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## **Erosion of Venezuelan Democracy**

### **I. Introduction**

Venezuela is currently one of the least democratic countries in the world, but it was not always that way. Before the election of Hugo Chavez in 1998, Venezuela was one of the most democratic countries in not just Latin America but the world. How did such a strong country, rich in oil, fall into the authoritarian regime that it is today? Authoritarian transitions often occur through military coups or external intervention; however, Venezuela's democratic erosion followed a different trajectory. That although, was not the case in Venezuela, it was through means of a democratically elected Hugo Chavez which started the chain of events that led to the authoritarian regime that is today. Venezuela's democracy eroded not through common means of a coup, military intervention or external factors, but through an at first free, fair and competitive election that democratically elected a leader. Notably, Chavez himself had previously led a coup attempt before later securing office through electoral means. As Karana and Tangin note, widespread public dissatisfaction with the political establishment created an opportunity for an outsider candidate, allowing Chavez to mobilize popular support through anti-elitist rhetoric.

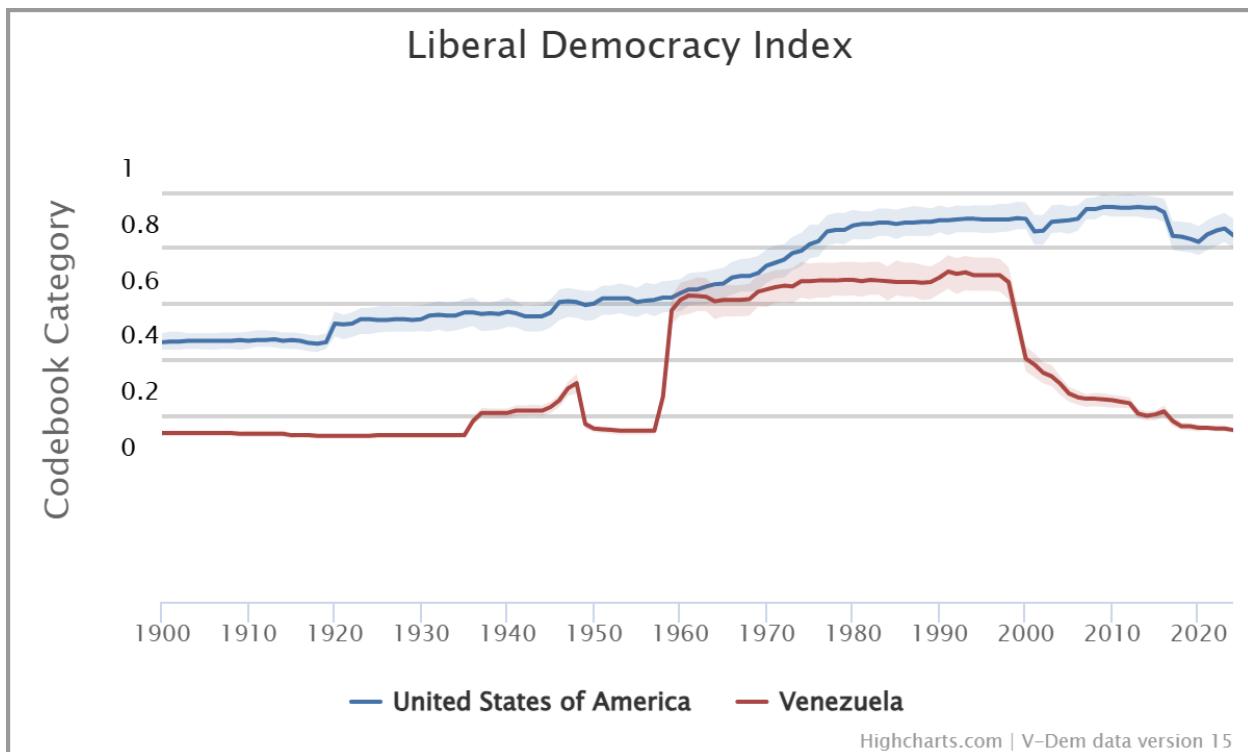
After he got elected, Chavez started eroding democracy from within. He started the writing of a new constitution, ignored and undermined checks and balances and slowly transferred power to himself as the executive. He used Venezuelan oil company PDVSA to his advantage, rigged elections and eliminated opposition. Chavez passed in 2013, however, his successor, Nicolas Maduro continued Chavez's work and finished dismantling the economy and

the institutions in Venezuela. Since then, the country has had more rigged elections, increased violence and has had many of its citizens leave the country to others around the world. This is the chain of events that has led Venezuela to be as authoritarian as it is today.

