic vote count that is transmitted automatically by voting machines to the CNE.

These tally sheets have a *number of built-in security features*, including unique hash numbers associated with each sheet and QR codes that provide a digital data trail, which make them difficult to forge without detection.

Leading Venezuelan opposition parties have alleged fraud in many major national elections for more than a decade and *did not sign* a pre-electoral agreement to recognize the results of this year's election. The opposition's release of purported tally sheets to support their claims has never been done before following a national election and – given the absence of any credible challenge to the authenticity – supports their claims of winning the election this time around.

In previous national contests, the Venezuelan authorities have quickly provided a detailed breakdown of the results. While the opposition has claimed that the government committed fraud previously — including in 2004, 2013 and 2018 — these claims were made without evidence and were therefore not credible. Nevertheless, the unfounded perception that elections on those occasions were fraudulent, provoked or contributed to serious public disorder and major outbreaks of violence in 2013, 2014, 2017, and 2019.

The Venezuelan electoral authorities *claim* that the electronic transmission of the results was affected by a cyberattack. They claim that this has delayed the release of the disaggregated results. The website of the CNE has been down since the election. While legally the Council *has 30 days* to publish the final results in the official gazette, they have provided disaggregated results much more rapidly in previous contests. Given the prolonged dispute in this election, with two sides reporting incompatible sets of results, this information should be released as promptly as possible.

The government has rejected the authenticity of the tally sheets published by the opposition. But the case it has made so far has been unconvincing, *presenting* about three dozen purported tally sheets (out of about 25,000) where there are allegedly missing signatures and similar issues which are common in most electoral processes. Just as the opposition had poll observers, so did

the governing party — which means that they should also have copies of the printed tally sheets and should normally be able to make these public, just as they did after the elections in 2013.<sup>2</sup>

Though the CNE has not publicly released disaggregated results, Maduro appealed to the Supreme Tribunal of Justice (TSJ) to adjudicate the electoral dispute. The court then summoned all the key actors in the election and asked them to hand over their copies of the tally sheets for the TSJ's analysis. The CNE reportedly did so on August 5. However, opposition candidate Edmundo González, who has contested the legitimacy of the TSJ's role in adjudicating the election result and reportedly fears arrest, hasn't appeared before the court. On August 10, TSJ [chief justice Caryslia Rodríguez declared](#) that the opposition coalition “did not submit any electoral material.” The justice added that the court's ruling would be “unappealable and compliance will be mandatory.” While recognizing the ongoing court process, the governments of Colombia, Mexico, and Brazil [have noted](#) that the CNE has the legal mandate to release the results.

## 4. CEPR's Past Electoral Work

CEPR has analyzed election results in many votes throughout the region over the past 20 years — including [Mexico's controversial 2006 election](#), the [Haiti post-earthquake vote of 2010](#), the deeply flawed [Honduras election in 2017](#), the [Bolivian election in 2019](#), and many others.

At the core of that work has been access to data. Disaggregated electoral results allow independent researchers to analyze the results of the election for possible irregularities or, as in the case of Haiti in 2010 or Bolivia in 2019, to analyze the electoral audits of the Organization of American States (OAS) that, in both cases, challenged the official results of the election without basis.

In 2017, in Honduras, an [analysis of disaggregated polling station data](#) revealed the possibility of significant irregularities in the vote counting process. The OAS eventually performed a similar statistical exercise and [concluded that the results were not legitimate](#). Nevertheless, the [US](#)

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<sup>2</sup> The US was isolated in the world in not recognizing Maduro's 2013 victory; it was recognized by both right and left governments in Latin America, the OAS General Secretary José Miguel Insulza, and the right-wing government of Spain. It was only after these governments and authorities recognized the election results that the US finally gave in. See Weisbrot (2013).



*recognized the winner*, Juan Orlando Hernández, who is now serving a 45-year sentence in a US federal prison after being found guilty of narco-trafficking in June of 2024.

In both the *Haiti* and Bolivia cases, initial allegations of fraud were widely accepted and promoted by international actors, however the *claims did not stand up to scrutiny*.

