

# Democratización



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Preliminary notes for November 21

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# Rebellion in the Regional and Municipal elections of 2021

Héctor Briceño<sup>1</sup>

*"On December 3, 1989, the first elections of the 20th century for Governors and Mayors took place; elections had also been held in the 19th century. It was a decisive step for the strengthening of Federal Democracy. Many more are to be taken".*

Rafael Arraiz Lucca<sup>2</sup>.

## Introduction

On Thursday, May 13, 2021, the Venezuelan electoral administration body, the National Electoral Council (CNE), made a public call for Regional and Municipal elections, which were to take place on November 21, 2021<sup>3</sup>. This was in accordance

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1 I would like to thank the kind comments and suggestions that Jesús Castellanos and Eugenio Martínez made on this text.

2 Rafael Arraiz Lucca, historian and member of the *Número de la Academia Venezolana de la Lengua*, on Twitter:<https://twitter.com/rafaelarraiz/status/1466751403225927685?s=21>.

3 Although the call was made by the ruling president of the CNE, Pedro Calzadilla, on May 13, 2021, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xqoZ2pdpKso>) and days later the electoral schedule was published on the website of the electoral body, the official call was not published in the Electoral Gazette until June 28 of the same year (Electoral Gazette 979). See analysis of the electoral schedule in: [https://sumate.org/documentos/Informe\\_Cronograma\\_Elecciones21Junio2021\\_210721.pdf](https://sumate.org/documentos/Informe_Cronograma_Elecciones21Junio2021_210721.pdf).

with the national legal mandate that stipulates the election<sup>4</sup> of 23 governors, 253 regional legislators, 335 mayors, and 2,471 municipal councilors every four years. However, this was the first time in more than 20 years that they were to be held simultaneously.

The electoral process was to take place in a complex social, economic and political context, characterized by the ever-growing humanitarian crisis, and framed within a new attempt to hold discussions between the government of Nicolás Maduro and the opposition.

The following analysis will review the political context in which such local and regional elections took place, examine its results, and outline the main consequences and implications that these have for the future of Venezuela. However, we must point out that at the present time of writing this essay the electoral process has not yet concluded: after learning of the defeat of Argenis Chávez, candidate of the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV)<sup>5</sup>, and ally parties for their reelection in Barinas State, against Freddy Superlano, opposition candidate member of Voluntad Popular (VP), the Electoral Chamber of the Supreme Court of Justice (TSJ) proclaimed two sentences<sup>6</sup> that prevented the totalization of votes (official summation) and proclamation of the winning candidate of that entity, alleging the political

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4 Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (1999):

**Article 160.** (...) *The Governor shall be elected for a period of four years by a majority of the people who vote. The Governor may be reelected.*

**Article 162.** (...) *State legislators shall be elected for a period of four years and may be reelected. National law shall regulate the organization and functioning of the Legislative Council.*

**Article 174.** (...) *The Mayor will be elected for a period of four years by the majority of people who vote, and may be reelected.*

5 Governor and candidate for reelection, Argenis Chávez.

6 See Sentences 78 and 79, of 11/29/2021: <http://www.tsj.gob.ve/decisiones#>

disqualification of the opposition candidate by the Comptroller General of the Republic, and ordering the complete repetition of the electoral process, which will be carried out, according to the schedule presented, on January 9, 2022.

### **Political context**

The precarious political conditions in Venezuela abruptly deteriorated after the opposition's electoral victory in the 2015 parliamentary elections. Since then, the government of Nicolás Maduro intensified the measures of repression and persecution against opposition political parties, its supporters, leaders, and the general population.

Opposition parties were outlawed and arbitrated, starting with the inclusive platform Mesa de la Unidad (MUD), as well as the parties Acción Democrática (AD), Primero Justicia (PJ), Voluntad Popular (VP), among others. Many of its leaders have been jailed while others were driven into exile. Political parties allied with the ruling PSUV until 2020, such as Patria Para Todos (PPT), Tupamaro, and Partido Comunista de Venezuela (PCV), were also threatened and/or intervened after breaking with PSUV and trying to present an independent alliance for the parliamentary elections of 2020<sup>7</sup>.

The pressing human rights situation also deteriorated, as reiterated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, in her report for the period June 2020-April 2021, in which she reiterated the persistence of serious violations to Human Rights committed by State agencies and

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7 For an exhaustive analysis of the intervention patterns of Venezuelan political parties see: <https://www.observademocracia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/InformeEspecialOGCD-PartidosPoliticosVenezuelaSeptiembre2018-1.pdf>

institutions, repeatedly denounced at least since 2017<sup>8</sup>. Upon hearing the complaints of these violations and after conducting a preliminary examination, the International Criminal Court (ICC) decided to formally open an investigation process against Venezuela for “alleged torture, extrajudicial executions or forced disappearances that have occurred against citizens detained by the State” since at least the year 2017<sup>9</sup>. The announcement was made at a press conference in Caracas and together with Nicolás Maduro by the prosecutor Karim A. A. Khan QC of the International Criminal Court.

