



**BRIEFING PAPER**

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# Venezuela: 2020 parliamentary election

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## Summary

Venezuela held a parliamentary election on Sunday 6 December 2020.

Ahead of the election campaign beginning, several opposition parties announced they would not participate, declaring the election to be fraudulent and illegitimate.

President Maduro's ruling socialist party – the PSUV – secured a landslide victory, taking 253 of the 277 available seats in the National Assembly.

This victory sees Maduro taking control of all branches of state in Venezuela.

Many in the international community have refused to recognise the election result. Meanwhile, opposition leader Juan Guaidó has vowed to continue as interim President and Deputies elected to the 2015 parliament, which he presided over, have voted to extend their mandate.

Thus, Venezuela has two contested Presidents and National Assemblies, reflecting the enduring political struggle between Maduro and Guaidó. Constitutionally, such a situation cannot continue indefinitely.

# 1. Background

Legislative elections in Venezuela take place every five years. The unicameral National Assembly (Asamblea Nacional) replaced the bicameral Congreso Nacional (National Congress) following the ratification of the 1999 Constitution. The assembly's members are known as Deputies.

The 2020 election decided 277 National Assembly seats, after the National Electoral Council announced an increase of 110 seats from the previous legislature.

A parallel voting system was used, with 144 seats chosen by list, allocated using the d'Hondt method<sup>1</sup>, and the remaining 133 seats chosen by first-past-the-post voting in 87 constituencies. The number of Deputies appointed per constituency is dependent upon population size. Within these figures, indigenous minorities have the right to select three Deputies.

On 1 July 2020 the National Electoral Council called for the Parliamentary election to take place on 6 December.

The election took place amid the Covid-19 pandemic, which had – by election day – infected over 100,000 people in Venezuela<sup>2</sup>. The Government announced face masks were required when voting and that voting machines would be disinfected after every vote. The Bolivarian Militia, a branch of the armed forces, was tasked with guaranteeing social distancing.

Before this election, the legislature was the only one of five Venezuelan branches of state that President Maduro did not control.<sup>3</sup>

With the main opposition leader – Juan Guaidó – leading a boycott of elections he called fraudulent, it was highly likely Maduro would take control of the National Assembly.

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<sup>1</sup> The European Parliament, of which 16 Member States use the D'Hondt method for elections to that body, has a useful explainer on [Understanding the d'Hondt method](#).

<sup>2</sup> ['Here's all you need to know about Venezuela's legislative polls'](#), *Al Jazeera*, 5 December 2020

<sup>3</sup> Venezuela's 1999 Constitution changed the country's three-branch system of government to a five-branch system. In addition to the executive (President), legislature (National Assembly) and judiciary (the courts), an electoral branch (National Electoral Council) and a citizens branch (composed of the Defender of the People, Chief Public Prosecutor, and the Comptroller General) were added.

## 2. 2020 Parliamentary election

### 2.1 Political parties

Until 1998, two parties dominated Venezuelan politics: Acción Democrática (AD) and the Social Christian Party (COPEI). By the December 1998 elections, these two parties had become discredited due to their association with inept or corrupt governments. AD and COPEI initially saw their support drop significantly, with the main presidential contenders beginning to represent new political movements.

For the 2020 parliamentary election, the National Electoral Council (CNE) president said there were 88 political parties able to register candidates.

On 2 August, 27 parties announced that they would not participate in the “electoral fraud”; a claim made in view of the Maduro regime taking over three of the main opposition parties and installing puppet leaders, appointing new members to the CNE without the participation of the National Assembly, and clamping down on critics.

The 27 opposition parties invited the international community to reject the process and results as “fraudulent and in violation of democratic principles”<sup>4</sup>. The parties signing the agreement included the four largest opposition parties: Popular Will, Justice First, Democratic Action and A New Era.<sup>5</sup>

### United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela – “PSUV”)

The United Socialist Party of Venezuela is the country’s largest and is led by President Nicolás Maduro.