## **II. Venezuela Before Chavez**

Before Chavez was elected, primarily in the 1960s, Venezuela was one of the most democratic nations in Latin America. It was a country that made its economy from the oil they had in the country, had competitive parties, and strong institutions. It was around the 1960s that “scholars agree that Venezuela had a strong early rising democracy. Venezuela managed to establish most institutions associated with liberal democracy: separation of powers, commitment to the rule of law and civil liberties.” (Corrales 24). Examples of strong institutions during this time in Venezuela were the two strong parties which were the Democratic Action Party (AD) and the Social Christian Party (COPEI) as well as PDVSA (oil company) later in the 1970s.

As a result of these parties, Venezuela had competition and strong elections. These elections as well as the positive results that the competition head partly explains how Venezuela used to be so democratic. It would be hard although to admit that there was no corruption at all. President Perez Jimenez tries to seize power, the 1973 oil crisis caused increased debt and the nationalization of the oil industry. This period was not free from corruption or political instability; however, these shortcomings did not undermine Venezuela’s democratic institutions. Although “the system was not perfect, Venezuela’s liberal democracy index came close to matching the United States (Corrales 24). The figure from VDEM below, represents the closeness of the Venezuelan liberal democracy index to that of the United States that Corrales mentions.



**Figure 1.**

As shown by Figure 1 above, the liberal democracy levels of the United States and Venezuela were the closest are around 1960. Even after that, the United States of course rapidly increased due to the civil rights movement and other factors, even so, they remained constant in Venezuela. Despite some flaws in the system, the liberal democracy index remained the same due to strong institutions and economy. The Venezuelan economy grew rapidly was due to PDVSA and the oil industry. In the 1960s, PDVSA became nationalized and hired many engineers and created many jobs. It was the most profitable company in Latin America and in the top ten most profitable in the world.

Together, institutional and economic factors account for Venezuela's relatively high liberal democracy scores between 1960 and 1999 and dismisses the argument that coups, corruption or external factors dismantled Venezuela's democracy. When the democratically

elected Chavez takes office the liberal democracy index has a sharp decline. This is not a coincidence; his election is what started Venezuela's transition to a more authoritarian regime.

### **III. The Election of Chavez**

It is hard to imagine that a democratic nation would come to elect an authoritarian leader. How exactly did the Venezuelan public get convinced into voting Chavez in then? Venezuela was facing some problems with its citizens viewing the politicians in the country as corrupt elite. Widespread dissatisfaction with political elites had eroded trust in the existing party system. Hugo Chavez, a military man came out as a national hero for many. He tried and failed to pull off a coup, hence highlighting the fact that he was elected is what caused democracy to downfall, not the failed coup attempt. From there he got sent to prison, and many became victims of what they thought was a corrupt elite government.

From there, he got pardoned and later ran for office where he “distinguished himself as a political outsider... he seduced the poorer and working sectors of the economy” (Cyr 5). His opposition was not very strong, at this point, the Venezuelans desired change and believed the two established parties were corrupt. Chavez’s opponent was a man named Enrique Salas Romer, whom he defeated in 1988. In the eyes of the Venezuelan people at this time, “Hugo Chavez arrived on the national stage during the heart of the period of social and political turmoil... relatively unknown, he emerged as a national hero to many who rejected the political system in Venezuela” (Cyr 4).

Many of these voters were the poor and working class of Venezuela who believed they were being treated unfairly by the oil sector. Chavez a revolution, redistribution of oil wealth, rewrite the country’s constitution, and go against the oligarchs. He tried to go against the

establishment. This resonated with the poor and working class of Venezuelan's and his fiery rhetoric was one that appealed to many. Chavez's electoral success resulted from economic frustration, party system, collapse, and his populist appeal. At the time of his election, Chavez faced weak opposition and limited constraints.