The complex human rights situation is complemented by the aggravation of the economic crisis that has plunged more than 94% of the population into poverty in 2021 (ENCOVI, 2021)<sup>10</sup>, and forced 6 million Venezuelans to leave the country in search of better opportunities (UN, 2021)<sup>11</sup>. And if all this were not enough, the global health crisis resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the poorest countries most deeply, including Venezuela, which has the second worst vaccination rate in Latin America, surpassing only Haiti<sup>12</sup>.

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8 Report of the United Nations Office for Human Rights on Venezuela 2019: <https://www.ohchr.org/SP/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24788&LangID=S>, Report of the United Nations Office for

Human Rights on Venezuela 2021: <https://venezuela.un.org/es/134630-informe-sobre-la-situacion-de-los-derechos-humanos-en-venezuela>

9 <https://news.un.org/es/story/2021/11/1499562>, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-59109361>

10 ENCOVI 2021: [https://assets.website-files.com/5d14c6a5c4ad42a4e794d0f7/6153ad6fb92e4428cada4fb7\\_Presentacion%20ENCOVI%202021%20V1.pdf](https://assets.website-files.com/5d14c6a5c4ad42a4e794d0f7/6153ad6fb92e4428cada4fb7_Presentacion%20ENCOVI%202021%20V1.pdf)

11 <https://www.r4v.info/es/refugiadosymigrantes>.

12 <https://es.statista.com/estadisticas/1258801/porcentaje-y-numero-vacunados-contracovid-19-en-latinoamerica-por-pais/>

The deterioration of the country's humanitarian and political conditions since 2015 did not prevent the continued holding of elections. Between 2016 and 2020, there were six electoral days: Election of a National Constituent Assembly (2017), Regional elections (2017), Municipal (2017), Presidential (2018)<sup>13</sup>, Municipal (2018) and Parliamentary (2020). The opposition alliance MUD and its main parties (the G4, a group of the four main parties: AD, PJ, VP and Un Nuevo Tiempo-UNT) only participated in the 2017 Regionals. After the year 2017, which was characterized by political protests and violent repression by the government through State agencies, growing conflict, a general climate of hopelessness and an intense campaign of discredit against the elections as a mechanism for political change led the opposition to leave the electoral arena. During this period, mistrust in the discredited electoral institution and its authorities further deteriorated, increasing from 68% in 2015 to 81% in 2018. Likewise, despair among Venezuelans spread even more in a population characterized by its resilient optimism. Thus, while 30% had a pessimistic view of the future in 2015, three years later, in 2018, despair reached 51% of Venezuelans, according to data from the Latinobarómetro Corporation<sup>14</sup>.

The strategy to abstain from voting, coupled with the deterioration of political and electoral conditions, made it possible

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13 Simultaneously to the 2018 presidential elections, the deputies of the State Legislative Councils were elected.

14 The question used to measure trust in the electoral body is the following: How much confidence do you have in the country's electoral institution? The percentage groups the sum of the responses "little" + "none". The question to measure hopelessness about the future is: And in the next twelve months, do you believe that your economic situation and that of your family will be much better, a little better, the same, a little worse, or much worse than today? The percentage groups the sum of the responses: "A little worse" + "Much worse". <https://www.latinobarometro.org/>

for a large part of the international democratic community to ignore the 2018 presidential election. Nicolás Maduro won with 68% of votes, in an election marked by an abstention rate of 54%, and where only a group of four minority opposition political parties (Copei, Avanzada Progresista, Movimiento al Socialismo-MAS, and the Ecological Movement of Venezuela) decided to participate together under the candidacy of the leader Henry Falcón, concentrating 21% of the votes. A third candidate, evangelical pastor Javier Bertucci, obtained 11% through the Esperanza por el Cambio party. Both candidates would open a first crack in the monopoly of the opposition leadership that the MUD had claimed with the help of the G4, and starting from the 2020 parliamentary elections they joined forces on the Democratic Alliance platform.

The electoral boycott as a strategy of the MUD leaders was maintained until 2020, a period during which opposition differences increased after each electoral process, not without the active and interested promotion of the government, which did not skimp on using the money or public institutions to divide and confront the opposition leadership.

During this period, the MUD and the G4 attempted to increase pressure on the government, both internally and internationally. In January 2019, and as a consequence of the ignorance of the 2018 presidential election, the leader of Voluntad Popular (VP) and president of the National Assembly for the 2019-2020 legislative period, Juan Guaidó, was proclaimed interim president and traced a route to "redemocratize" the country. The strategy was summarized in three steps: 1. Cessation of the usurpation, which implied the deposition of the government of Nicolás Maduro; 2. Transitional government, aimed at establishing an administration that would build political-electoral conditions, to finally hold

3. Democratic elections that would allow the country to be progressively re-institutionalized.

However, and despite the efforts aimed at dividing the political-military alliance that supports the government led by Nicolás Maduro, Chavismo resisted. It suffered only only minor fractures that, far from weakening them, have allowed them to purge solidarities<sup>15</sup>.

The passage of time, the boycott of the parliamentary election of December 2020, together with the impossibility of displacing the Chavista government, eroded the national and international credibility of the Interim Government (IG) led by Juan Guaidó and the opposition identified with the MUD, promoting the appearance of new opposition fractures. Thus, in June 2021, and given the indecision of the G4 parties regarding participation in the Regional and Municipal elections called for November, a group of local opposition leaders created a new political party that fed the diversity among the opposition<sup>16</sup>.