A left-wing party, PSUV was founded in 2007 by former president Hugo Chávez as a merger of Chávez’ own party – the Fifth Republic Movement – and a range of smaller parties involved in the pro-Bolivarian Revolution.

PSUV defines its values and principles as follows:

The party is constituted as a socialist party, affirms the socialist society as the only alternative to overcome the capitalist system. It takes as creative sources the thoughts and works of Simón Bolívar, Simón Rodríguez and Ezequiel Zamora. In the same way, it takes the principles of scientific socialism, Christianity, liberation theology, all critical and humanistic universal thought, gender equity and equality, and the ethical obligation to build a respectful model of life and of the mother. land that guarantees the survival of humanity.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> ‘2020 parliamentary election’, *BBC Monitoring – Venezuela*, 14 December 2020

<sup>5</sup> [Por unanimidad: los partidos políticos de la Unidad deciden no participar en el fraude y convocan a un pacto nacional para la salvación de Venezuela](#), National Assembly of Venezuela, 2 August 2020

<sup>6</sup> Artículo 3: Valores y Principios, [Estatutos del Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela \(PSUV\)](#), 24 April 2010

## Popular Will (Voluntad Popular – “VP”)

Popular Will (also translated as People’s Will) was founded in 2009 by former Chacao Mayor Leopoldo Lopez, ahead of the 2010 elections.

A centrist party, VP describes itself as being progressive and social-democratic. The party’s leading figure is Juan Guaidó, who was President of the National Assembly following the 2015 election.

The party aims to unite Venezuelans – from all backgrounds – who consider President Maduro and his predecessor, President Hugo Chávez, to be oppressive and authoritarian.

Popular Will’s commitment, “The Best Venezuela” (La Mejor Venezuela), states:

We are convinced that a safer, more caring and prosperous country can be built, which is the Venezuela of Peace, Well-being and Progress, living under the protection of an authentic and sincere justice, a just justice; turning Venezuela into a producing country, where work serves to generate life and is a respected and well valued activity.

The Best Venezuela is the country where all rights are for all people equally, without exclusion of any kind. This is the path of action and struggle that we have outlined for ourselves and the one that we propose to all our Venezuelan brothers.<sup>7</sup>

The first two LGBT members of the National Assembly, elected in 2015, were Popular Will candidates.

## Democratic Action (Acción Democrática – “AD”)

The National Democratic Party (established in 1936) was renamed Democratic Action in 1941 and is a social-democratic, centre-left party.

The National Democratic Party had been formed during a period in which Venezuela’s government relaxed its restrictive laws regulating political organisations.

By the end of 1937, however, the ruling dictatorship feared the opposition was growing in strength and clamped down on political activities. When Rómulo Betancourt, a left-wing anti-communist who had been sent into exile, returned to Venezuela in 1941, he took over the party and renamed it Democratic Action.

Democratic Action supported the military coup that overthrew President Isaias Medina Angarita’s government in 1945 and subsequently came to power as head of a civilian-military junta. When free presidential elections were held two years later, the party gained more than 70 per cent of votes, with support particularly strong among the workers.<sup>8</sup>

A decade of dictatorship began in 1958, during which time Democratic Action was ordered to dissolve.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> [La Mejor Venezuela](#), Leopoldo López website [accessed 12 January 2021]

<sup>8</sup> [Democratic Action](#), Britannica [accessed 12 January 2021]

<sup>9</sup> [Historia del partido Acción Democrática](#), Acción Democrática website [accessed 12 January 2021]

From the return of democracy in 1958 until 1994, candidates from either AD or COPEI were elected President.

Democratic Action has traditionally advocated for state-led development programmes to encourage rapid economic development and extensive social welfare programs. Since the 1980s, the party has supported economic deregulation and the privatisation of many state-owned ventures, policies that were deeply unpopular among large segments of the Venezuelan population. The party, which has roughly one million members, has historically performed best in rural areas.

## **Social Christian Party (Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente – “COPEI”)**

The Social Christian Party – widely known as COPEI – was founded in 1946 by Rafael Caldera and leans centre-right.