#### **IV. The Chavez Presidency**

Following his election Chavez initiated his efforts to concentrate executive power. Throughout his presidency, "Chavez centered on backsliding" (Corrales 28). He did this in several ways including: ignoring checks and balances, rewriting the constitution, increasing government spending from PDVSA and controlling the media.

His undermining of checks and balances started when he called on the constituent assembly to rewrite the constitution. Once he called for this, the Supreme Court was very opposed to it, and he did not have enough support at first. He then proceeded to ignore what the Supreme Court had said and make his own radical interpretation of what they had said. The court said that the decision to change the country lies within the people. Chavez argued that the current constitution did not allow the people to express their will and change the government. After a failed referendum, a second one took place and Chavez was able to call the assembly into place, a move that weakened checks on executive authority.

From there, he made sure to take power away from the courts as well as congress. This ensured that he had as much power as possible. He was then able to put loyalists throughout the government in order to get the support he needed to take control of as much of the government as he possibly could. "The constituent assembly of 1999, in fact, served to facilitate the total takeover of state powers by a new political group supporting the president, which crushed all

others including existing political parties” (Carias 40). Eventually, he expanded his authoritarianism by taking control of the private sector with Venezuela’s most important and profitable company, PDVSA.

The economy started to decline when he made this move with “the origin lying in PDVSA’s intermediates... which were used by those accused of wrongdoing to misappropriate funds” (Country Report). Essentially, Chavez started using the money that PDVSA made in order to fund social programs that kept his support high with the poor and struggling lower class of the country, “PDVSA was known for providing many gifts and social programs for poor towns” (Corrales 70). Of course, increased government spending declined the Venezuelan economy, and it was blamed on the current oil situation in the world. While an external factor was blamed here and is an argument that could perhaps be pointed to, it is the fact that Chavez essentially used PDVSA for personal gain and support that declined Venezuela’s economy.

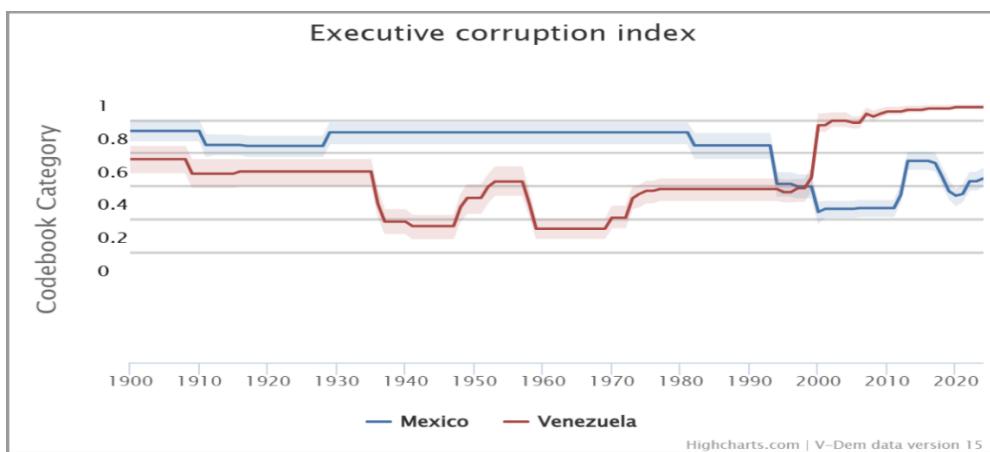
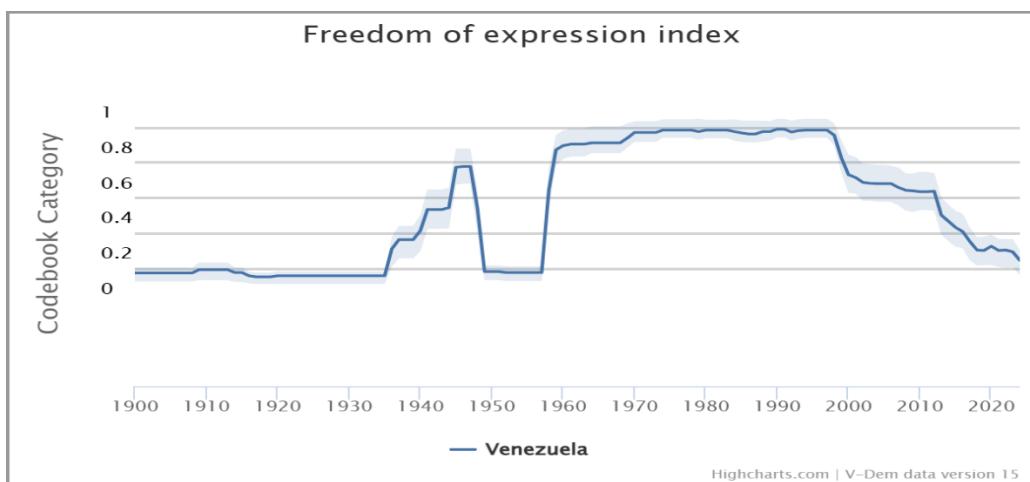