A final element that should be noted within the general electoral political context is the beginning of a new process of dialogue between the government and the opposition in Mexico<sup>17</sup>, that has had the mediation of Norway and the support of several countries, including the United States, China and Russia, where some agreements were reached, including some of the conditions

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15 On the fractures within the government, see: <https://www.posmonicionpolitica.com/2021/09/crisis-ruptura-y-colapso-el-fin-de-la.html>

16 The Fuerza Vecinal Party: <https://fuerzavecinal.com/conocenos-2/>

17 Currently suspended.



for the holding of the Regional and Local elections of November 2021<sup>18</sup>.

### **Electoral conditions**

During the years when the MUD and its allied parties decided to boycott the elections, the precarious electoral conditions in Venezuela further deteriorated. Violations of the most elementary political rights worsened. Such is the case of the illegal disqualifications which extended from the opposition parties to also incorporate former allies of the government such as the PCV. The practice of illegal disqualifications imposed by the government through the Comptroller General of the Republic (CGR) began as early as 2002 and have progressively increased since then<sup>19</sup>. For these elections, the list of disqualified people was not even made public (published), nor was it notified to those affected, even less communicated to the rest of the public powers, not even to the Electoral Power, as denounced by its authorities<sup>20</sup>. Additionally, and as the election of the Governor of Barinas showed, the disqualifications have also been announced “ex post”, after the election, to prevent the proclamation of a winning candidate.

Regarding the participation of opposition political parties, although it is true that the government allowed the return of the

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<sup>18</sup> The most important of the agreements reached in the dialogue process in Mexico so far is the establishment of regulations for it, an agreement accepted by both parties called a “memorandum of understanding.” See: <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2021/08/13/6116bd52fdddff66448b4699.html>

<sup>19</sup> See Acceso a la Justicia: <https://accesoalajusticia.org/13-anos-de-inhabilitaciones-politicas-en-una-imagen/>

<sup>20</sup> See <https://accesoalajusticia.org/el-chavismo-no-renuncia-a-las-inhabilitaciones-politicas-para-asegurar-su-hegemonia/> and <https://twitter.com/rpiconh/status/1437540835340558337?s=20>

MUD electoral alliance card, it did not lift the intervention of the opposition parties Acción Democrática and Voluntad Popular, while the Primero Justicia party decided not to participate<sup>21</sup>, even though some of its leaders were candidates in different circuits. Thus, the opposition had the participation of at least 4 alliances: 1. The MUD alliance, made up of the G4 parties (AD, PJ, UNT and VP), plus the parties Convergencia and Movimiento Progresista Venezolano, 2. The Fuerza Vecinal party, 3. Alianza Democrática made up of the Avanzada Progresista, Copei, Esperanza por el Cambio (Cambiemos) parties, plus the factions intervened by the Supreme Court of Acción Democrática (AD) and Voluntad Popular (VP) parties, and, 4. The Independent National Coalition, made up of minority parties that built alliances with all opposition coalitions within the different circuits<sup>22</sup>.

The conditions for electoral competition continue to be characterized by official advantage and the use of public resources, being especially grotesque in the most significant circuits. Thus, according to the monitoring report of the Election Observation Mission of the European Union, coverage of the PSUV candidates on public television (VTV) “was disproportionate, representing more than half of all mentions and appearances of candidates in that channel while the candidates of the Democratic Alliance corresponded to 28% of the news and editorial content (...) The candidates of the MUD party were almost absent from State television, and their minimal coverage was negative”<sup>23</sup>. According to the same report, “the constant presence of the PSUV vice president in State media (from where) he directed fiery attacks

21 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4amEpubeqk>

22 See: <https://talcualdigital.com/cuales-son-las-alianzas-entre-partidos-para-los-comicios-del-12n/>

23 [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/declaracion\\_preliminar\\_venezuela\\_2021\\_final\\_es.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/declaracion_preliminar_venezuela_2021_final_es.pdf), p. 11.

against political opponents, and even against a CNE rector, goes against international standards of impartial coverage of the State media during election periods”<sup>24</sup>. The electoral regulations, especially for the election of collegiate bodies through parallel systems of election of nominal and list positions, is characterized by its disproportionate result that privileges the governing party. Thus, in the state of Barinas, despite the victory (intervened by the CGR and the TSJ) of the opposition, the regional legislative power (Consejo Legislativo Estatal) remained in control of the governing party PSUV in a ratio of 6 to 5, thanks to the electoral system and the design of electoral circuits.

