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Venezuela is a dictatorship in which people count votes democratically. On election night, ordinary Venezuelans gather to count ballots and collect tally sheets, and to make those results public, in a democratic ritual made possible by the government's own voting technology. Former U.S. president Jimmy Carter once said that Venezuela's vote-counting system was the best of the 92 that he had monitored.[1]

This unusual coexistence of nondemocracy and democratic practice in Venezuela became newly visible on 28 July 2024, when incumbent president Nicolás Maduro faced a suddenly popular challenger, Edmundo González, in a presidential election. Millions of voters showed up at polling places. Each voter cast a ballot on one of Venezuela's electronic voting machines, inspected her individual ballot receipt (an actual piece of paper), and then dropped that receipt into a ballot box.

Later that evening, hundreds of thousands of people worked in concert to collect the results. They printed tally sheets from each voting machine. They counted millions of individual paper ballot receipts. They took photographs and videos documenting their work. And two days later, the González campaign published the results online. The campaign posted images of tally sheets that, taken together, accounted for more than 80 percent of ballots cast. González had won in a landslide. Shortly after midnight on election night, however, Venezuela's National Electoral Council (CNE) declared that Maduro had won. He remains in office.

Maduro's undemocratic hold on power might seem at odds with the public hold on vote counting in Venezuela. One might think that an elected autocrat would favor vote-counting technology that would allow him to steal elections with some degree of stealth. Instead, the competitive authoritarian regime of Hugo Chávez, Maduro's predecessor,

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chose transparent electoral administration, and the less competitive and more authoritarian Maduro government doubled down, building a vote-counting system that is more participatory and more credibly auditable than those of the most stalwart democracies.

We explain the political logic of this seeming contradiction. Chávez installed Venezuela's transparent vote-counting technology at a time when most Venezuelan voters supported him. As the beneficiary of the biggest oil windfall in the history of the Americas, Chávez had no need to steal elections; his only need was to defend real victories against false accusations of fraud. Transparent vote counting was therefore useful.

Maduro stuck with this choice even though he enjoyed neither Chávez's oratorical prowess nor his sky-high oil prices. Instead, Maduro courted Venezuela's military. Having the generals behind him made transparent vote counting a good political bet. When Maduro won, as in his initial election in April 2013, a month after Chávez died of cancer, accurate vote counting rendered that victory maximally legitimizing. When Maduro lost, as in the 2015 legislative election, military support allowed him to minimize the political damage.

Heading into the 2024 presidential election, Maduro had little reason to expect a break from this history. Either he would actually win more votes—not a delusional notion going in—or he would lose but hold on to power anyway, with the armed forces behind him. That is in fact what happened: Maduro brazenly stole the 2024 presidential election, while the military and the Supreme Court backed his play.

All that said, we do not count Maduro's persistence in power as evidence against the notion that transparent vote counting is a potent force for democracy. Preserving such vote counting in Venezuela is not only valuable in itself—providing the intrinsic democratic benefit of allowing the Venezuelan people to establish electoral truth for themselves—but also has the potential to provide instrumental political value in the future.

The World's Best Vote-Counting Technology?

Scholars and journalists typically recognize Venezuela as an autocracy.[2] Less well known is Venezuela's record of holding elections in which ordinary people count votes quickly, accurately, and publicly. Democratic vote counting is possible because voters cast ballots on electronic voting machines that produce a paper trail. This technology has its merits: speed (no languishing for days as hand counts drag on), accuracy (no judgment calls about incorrectly marked ballots), biometric identification of each voter (no double voting). But its primary virtue is transparency. Venezuela's vote-counting technology allows the public to know the outcome of an election without help from the CNE, the voting-machine vendor, or even politicians.

To see how, consider the 2024 presidential election. Each voter was assigned to one of 30,280 electronic voting machines distributed across 15,960 polling places. Each voting machine was staffed by four poll workers who, critically, were neither government employees nor volunteers: Each foursome had been randomly selected from among each booth's registered voters, with a requirement to serve. Poll workers, then, were representative of the voters for whom they were responsible. These poll workers operated alongside *witnesses*: each candidate may appoint one witness per voting machine. In 2024, both Maduro and opposition candidate Edmundo González had a witness at nearly every voting booth.

Arriving at the polls, a voter would show her national identification card (*cédula*) and a poll worker would type the voter's ID number into a keypad. The voter would then place her right thumb on a fingerprint scanner. If her scanned thumbprint matched her thumbprint as recorded in Venezuela's national registry, her assigned electronic voting machine would activate and the voter would proceed to her voting booth (*mesa*). This system guards against partisan poll workers casting ballots in place of voters who choose to abstain (a form of electronic ballot-box stuffing) and against one voter impersonating others. By conditioning voting-machine activation on a valid fingerprint match (or manual overrides of escalating difficulty), the Venezuelan system thwarts most attempts to cast a ballot that belongs to someone else.

Proceeding to her voting machine, each voter would encounter a touchscreen which, in the 2024 presidential election, resembled a boxy white mid-2000s iMac. After making her selection, she would see a screen prompting her to confirm her choice or to go back and correct it. The combination of a screen showing candidate photos and the follow-up question likely explains the very low number of invalid votes in Venezuelan elections; in Brazil, for example, the introduction of these two features dramatically reduced the share of spoiled ballots.[3]

After a voter confirmed her choice, the machine would print out a ballot slip. The voter would check the slip to confirm that it matched her electronically recorded vote, and then deposit the slip in a ballot box. This slip was part one of the paper trail.