Figure 2.

The executive corruption index above comes from VDEM and is a measure of theft and robbery by the executive branch and its members. In Figure 2 above Venezuela is being compared with another Latin American country, Mexico which also is usually associated with

corruption. It highlights Chavez's theft and robbery from the private sector with a sharp increase in the 1990s, compared to Mexico's which stayed relatively the same around that time. This theft and overtaking of the private sector is an authoritarian tactic which was done by a democratically elected leader.

One final way that Chavez took part in democratic backsliding during his presidency was through silencing the media. This is another common authoritarian tactic. He silenced media that he did not agree with and tried his best to make the media as positive for him as possible. The support for him varied greatly in areas where people had access to actual media as opposed to his controlled one. There was a "drop for support for Chavez during the sample period which was strongest in areas with access to opposition television via signal" (Knight and Tribin). The freedom of expression index from VDEM declined in the late 1990s and early 2000s as represented by Figure 3 below.



**Figure 3.**

Through this support, he was able to get rid of term limits in 2009, allowing him and his successor Maduro to run as many times as they wished. Unfortunately for Chavez, he passed away in 2013, but he had Maduro as his successor.

## V. The Maduro Presidency

Maduro then “won the 2013 election” (Corrales) by a very close margin. He continued Chavez’s authoritarian work by rigging elections, using the military and getting help from foreign authoritarian allies such as Russia.

Maduro was also a suspect in using oil money for his personal success. After having beat Henrique Capriles by about 1.5% points, the opposition to Maduro demanded a recount. Maduro has been relevant in corruption the Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE) or the National elections committee in Venezuela. They gave Maduro the win, later officially inaugurating him as president of Venezuela. Although these actions triggered widespread protests, institutional control by the regime prevented political reversal.

Corrales argues “every authoritarian regime needs military support, Maduro has it.” The military is a big source of violence and a huge threat to the Venezuelan people. Any sort of manifestations or protests end up resulting in violence and deaths. Also, under the Chavez presidency from before groups called the colectivos were formed. They are essentially paramilitary groups with weapons that also incite violence. This is an issue when it comes to elections as well.

With the help of violence as well as control over the CNE, Maduro can control the elections as much as he wants. Although Maduro makes the elections seem competitive at times, it is not the case. He will let candidates perhaps oppose him for a bit but “in the aftermath of the primaries, the opposition candidate (or candidates) will also have to contend with Venezuela’s fraught electoral institutions...tainted by regime influence and high levels of executive control”

(Berg and Zieman 3). There are two elections that can be used as evidence for this, the 2018 election and the 2024 election.

In the 2018 election, Maduro was going up against Henri Falcon and Javier Bertucci. This was not without controversy as Maduro had moved the date of the election. On top of that he decided to ban candidates of many other parties from even running in this election. Concerns over the irregularities regarding the scheduling and the banning of certain parties caught much attention. The two other candidates as well as democratic countries such as the United States and the European Union rejected these results. Nonetheless, Maduro continued in power. Any demonstrations were met by violence from the government which is a common theme with the elections since Maduro took office.