In March 2020, a fire in the CNE warehouses destroyed almost all of the machines that made up the automated voting system, forcing the electoral body to buy new machines<sup>25</sup>. However, the procurement process for the new machines was handled with little transparency. It is known that the machines were purchased from the Argentine company ExClé<sup>26</sup>, but it is unknown if the negotiation and contract conditions complied with the elementary legal regulations. More importantly, it is unknown who developed the software that runs them<sup>27</sup>. However, we must point out that, despite the latter, the voting system was subjected to a comprehensive audit which, according to the civil organization “Venezuelan Electoral Observatory” demonstrated to guarantee “the secrecy of the vote, the transparency of the vote, the reliability of the vote, the accounts that are made and the security of the vote, which includes the non-communication

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibíd.* p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.efe.com/efe/america/politica/se-queman-casi-todas-las-maquinas-de-votacion-sistema-electoral-venezolano/20000035-4191131>

<sup>26</sup> <https://ex-cle.com>

<sup>27</sup> <https://efectocucuyo.com/politica/nuevas-maquinas-de-votacion-casi-60-millones-invertidos-en-una-compra-misteriosa/>

of the voting machines with an external entity during the voting process and before the counting, and the non-communication, neither by internet nor by other means, of the device fingerprint catchers and with machines”<sup>28</sup>.

However, the most significant change in electoral guarantees was the creation of a less biased electoral body, based on the appointment of new authorities. The process began in January 2021 and culminated in May with the appointment of 15 new rectors, 5 principals, and 10 alternates, among whom are 5 independent personalities (2 principals and 3 alternates)<sup>29</sup>.

These new electoral authorities have begun their management clearly oriented to rebuilding trust in the vote as a mechanism for change, including the rectors linked to Chavismo, who have shown a much more balanced and impartial performance than that carried out by the previous authorities, especially during the period of rector Tibisay Lucena.

Another significant advance in electoral conditions is the return of international electoral observation, with the missions of the United Nations, the European Union, and the Carter Center, who were able to deploy throughout the country to observe the electoral process and issue their evaluations, a mechanism that, together with the national electoral observation organizations, generates trust both in voters and in parties and candidates.

Three last comments finalize the general panorama of the electoral conditions. The first is the birth of an initial, timid attempt to regulate the electoral campaign in social media through two articles in the “Specific Regulations on Electoral

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28 <https://oevenezolano.org/2021/07/boletin-68-diez-certezas-tras-la-auditoria-al-sistema-de-votacion/>

29 See: <https://www.observademocracia.org/monitor-electoral-3/>

Campaign and Propaganda for Regional and Municipal Elections 2021”<sup>30</sup>. The second is the institutional promotion from the CNE of gender parity in the party’s candidacies, although the results were wholly disappointing.

Third, we must point out that the special regulation to control the election of indigenous representation in the elections of Legislators of the States and Councilors of the Municipal Councils 2021 consolidates the violation of the most elementary political rights against the Venezuelan indigenous communities. This regulation establishes the holding of second-degree elections in community assemblies, violating the right to direct and secret voting. Likewise, the requirements for candidacies violate the most elementary political equality, by restricting candidacies to those who have “held a position of traditional authority in their respective community”<sup>31</sup>.

In summary, the electoral conditions in which the 2021 Regional and Municipal elections were held do not meet the minimum requirements to be recognized as a democratic process. However, we must recognize the existence of advances that could be decisive for the holding of higher-quality electoral processes in the future. In particular, the positive changes experienced in such a short time show the impact that a change has on institutional political will.

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30 <https://efectococuyo.com/politica/cne-campana-electoral-las-regionales/>

31 See Special Regulations for the election of indigenous representation in the elections of Legislators or Legislators to the Legislative Councils of the States and Councilors and Councilors of the Municipal Councils 2021: [http://www.cne.gob.ve/web/normativa\\_electoral/elecciones/2021/elecciones\\_regionales\\_y\\_municipales\\_2021/documentos/resolucion/resolucion\\_reglamento\\_indigena\\_2021.pdf](http://www.cne.gob.ve/web/normativa_electoral/elecciones/2021/elecciones_regionales_y_municipales_2021/documentos/resolucion/resolucion_reglamento_indigena_2021.pdf)

## 21N: Election day

On November 21, starting from 5 am, the electoral event began to elect all the Governors, Mayors, regional legislators and councilors of the country, as it was proposed. The event was characterized by a series of irregularities that were difficult to evaluate, which may have had different impacts, since it was not a single election process, but rather 3,082 simultaneous ones held in a great diversity of circuits. For this reason, while some irregularities may have been irrelevant in some circuits, in others they may have been decisive.

Among the most recurrent irregularities denounced both by the media and by different initiatives of national electoral observation are:

1. Late opening of polling stations. According to the platform Venezuela Documenta<sup>32</sup>, by 9:30 in the morning, 10.9% of the polling stations reported a delay of between 1 and 3 hours<sup>33</sup>.
2. Arbitrary migrations. According to the same initiative, 36% of the polling stations registered arbitrary migrations, that is, changes not requested by voting center voters, some of which implied a change in the voting circuit, such as from one State to another<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> Venezuela Documenta is an interactive and collaborative database, designed by human rights defender groups, ready to support citizens in registering incidents and patterns linked to the weakening of democracy, human rights, political participation and electoral processes in Venezuela.