There are plenty of reasons to question allegations of fraud in Venezuela — including a history of baseless accusations of fraud and of efforts aimed at toppling the Venezuelan government unconstitutionally. Notably, following the 2004 recall referendum won by Hugo Chávez, a Venezuelan NGO led by María Corina Machado, alleged that the *results were the product of fraud* and pointed to exit polling it had done as evidence. These claims were supported by some academics in the US. However, CEPR research at the time *showed* that these claims were false. The Carter Center, which convened a group of experts to review the allegations, *reached the same conclusion*.

In the current election, with the release of purported tally sheets the opposition has presented a prima facie case that the official results were inaccurate, unlike on prior occasions. Without the release of detailed electoral data, there is no way to independently confirm the official results announced by the Venezuelan electoral authorities.

## 5. Sanctions and US Intervention

As *CEPR warned* before the vote, it was likely that neither the government nor the opposition would recognize a victory of the opposing side. Both had legitimate reasons to contest the free and fair nature of the vote.

While much attention has been given *to the challenges* that Venezuela's opposition has faced ahead of the election, there has been scant discussion of the impact of broad sanctions imposed by the United States and some of its European allies and how they have made it virtually impossible to have a free and fair, or democratic election at this time.

The United States has *intervened heavily* in Venezuela over the past 25 years, beginning with the 2002 military coup. As a US State Department investigation *revealed*, the US “provided training, institution building, and other support to individuals and organizations understood to be actively involved” in the 2002 military coup that briefly removed Hugo Chávez, Maduro's predecessor,

from power. The US also provided [initial backing](#) to the destructive 2002–2003 oil lockout, and after Chávez won a recall election in 2004, began to impose the first [sanctions measures](#).

Over the past decade, the most destructive and lethal form of intervention against Venezuela has been economic sanctions — or “unilateral coercive measures” as the United Nations calls them. These have taken tens of thousands of lives — possibly more — as well as causing devastating harm to public health and fueling the departure of millions of people — now nearly a quarter of the population — from Venezuela.

Sanctions also influence elections, and this is part of their intent: a form of collective punishment that is life-threatening and that could convince people to either vote the way that the United States wants them to or get rid of the government by other means. This economic violence of regime change is increasingly recognized by political leaders in the United States, including some who think it is very wrong. In May 2021, one of the top Democratic leaders in the US House of Representatives, Jim McGovern, [wrote a letter](#) to President Biden asking for an end to “all secondary and sectoral sanctions on Venezuela. He said:

“The impact of sectoral and secondary sanctions is indiscriminate, and purposely so...Economic pain is the means by which the sanctions are supposed to work. But it is not Venezuelan officials who suffer the costs. It is the Venezuelan people.... For people in Venezuela the ongoing crisis is a life and death matter...”

“... I have never believed that sanctions should be used to punish whole populations for the actions of their leaders... I believe sanctions like those the previous administration imposed on Venezuela are both misguided and immoral.”

The order of magnitude of the sanctions-related deaths in Venezuela is no longer in question, and found in an increasing body of research. In just the first year following the Trump sanctions of 2017, a survey by the National Survey on Living Conditions (ENCOVI), run by three universities in Venezuela, not supportive of the government, found an [increase](#) in mortality of 31 percent, which implies tens of thousands of additional deaths in that year. This is consistent with research on the relationship between recessions and mortality in developing countries; for example, as [investigated](#) by the Bank for International Settlements, which would imply an increase in deaths of about 43,000 from the economic contraction in the first year of these broad, including financial, US sanctions.

Extensive [research](#) on the historical application of broad economic sanctions has found an impact of similar proportions, with US sanctions associated with a 35 percent increase in mortality.

It is worth noting that the US sanctions are also [illegal](#) under international law and treaties that the United States has signed, including the [charter](#) of the Organization of American States. They would violate the fourth Geneva Convention, which prohibits collective punishment, except for the technicality that this treaty applies during war, and there is not a war going on between the United States and Venezuela.

However, UN experts and other legal scholars have argued that something that is a war crime when people are killing each other with weapons of war, should also be a crime when they are not. The loss of food imports in Venezuela due to sanctions led to a sharp rise in malnutrition; and imports of medicine also fell substantially.

All this is most relevant to the current situation in terms of its potential effect on voters. The economy is down an estimated [37 percent of GDP](#) per person as a result of US sanctions. This loss of GDP was more than the United States lost in the collapse of the Great Depression.