The party was very influential for four decades, as one of the two main political parties in Venezuela, but its support has decreased substantially in recent elections.

## **2.2 Election campaign**

Venezuela’s National Electoral Council (CNE) provided for the election campaign to run from 21 November to 5 December, the day before election day.

Ahead of the campaign, in June 2020, Venezuela’s Supreme Court – a body loyal to Maduro – appointed new members to the CNE. These included three people who had been sanctioned by the US and Canada. The appointments took place without the participation of the opposition-led National Assembly, as required by law. The Supreme Court also took over three of the leading opposition parties, appointing new leaders that were accused of conspiring to support Maduro.<sup>10</sup>

On 13 June, Juan Guaidó, the leading opposition figure, rejected the appointment of new members to the CNE, saying: “We will not validate any electoral fraud”. The following day the 11 main opposition parties rejected the new appointments and said they would not participate in any election declared by the CNE, declaring it “illegitimate” and that: “The Venezuelan democratic parties will not validate or recognise any electoral farce mounted by the dictatorship.”<sup>11</sup>

On 2 August, 27 political parties announced that they would not participate in the parliamentary election and invited the international community to reject the poll.

The following month, on 8 September, five opposition political parties united to form the Democratic Alliance, to contest the election. The member parties were: Hope for Change (El Cambio), Social Christian Party (COPEI), Let's Change Citizen Movement (CMC), Progressive Advance (AP), and Democratic Action (AD).

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<sup>10</sup> [‘Venezuela votes in parliamentary elections amid Guaido-led opposition boycott’](#), *France24*, 6 December 2020

<sup>11</sup> [‘2020 parliamentary election’](#), *BBC Monitoring – Venezuela*, 14 December 2020

The European Union, after meeting with representatives from the Maduro administration and representatives from the opposition, decided not to send an EU Election Observation Mission.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrel said European External Action Service (EEAS) officials made it “crystal clear” that “if Venezuela did not decide to postpone the elections and used the additional time to meet the necessary democratic standards, an EU Election Observation Mission will be absolutely impossible.<sup>12</sup>”

When the election campaign officially began, the main consideration for most of the electorate was Venezuela’s economic crisis. Inflation was running at almost 200 per cent and there had been severe shortages of basic goods, including food and medicines.

There were extremely high rates of violent crime and public services – including utilities, health and justice systems – were collapsing.

## 2.3 Election results

Venezuela’s National Electoral Council (CNE) published the official results of the legislative election, which saw a turnout of just 31 per cent.

President Maduro’s ruling socialist party – the PSUV – secured a landslide victory, following a boycott by the major opposition parties.

In winning 69 per cent of the vote, Maduro managed to take 91 per cent of seats in the National Assembly.

This victory allows Maduro to tighten his grip over Venezuela as he now controls all state institutions.

Congratulating the PSUV and its partners on their victory, Maduro said: “Venezuela has a new Assembly. This is a great victory for democracy and the country’s Constitution. Five years ago we recognised the opposition’s triumph, but today it was our turn to win.”<sup>13</sup>

Party	% of valid votes	Seats
United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV)	69.34	253
Democratic Action (AD)	6.95	11
Hope for Change (El Cambio)	4.56	3
Progressive Advance (AP)	4.43	3
Venezuela First (PV)	4.18	2
Social Christian Party (COPEI)	2.82	1
Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV)	2.73	1
Indigenous candidates	-	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>277</b>

Source: [National Assembly \(Venezuela\)](#), Europa World online [retrieved 14 January 2021]

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.



## 2.4 International reaction

### United Kingdom

Following Venezuela's parliamentary election, the UK Government issued a statement calling the election "illegitimate" and declaring that the UK Government did not recognise the result.

A Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office spokesperson said the election had been neither free nor fair and that it did not meet internationally accepted conditions, nor the requirements of Venezuelan law.