<sup>33</sup> <https://venezueladocumenta.org/index.php/2021/11/16/apertura-y-funcionamiento-del-centro/>

<sup>34</sup> <https://venezueladocumenta.org/index.php/2021/11/21/irregularidades-observadas/>

3. Presence of partisan points. The presence of partisan points in the vicinity of the electoral centers was also recorded in 62.8% of the points observed: 55.5% belonging to the PSUV and 7.3% to other political parties, including opposition parties.
4. Electoral propaganda. Electoral propaganda was identified in 30.8% of the centers, according to the observation report of the Venezuelan Electoral Observatory (OEV)<sup>35</sup>.
5. Voter hauling. In 54.2% of the points observed by the same organization, various mechanisms of hauling voters with public resources were also found<sup>36</sup>, mostly by institutions of the national, regional and local government of the ruling party, but also to a lesser extent, by regional and local governments in the hands of opposition parties.
6. Assisted voting. Likewise, the electoral observation organization registered unsolicited accompaniment, a violation of political freedoms and voting secrecy in 11.9% of the voting centers during the morning, a practice that increased to 12.3% in the afternoon.
7. Late closing of voting centers. According to the OEV report, in just over half of the centers analyzed in their study, “the tables closed after 7:00 at night. The rest did the same before, between 6:00 pm and 7:00 pm”, all this when the electoral regulations establish that the centers must close at 6:00 pm, as long as there are no voters queuing to vote.

All these irregularities and violations of the free exercise of political rights have been present in the electoral processes during

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<sup>35</sup> <https://oevenezolano.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Avance-de-resultados-OEV-Observacion-de-la-jornada-electoral-del-21-N.pdf>

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

the Chavista era, raising the costs of electoral participation, especially for voters, leaders and opposition parties, who must fight against a system structurally designed to intimidate and discourage them from participating in or supporting political alternatives other than the PSUV and its alliance Gran Polo Patriótico Simón Bolívar (GPPSB), a system that has the active participation of the entire State institutional, including the public powers.

But these irregularities become more significant in elections held in municipal or even parochial circuits. As an example, Table 1 shows a sample of 12 mayors whose victory is reduced to between 5 and 201 votes, a situation that is exacerbated in the circuits for the election of nominal councilors that present the smallest electoral districts of the entire electoral system Venezuelan<sup>37</sup>. In each of these electoral districts, irregularities, which tend to be diluted in the sum of national results, become decisive in terms of the quality and integrity of the electoral process and respect for popular sovereignty and results.

We must point out, however, that not all irregularities can be attributed to the intentionality of political actors and, therefore, be considered electoral fraud<sup>38</sup>, but rather to problems of electoral management and administration. To mention an example, a good part of the problems of the late opening of polling stations were caused by the absence and lack of training of the members of polling stations selected by lot to perform the electoral service, a task for which the electoral institution is responsible. The institution must update and adapt its procedures to current

<sup>37</sup> Elections of the Communal State are not taken into account.

<sup>38</sup> Electoral fraud is defined as all "clandestine actions to alter the electoral results", Fabrice Lehoucq, "What is electoral fraud? Its nature, its causes and consequences", in *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 69, no. 1 (January-March, 2007): 01-37, p. 2.



society, but also in parties, social organizations and the media that do not sufficiently disseminate the call of the electoral body, as well as in citizens who do not heed the call.

**Table 1. Votes, selection of mayors according to political alliance, 2021**

State	Municipality	GPPSB Votes	Oposición <sup>a</sup> Votes	Difference
Amazonas	Atabapo	918	834	84
Amazonas	Autana	890	731	159
Amazonas	Maroa	434	274	160
Aragua	O. de la Costa	2.849	2.661	188
Mérida	Rivas Dávila	2.660	2.494	166 <sup>c</sup>
Miranda	Carrizal	7.774	7.881	107 <sup>b</sup>
Miranda	Zamora	28.543	28.744	201 <sup>b</sup>
Táchira	Capacho Viejo	3.796	3.801	5 <sup>bc</sup>
Táchira	J.M. Vargas	1.941	1.798	143 <sup>bc</sup>
Trujillo	Candelaria	4.251	4.132	119
Trujillo	La Ceiba	4.003	3.915	88
Trujillo	Rafael Rangel	2.793	2.679	114

Source: Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE), own calculations.

Nota: **a-** Votes from the opposition alliance that has obtained the most votes in the municipality. **b-** Opposition advantage. **c-** Government under opposition rule between 2017-2021 with candidates for reelection.

In any case, even with the multiple irregularities witnessed on election day, the Venezuelan electoral system continues to be characterized more by the preceding structural advantage, which severely conditions the competitiveness of the system, than by the alterations that occurred on voting day. To these, we must also add the post-electoral alterations, such as the disqualification of the winning opposition candidate for the Barinas State Government,

Freddy Superlano, or the suppression of powers and resources to the Government of Zulia after the victory of the opposition candidate Manuel Rosales, such as the threats to several winning mayoral candidates from the various opposition alliances.

## Results

Although the ruling party managed to win over 19 of the 23 governorates, including 3 of the 4 governorates in opposition hands since at least 2017 and whose candidates aspired to be reelected (Anzoátegui, Mérida and Táchira), and with 211 of the 335 mayoralties (see table 2), the results represent one of the worst electoral performances of the PSUV and its allies (only surpassed by the results at the beginning of Chavismo when the number of voters was just over half of the current number), deepening the loss of support and capacity for mobilization during an election in which Chavismo aspired to legitimize itself before the international community (see figure 1).