The role of the sanctions in causing this damage is clear. Although the economy has stabilized somewhat recently, any government with [more than 80 percent of its population](#) still living below the poverty line (when the 2015 rate was 33 percent, according to the [World Bank](#)) is going to be at a severe disadvantage in an election.

But it's actually much worse than that for the incumbent government, because millions of citizens know that the sanctions will continue, and perhaps even worsen, if voters were to re-elect the current government.

It would therefore be incomplete to cite only the disadvantages that the opposition faces in an election like this; the impact of sanctions on the electorate, and more importantly the threat of further death and destruction if they vote the "wrong" way, can be expected to have a powerful impact on voters' choices. In all of these ways, sanctions that are ostensibly designed to "promote democracy" end up having the opposite effect.

The history of just the past two decades of US foreign policy in the hemisphere would make any rational observer wary of Washington's potential role in a multilateral effort to resolve a political

crisis, especially one in which it is already deeply committed to supporting one side against the other.

Since the early 2000s Washington has intervened against a number of democratically elected governments, sometimes toppling them — at a serious cost to those countries and their people. This has [included](#) Brazil (both [Dilma Rouseff](#) and Lula da Silva, [who](#) has [noted](#) publicly the role that the [US government played](#) in the [investigation](#) and legal proceedings that jailed him; thus preventing him from participating in, and very likely winning, the 2018 presidential election (the [conviction](#) that jailed him was subsequently [overturned](#)); the [military coup](#) in Honduras in [2009](#); [Haiti](#) (the [2004 coup](#), and the [reversal](#) of [election results](#) in 2011); [Paraguay](#) (2012); and [Bolivia](#) ([2019](#)). These were just some of the recent interventions that successfully removed governments; and there [were others](#).

The Bolivian election of 2019 (referenced in the prior section) is one of the most outrageous examples of the United States' intervention in this hemisphere in recent years. Together with the leadership of the OAS, the US government supported a military coup which overthrew the democratically elected president of Bolivia, Evo Morales, the first indigenous president in a country that has the highest percentage of indigenous people in the hemisphere.

The pretext was a false claim that Morales had stolen the election. This was arguably even more transparently false than Donald J. Trump's "stop the steal" effort in the 2020 US presidential election. Trump's claim is rightfully dismissed because there is no evidence to support it. But the claim that Bolivia's election was stolen, led by OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro, was numerically untenable from day one, as 133 economists and statisticians explained in an [open letter](#) to the OAS.

All this is relevant not because the Bolivian dispute was directly analogous to Venezuela's July election. Rather, it illustrates — as do the numerous twenty-first century examples cited above — how badly things can go wrong when the most powerful actors in the hemisphere are more interested in regime change than they are in helping resolve any crisis or dispute, as has been the case with regard to US policy towards Venezuela for the past 25 years.

Almagro himself is still Secretary General of the OAS, and can be expected to prioritize regime change as compared to conflict resolution as in the past, with respect to Venezuela.

It is interesting to recall how the false fraud narrative that served to justify the Bolivian coup was undone. A news [report](#) appeared in the *New York Times* on June 7, 2020, which debunked the story that the 2019 election was stolen. The “flawed” OAS analysis, the report stated, helped “force out a president” and “fueled a chain of events that changed the South American nation’s history.” After that one report, the prior narrative of a stolen election largely disappeared from the major news reporting rather quickly.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, the other examples cited above also help explain how the US (and for Haiti at least twice, together with the OAS) “changed [each] nation’s history.”

## 6. A Way Forward

The purpose of the above references to the recent history of US and OAS intervention is not to imply anything about the results of the presidential election in Venezuela. Rather, this history is important to keep in mind for what happens going forward and how to reach a negotiated solution to Venezuela’s crisis. One lesson of these past 25 years (and many more) is that there is a need for regional actors who are strongly committed to a non-violent, negotiated solution, in order to get one. And it is incumbent on those who care about a peaceful solution to work to ensure that the US government supports the efforts of these actors.

In the weeks since the July 28 vote, a number of countries have recognized Maduro’s claimed victory and/or recognized him as president-elect, including Bolivia, Honduras, Cuba, China, Russia, Turkey, Mali, Mozambique and other countries. On the other hand, the governments of Peru, Argentina, Panama, and Costa Rica have formally recognized González as the president-elect. For its part, the US has stated its belief that González received the most votes but has thus far [stopped short](#) of formally recognizing him as president-elect.