Much of the same happened in the 2024 election and Berg and Henry believe that “Maduro would be able to change the election schedule as he did in 2018.” There was an election set but there was much done by Maduro to prevent the opposition from winning. The lead person in the opposition who was supposed to face Maduro was Maria Corina Machado. She was the head of the opposition and was going to face Maduro as she had won the primaries. Nevertheless, Maduro banned Machado from running and had to be replaced by Edmundo Gonzalez. This time around, the election was getting much attention from around the world and Maduro and his regime made it seem close at first. In many polls, the opposition was leading. Come election day, Maduro used threats of violence as well as control of the CNE to prevent people from voting.

Faced with violence in Venezuela, there were also problems while abroad. Many citizens who are eligible to vote are living abroad in countries such as Colombia, the United States, Spain and Mexico. “Although millions of these Venezuelans living abroad had the formal right to vote

at embassies, the Maduro government had made it very hard for them to actually cast ballots” (Corrales and Kronick). Election fraud was not even being hidden anymore, it was very apparent. Maduro ended up winning despite the opposition leading in the polls before the election. This was met with rejections from democratic countries all around the world but supported by other authoritarian regimes.

A comparison of the elections of a democratic country and Venezuela can be seen below.

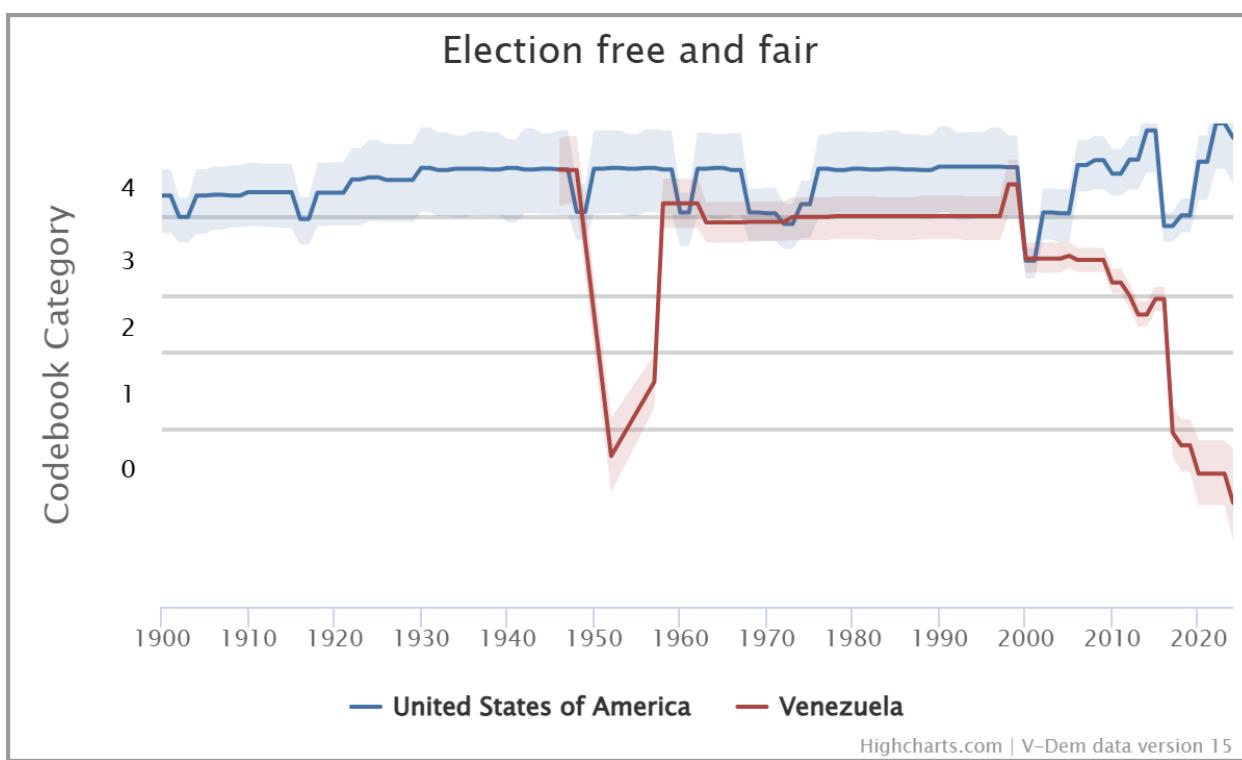


Figure 4.