**Table 2. Governorships and Mayorships won by alliance**

<b>Alliance</b>	<b>Governorships</b>
GPPSB	19
MUD	2
Fuerza Vecinal	1
<b>Alliance</b>	<b>Municipalities</b>
GPPSB	211
MUD	63
Alianza Democrática	38
Fuerza Vecinal	8
Otros	15

Source: own calculations.

See detail in: <https://www.elnacional.com/venezuela/lista-de-las-alcaldias-y-sus-alcaldes-segun-el-cne-ultima-actualizacion/>

An element that should be part of the analysis is that no party of the Chavista dissidence had successful turn up. PPT parties<sup>39</sup> and Tupamaro<sup>40</sup> were intervened appointing new directives loyal to the PSUV through the Supreme Court of Justice in August 2020 when they tried to break with the government, while the Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV) for its part, also a former ally of Chavismo, did not win any mayor's office. It obtained just over 154 votes at the national level, corresponding to 1.8% of the total votes<sup>41</sup>. Such results ratify the Chavista hegemony of the PSUV and that the government does not allow internal divisions. To avoid this, it has all the State institutions at its service at its disposal. But additionally, those who manage to escape the institutional cage have not managed to capitalize on support within the Chavista sympathizers.

While maintaining the Chavista hegemony, the PSUV and its GPPSB allies lost a significant number of votes, a large majority in their traditional strongholds, rural, sparsely populated, and economically depressed areas, where the mechanisms of political and social control tend to be much more powerful and the population more dependent on the regional and local state and political structures such as the PSUV, the Communal Councils and social programs. All this suggests the exhaustion of the party machinery and that the crisis has also hit the government, deteriorating both its loyalty and its coercive capacity.

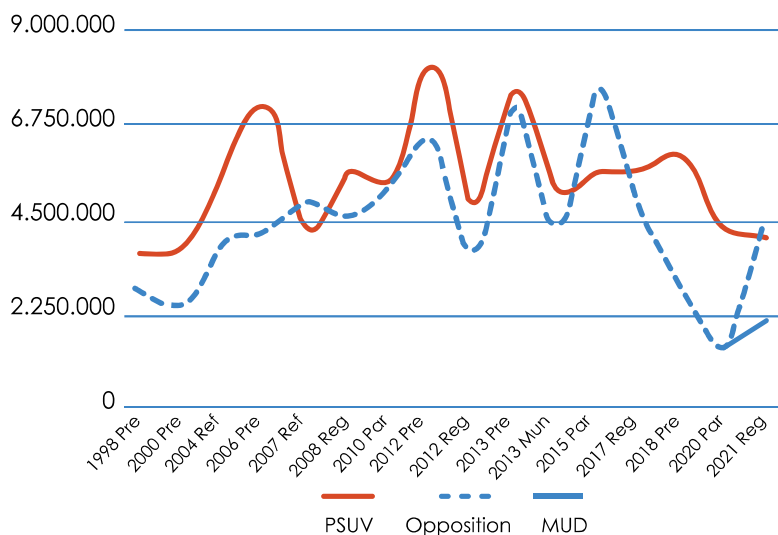
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39 Sentence 0122, of August 21, 2020: <http://www.tsj.gob.ve/es/web/tsj/decisiones#>.

40 Sentence 0119, of August 18, 2020: <http://www.tsj.gob.ve/es/web/tsj/decisiones#>.

41 Corresponds to votes for mayoral candidates.

Graph 1. PSUV absolute votes and Opposition, 1998 - 2021



Source: 1998 - 2015, CNE; 2017 - 2021, Eugenio Martínez on Twitter (<https://twitter.com/puzkas/status/1465457906577547274?s=20>).

Note: The results group the votes of the PSUV and its allies, and the MUD and its allies. The votes plotted on the dotted line correspond in 2018 to the sum of the candidates Henry Falcón and Javier Bertucci, while in 2020 they correspond to the votes of the Democratic Alliance coalition. In the year 2021, the data on the dotted line correspond to the sum of the votes of the three opposition coalitions: MUD, Alianza Democrática and Fuerza Vecinal.

But the loss of votes for Chavismo in these areas has other additional causes. In the first place, the votes represent a clear protest against the government since, in these areas, the collapse of the capacity of the State and public services has had a more profound impact on the quality of life of the population.

Simultaneously, the participation rates also show a protest against the opposition that called during several continuous elections to boycott the elections. Even though participation at the national level is relatively low, even for an electoral event of

this nature, around 42%, it is not distributed evenly throughout the national territory. The rural-urban division is the primary explanatory variable for abstention/participation.

Thus, when observing the first part of graph 2, the relationship between population size<sup>42</sup> and participation rate can be identified. The smallest parishes (less than 2,500 voters) have an average participation rate of over 50% of the voters. However, as we move on the population scale towards parishes with a greater number of voters, the participation rate progressively decreases until reaching the largest corresponding to large cities in the country (those parishes that contain 100,000 voters or more), which have an average participation rate of less than 40%.