However the US administration could eventually recognize a parallel government as occurred in 2019 with Guaidó – a policy that failed (and that would probably have required a bloody military

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<sup>3</sup> Almagro’s reaction to the *New York Times* article is also interesting. He responded with an angry, disjointed 3200-word [press release](#) “recognizing the NYT right to lie, distort, and twist information, data, and facts, and to mix truth and lies as often as it wishes.” He accused the Times of having “a well-documented controversial history with truth in relation to dictatorships and totalitarianism,” going back to their reporting on the Soviet Union 90 years ago, which he claimed was “ultimately more a defense of Stalin than of the truth.” The Times, he said, “was instrumental in building a pro-Castro narrative” in the late 1950s. OAS (2020).

coup to succeed). This would also increase the probability of yet more economic sanctions, including the revocation of licenses given to multinational corporations to allow them to engage in economic activity in Venezuela, particularly within the oil industry.

Snapping back to prior, failed policies detailed in the previous section is unlikely to convince the Maduro administration to give up power, will certainly cost many lives, and will cause much additional suffering.

The new presidential term in Venezuela does not begin until January 2025, providing more than four months for all sides to reach a negotiated agreement and allow for diplomatic efforts to take shape. In that regard, it seems like the most promising efforts are led by the group formed by Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia, who are “holding conversations with both sides”, as the Associated Press [reports](#). The countries also have generally good relations with Russia and China, who have recognized Maduro as president–elect and are considered to have some degree of influence over his government.

The leaders of these three countries also have decades of experience dealing with the problems embodied by the current conflict in Venezuela, including the election–related problems. Brazilian president Lula de Silva himself was jailed following an illegal process of lawfare, preventing him from participating in Brazil’s 2018 presidential election, which he was widely expected to win.<sup>4</sup> The conviction that jailed him was subsequently overturned and the persecution subsided.<sup>5</sup>

Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador lost the Mexican presidential election in 2006 in a disputed election in which ballots at more than half the voting tables in the election did not add up.<sup>6</sup> And Gustavo Petro, Colombia’s president, was once a member of a guerrilla group that [formed following allegations of electoral fraud](#). As president, he has been a champion of the

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<sup>4</sup> See Weisbrot (2018), Fishman (2020), and Fishman (2021).

<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that the United States government contributed to the lawfare that jailed Lula and prevented him from being re–elected in 2018. See Weisbrot (2022). Lula has [spoken](#) about the role that the [US government played](#) in the [investigation](#) and legal proceedings that jailed him and prevented him from participating in the 2018 election. Each mesa, or voting table, begins with a recorded number of blank ballots. When voting stops, the remaining blank ballots, plus the voted ballots, should add up to this initial number. For more than half of the tables, they did not. The authorities also conducted a sample recount after the election; the difference between this sample and the voting result was statistically significant, and indicated a reversal of the election result. See Weisbrot (2006).

ongoing peace process in his own country, which seeks to end decades of civil conflict through dialogue and mediation.

The likely alternative is not promising: if these governments were to be sidelined, the United States would likely play a bigger role together with rightwing regional governments who are allied with Washington. Given the history described above, it is highly unlikely that this would result in a positive outcome for Venezuela.

Though there have been mixed signals indicating at least tepid support in favor of cooperation with Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia, it is not clear how far this will go, or how long the US administration's support for these dialogue efforts will last. Some observers see the administration as trying to avoid trouble before its own election in November. This tendency has been prevalent in the past, and some have seen the Venezuelan government's decision to hold elections shortly before the US elections as motivated by the idea that US intervention would be less likely. The administration may be even more circumspect than in previous years because it's likely that if Democrats win a close presidential election in the US, they will have to deal with a fight over the election results. And then there is also the issue of migration, which could increase if the situation deteriorates further in Venezuela.

Whatever the case, the crisis in Venezuela is unlikely to be resolved soon and it will be necessary to generate public pressure for diplomacy, negotiations, an end to sanctions and other illegal, coercive measures; and in favor of cooperation with other governments who share those goals.

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