As seen in Figure 4, free and fair elections did go down under Chavez’s time but got much worse during the Maduro elections in 2013, 2018 and 2024. After 2024, they are as close to zero in free and fair as they can be, whereas a democratic country (USA) is almost at the top. This highlights just how unfair elections are in Venezuela, especially after Maduro succeeded Chavez.

A final aspect of the Maduro presidency that led Venezuela further into authoritarianism is the support they get from other authoritarian regimes. These include countries such as Russia, China and Iran. As the United States, Europe and other democratic countries around the world have cut relations with Venezuela and their oil, these other countries have not. “Venezuela turned increasingly to Russia” (Corrales). These other countries providing support to Venezuela over democratic ones just further Venezuela from democracy. It is important to note that this chain of events is still going from a democratic election in the 1990s. Now in 2025, the consequences are from that democratically elected leader and his successor, not external factors.

## **VI. Counterarguments**

While it is safe to say the erosion of democracy and transition to authoritarianism came from a democratically elected leader, there is an argument that it could have been external factors such as the economy or oil prices around the world.

When looking at the economy specifically, some scholars point to per capita income. Grier and Maynard argue that “the observed reductions in inequality and poverty should not be attributed to Chavez’s leadership, the legacy may have more to do with the harm caused by the per capita income.” What they fail to acknowledge here is that it was in fact Chavez’s leadership that declined the economy and therefore the per capita income. With PDVSA, many people lost jobs, went into poverty, and he took the money for his own personal gain. Again, he used the money for support, the reason that there was not much money with the Venezuelan public is because Chavez took control, distributing it as he pleased. The economy itself was a result of Chavez being elected and using it to his advantage

Oil prices around the world is another issue that many scholars tend to look at. “In the 1980s, the country faced two shocks: decline in export prices and debt crisis” (Hausman and Rodriguez 2). Again, this is an issue relating to oil. While the prices of oil around the world were changing and there was a crisis, the reason that Venezuela was not making much money off oil is Chavez’s social programs. That money was redistributed to the poor and the struggling in order to keep support for Chavez alive. Venezuela is rich in oil, it could have kept the economy going even through a crisis. Although, oil prices could have caused an issue, the reason to revenue made was because Chavez reworked PDVSA.

There is also an argument by other authoritarian leaders around the world that Venezuela actually is not authoritarian. They claim that Venezuela actually does have free and fair elections. The elections are competitive and there are other candidates allowed to run. This could not be further from the truth, not during Chavez and even less true under Maduro.

Under Chavez “the possibility of elections being rigged generated a deep lack of confidence in the electoral system, which led the opposition to not participate in the 2005 legislative elections” (Jimenez and Hidalgo). This emphasized that even during Chavez, the opposition was deterred from running, which is not democratic at all but authoritarian.

The same can be said about more recently during the time of Maduro. Especially with this latest election in 2024. “If a fair election is held, the victory of the anti-Chavez candidate is certain, it will depend on how well the Chavez faction respects the agreement” (Sukaguchi). This did not happen, and with the evidence of election fraud being very believable with physical evidence in the violence, banning candidates and preventing people abroad from voting, this election was far from democratic. Therefore, although perhaps a bit obvious, the claim by

authoritarians that Venezuela is actually free and fair and democratic can be easily brought down through election fraud evidence.

## **VII. Conclusion**

Venezuela's democracy was a victim of a democratically elected populist which turned into one of the most authoritarian regimes in the world. While at first very democratic, even close to the United States when it came to democracy, frustration over politicians led to the election of Hugo Chavez. He was democratically elected and then started the downfall of democracy in the country. He dismantled institutions, undermined checks and balances and took as much power as possible. He got money by taking over the private sector and eventually took away term limits. Once he died, he was succeeded by Maduro who continued his authoritarian agenda with the use of the military and rigged elections, leading Venezuela to be as authoritarian as it is today.

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