The differentiated behavior between large and small populations shows us a double rebellion in rural areas: they participate more, which goes against the abstentionist discourse that the large opposition parties (MUD and G4) maintained for at least 3 consecutive years, and, in parallel, they punish the government more.

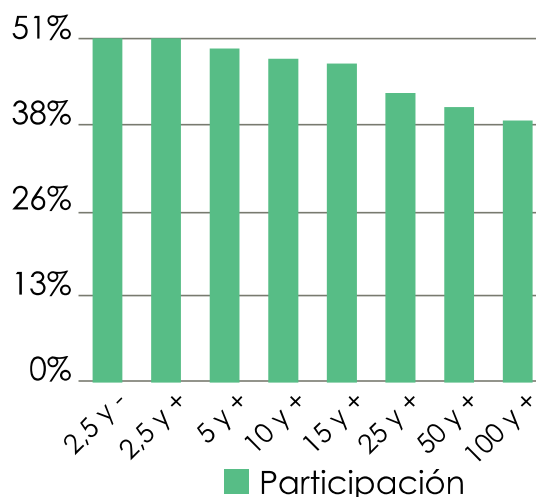
The PSUV and its allies in the GPPSB decreased the flow of votes in places where they previously dominated with almost no competition, but they also increased their vote in former opposition strongholds: large cities, where oppositional division and abstention was decisive. Thus, the great Chavista strength, its disproportionate vote in small towns, whose sum gave them an important advantage in national elections, was clearly diminished in this election, while ironically they grew in circuits of traditional opposition dominance. There they voted more to punish Chavismo, here they voted less to punish the opposition.

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<sup>42</sup> The unit of analysis of the study is parishes, grouped according to the number of voters.

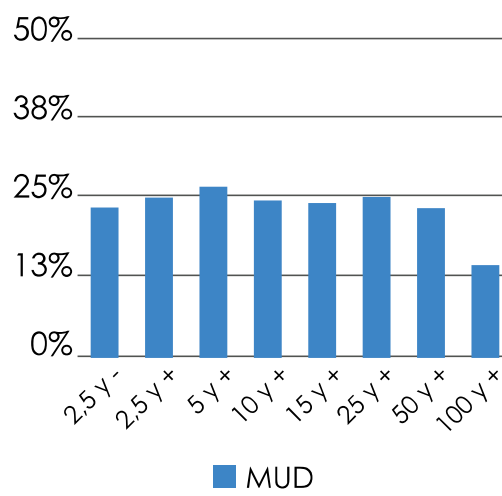
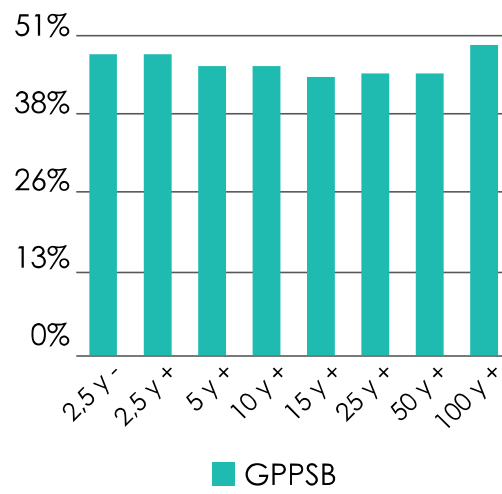
As a consequence of the double rebellion, the opposition in general, but especially the MUD, increased its voting like never before in the smaller circuits where it performed above its average (see graph 2), although it lost arena in its traditional strongholds, large cities (parishes with 100 or more voters), not only against Chavismo but also against the new opposition coalitions, Fuerza Vecinal and Alianza Democrática. These alliances follow the traditional pattern of distribution of opposition votes, concentrating in the big cities and dissolving in the towns and rural areas of the country (see graph 2).

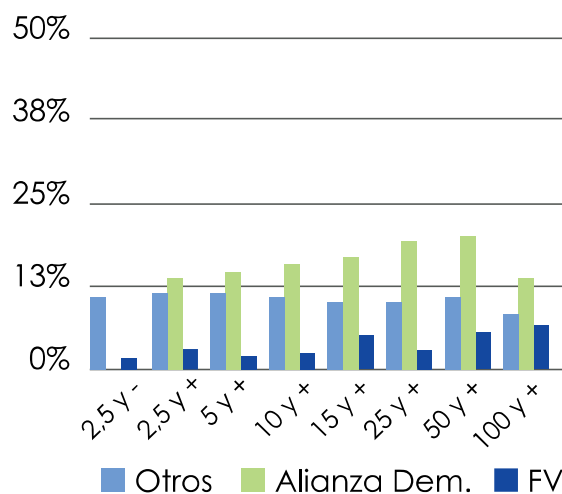
Graph 2. Participation and votes, GPPSB, MUD, FV, Democratic Alliance, and others, according to number of voters by parishes, 2021



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Rebellion in the Regional and Municipal elections of 2021





Source: National Electoral Council, own calculations.

Note: The graphs are calculated on the results of the vote for mayors and with the data of the 2nd Official Bulletin of the CNE that contains 98% of the voters.