Furthermore, the statement said: "The UK recognises the National Assembly democratically elected in 2015 and recognises Juan Guaidó as interim constitutional President of Venezuela."<sup>14</sup>

### United States

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, in a strongly worded press release, condemned the elections and said the US would also continue to recognise Juan Guaidó as interim President and support the National Assembly elected in 2015.

The press release was dismissive of Maduro and Venezuela's democratic deficit, saying:

This farce was nothing more than an attempt to install a complicit, puppet National Assembly, beholden only to Maduro, while destroying the country's only remaining democratic institution truly representative of the Venezuelan people.<sup>15</sup>

### European Union

The EU expressed regret that Venezuela's parliamentary election went ahead without a national agreement on electoral conditions, and criticised the planning and execution of the poll.

The EU urged a political solution to end the current impasse – including credible local, presidential and legislative elections – and said it would continue to engage with Juan Guaidó and other representatives of the outgoing National Assembly elected in 2015, which was "the last free expression of Venezuelans in an electoral process."<sup>16</sup>

The press release added the EU deeply regretted the National Assembly assuming its mandate on 5 January on the basis of non-democratic elections.

### The Americas

A group of 16 countries across the Americas – mainly from Latin America – issued a declaration calling on the international community to reject the "fraudulent" election results and support a peaceful transition

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<sup>14</sup> [Venezuelan National Assembly elections, 6 December 2020: FCDO statement](#), Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office press release, 7 December 2020

<sup>15</sup> [The United States Condemns Venezuela's Fraudulent Legislative Elections](#), US Department of State, 7 December 2020

<sup>16</sup> [Venezuela: Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union](#), Council of the EU press release, 6 January 2021

process, defined and driven by Venezuelans, “to find a peaceful and constitutional solution that will lead the country to free, fair and credible presidential and parliamentary elections, as soon as possible”.<sup>17</sup>

### Russia

Russia, however, hailed the elections, with Russia’s Foreign Minister issuing a statement on 7 December, saying: “The electoral process in Venezuela was organised in a more responsible and transparent manner than in some countries which usually present themselves as an ‘example of democracy’.”<sup>18</sup>

## 2.5 Looking ahead

On 26 December 2020, before the new National Assembly convened, the opposition majority led by Juan Guaidó voted to extend the mandate of the 2015 parliament (Democratic Action abstained), until free and fair presidential and parliamentary elections are held in 2021.

The parliament’s Deputies reiterated their refusal to recognise the December 2020 election and extended Guaidó’s tenure as president of the National Assembly and interim President of Venezuela.

On 5 January 2021 the new parliament (elected in December for the 2021-26 term) was convened and Jorge Rodríguez Gómez was elected President of the National Assembly.

Thus, Venezuela has two contested National Assemblies, reflecting the enduring political struggle between Maduro and Guaidó.

Although the UK, US and other countries and organisations have pledged to continue supporting Guaidó, it is unclear whether he can maintain this widespread international support.

Some media reports have indicated that several EU governments, as well as President-elect Joe Biden’s incoming administration in the US, are considering changes to their Venezuela policies and that this could include re-thinking sanctions against the Maduro administration, as well as their existing acknowledgement of Guaidó as head of state.<sup>19</sup>

Constitutionally, Venezuela can’t continue with two Presidents and two National Assemblies indefinitely.

Guaidó’s legitimacy was based on his leadership of the previous, opposition-controlled, National Assembly. With the new parliament – and all other branches of the state under Maduro’s grip – the President is in control.

Writing in pro-opposition newspaper *El Nacional* on 30 December, columnist Victor A. Bolívar said that maintaining an opposition-controlled National Assembly with “exiled deputies”, without a full

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<sup>17</sup> [Joint Declaration on Venezuela](#), Government of Canada, 7 December 2020

<sup>18</sup> ‘2020 parliamentary election’, *BBC Monitoring – Venezuela*, 14 December 2020

<sup>19</sup> ‘Explainer: Venezuela: two parliaments, two presidents, one unsolved crisis’, *BBC Monitoring*, 4 January 2021

quorum and without access to Venezuela's Congress building was not likely to exert much real pressure on Maduro.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

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