When adding the votes of the different opposition alliances at the national level, the balance in favor of the opposition exceeds Chavismo by more than 400 thousand votes or 4.7 percentage points (50.9% to 46.2% respectively - see graph 1). Additionally, and despite the dispersion of the vote generated by the division, the opposition won with a third of the mayoralties (see table 1), their best result in 20 years.

The opposition result also shows an image of internal fragmentation: while the MUD wins half of the mayoralties obtained by the opposition, Fuerza Vecinal and Alianza Democrática add the other half, a result that is reproduced in the national vote, which is divided into almost equal parts between the MUD (46.6% of the opposition votes) and the other opposition alliances (see table 3).



**Table 3. Distribution of opposition votes, 2021**

Party	Votes	%
MUD	2.139.543	46,6
Alianza Democrática	1.129.406	24,6
FV	426.156	9,3
Other	895.907	19,5

Source: CNE, own calculation.

Note: Results of votes for alliances in mayors.

Unlike what happened in the Chavista bloc, within which the PSUV maintains hegemonic control, opposition votes and leadership consolidated a division that dissolved the monopoly exercised by the MUD and the G4. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the opposition division is a fundamental characteristic of party elites that is not reproduced beyond the large cities where tensions between opposition alliances are strongest. As the journalist Eugenio Martínez has shown<sup>43</sup>, in a large number of smaller electoral circuits, the various opposition coalitions bridged the gaps to establish alliances between them, turning out to be decisive for winning some important mayoralities. In short, dialogue and negotiation between opposing coalitions actually took place in many small circuits.

### **Consequences and implications**

During the 2021 Regional and Municipal elections, the different political actors put their projects to the test, trying to take advantage of them. The government tried to clean up its tarnished image and gain minimal international legitimacy. For this, it made some concessions in order to demonstrate its willingness

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<sup>43</sup> See Eugenio Martínez in: <https://twitter.com/puzkas/status/1466852171933171713?s=20>.

to dialogue. It allowed the election of a more balanced CNE. It also allowed the return of some opposition political leaders and parties, as well as the participation of three recognized and independent international electoral observation organizations.

It also slightly eased the political pressure in an election it thought it had fully under control. However, through the small open exhaust valves, it managed to sneak in much more than it had anticipated and what it was willing to tolerate, in a clear sign of exhaustion of its control and mobilization systems, probably weakened by the deep crisis that the country is going through. The electoral results reaffirm to the government that its power depends on the tight control exercised through machinery that has shown the first signs of weakness and fatigue.

To try to reverse this image of weakness, the government used the State institutions under its control (courts, police and military), intimidating the new opposition mayors, confiscating competences from rival governors and forcing second elections in the symbolic state of Barinas.

For their part, the opposition parties grouped into their different alliances tried to defend their political spaces on three simultaneous boards: against Chavismo, against each of the alternative opposition alliances and against abstention. Against the government, the results showed that the united opposition sums more than the government, and not only in national elections (as had happened on several previous occasions), but also in most regions and municipalities. However, the results also recorded the end of the opposition political electoral monopoly of the MUD and the consolidation of new opposition platforms, posing new organizational and strategic dilemmas, facing the

process of dialogue with the government, as well as the next electoral appointments<sup>44</sup>.

If the main opposition weakness is division, voting outside the big cities sent a clear message: in these circuits, pragmatism and the fight for democracy converged with local leaderships to prevail against the government and division. Will the political elite be able to follow the route traced by the leaders and voters of these circuits?

Opposition parties also timidly tried to reverse the hopelessness and distrust towards the vote, a path in which they converged with other actors: civil society organizations, the international community, the media, and especially the new electoral authorities. Mainly and surprisingly, voters from the smallest towns and the most rural areas responded to the effort, who attended the electoral call at rates much higher than in the cities.

The international community, for its part, witnessed the serious violations of the most elementary political rights of parties and candidates, but also of voters. However, they also witnessed small steps in the right direction<sup>45</sup> and the important role they can play in the country's re-institutionalization process.

Voters rose above political divisions and differences, supporting a plurality of leaderships of different sign alike. They

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44 Presidential 2024, Parliamentary 2025 and an eventual Presidential Recall Referendum in 2022.

45 Despite the "democratic deficits, the negotiations between sectors of the opposition and the ruling party have led to three important changes for the environment of the elections: the recomposition of the National Electoral Council (CNE) in a concerted manner by the National Assembly (AN); the presence of international observation; and the cycle of dialogue between the government and the opposition that began in

rewarded and punished leaders and parties. They demonstrated how to handle and dominate political information even in a highly complex electoral process, and more importantly, they demonstrated once again great maturity when choosing.

Far from what had happened in almost all the electoral processes of the last 20 years, in the 2021 Regional and Municipal elections there are no absolute winners or losers. The results leave the door wide open for politics. That is perhaps the most important message that the democratic rebellion of November 21, 2021, leaves us: the future will be in the hands of those leaderships that can weave the widest network of alliances, based on trust and the will to cooperate in order to confront the challenges of democratic reconstruction.

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Mexico in August ", Carter Center (2021): <https://www.cartercenter.org/news/pr/2021/venezuela-120321.pdf>