After the last vote was cast, each voting machine printed copies of the tally sheet (*acta*), a long receipt listing the number of votes for each candidate along with information identifying the voting booth and the poll workers. That receipt was part two of the paper trail. Each poll worker and each party witness was entitled to take home a copy of the tally sheet. Another virtue of Venezuela's electronic voting system is that, since 2021, the tally sheets have included a QR code at the bottom that produces a spreadsheet-ready text version of the tallies: There is no need for data entry or glitchy optical character recognition.

Crucially, this dual paper trail—millions of individual ballot receipts

and tens of thousands of tally sheets—does not go unexamined. Since 2006, ordinary citizens have hand-counted a large sample of ballot receipts, verifying that the hand count matches the total printed on the tally sheets. (CNE regulations specify that poll workers should hand-count ballot receipts from more than half of ballot boxes; in practice, according to Venezuelan journalist Eugenio Martínez, poll workers end up opening approximately 30 percent of ballot boxes.) This process is participatory. Poll workers typically open ballot boxes and hand-count the paper ballot slips in the presence of party witnesses, recording the tallies by hand on paper forms. That is why Venezuelan journalist Francisco Toro describes the country's voting machines as "just the world's most expensive pencil: they produce printouts, and the printouts are counted by hand. No hacker in Timbuktu or anywhere else can do anything about that."[4]

As is their usual practice, Venezuelans also collected a large sample of tally sheets: In 2024, the González campaign managed to collect more than 80 percent of tally sheets. In prior elections, individual campaigns and the nongovernmental organization Súmate, founded by opposition leader María Corina Machado, coordinated the collection, scanning, and digitizing of tally sheets. This process creates an "official unofficial record" of the entire vote count, as *This American Life* put it.

People then compare the totals printed on the tally sheets to voting-machine–level data typically published online by the CNE. A match across all three of these counts, or what Toro calls "triple congruence," guarantees that votes are counted correctly on election day. If the government (or a hacker) were to rig the voting machines, either voters would notice that their paper ballot receipts failed to match their votes—"Wait, I did *not* vote for so-and-so!"—or the hand-counted paper ballot receipts would fail to match the machine-printed tally sheets. Were the government to tamper with the vote tallies after the fact, publishing doctored voting-machine–level totals, those figures would fail to match the printed tally sheets (this happened once, in fact, as we discuss below). But when the paper ballot receipts line up with the printed tally sheets and the printed tally sheets match the data published by the CNE, every voter can see for herself that her ballot was counted.

One remarkable feature of this system is that, once installed with the proper technical audits, it does not depend on good behavior on the part of the voting-machine vendor. The first company to provide electronic voting machines in Venezuela was Smartmatic, then a start-up, now a multinational that provides electronic voting machines in Brazil, the Philippines, and Los Angeles, among other places. (In the United States, following the 2020 election, Fox News and other media outlets accused Smartmatic of rigging voting machines in favor of Biden; Smartmatic sued Fox News for defamation.) The U.S. Department of Justice has indicted Smartmatic executives for bribing a Filipino government official to buy the company's machines. This is all to say that triple-verification

electronic voting has worked in Venezuela even in the absence of unimpeachable vendor integrity.

Instead, the system depends on participatory public vigilance: the hand counting of paper ballots, the collection of tally sheets, the comparison of those tally sheets to data which, in most elections prior to 2024, the CNE published online. It is this vigilance that we described in the introduction as a democratic ritual. It is *democratic* not only in the sense that it can support democracy as a system of government but also in the sense that ordinary people make it work. Venezuela's 2024 presidential election put this quality on international display. Hundreds of thousands of volunteers took part in a successful effort to collect and publish the vast majority of tally sheets, proving that opposition candidate González had won in a landslide.

The Strongman Who Liked a Transparent Vote Count

One might wonder why a president such as Hugo Chávez, who sought to concentrate power in the presidency and perpetuate himself in office, would install an electronic voting system like the one just described. He could have chosen riggable voting machines that leave no paper trail, allowing his government to alter tallies by stealth. But Chávez selected Venezuela's electronic voting system at a time when he enjoyed a majority, thanks to his rhetoric, populist antiparty policies, oil windfall, lavish spending on publicly provided goods and services, forms of intimidation and manipulation carried out prior to voting, and strategic errors by his opponents. As a result, Chávez did not need tally fraud. On the contrary, he thought that he needed to prevent opposition politicians from committing fraud,[5] and he needed to defend his real tallies against false charges of tampering. The system that he picked worked remarkably well for these purposes.

The legitimizing power of Venezuela's voting technology revealed itself from the outset. Its first use was in the August 2004 recall referendum. Venezuelans cast their votes, yea or nay, on whether Chávez would keep the presidency. In 2003, opposition leaders had begun collecting the petition signatures needed to convene the referendum. At that time, Chávez's approval rating was low; had the referendum been held promptly, he might well have lost. But his government stalled long enough for an increase in oil prices to underwrite more public spending and with it, a sharp rise in his popularity. As opinion surveys had foretold, Chávez beat the recall with 59 percent of the vote.

Politicians and activists cried fraud, claiming that the voting machines had been rigged. But the transparency of the voting technology allowed the Chávez government to convince international observers—and certain prominent domestic opposition leaders—otherwise. The Carter Center and the Organization of American States (OAS) used the

machine-printed tally sheets to conduct a quick count, which ended up aligning with the results announced by the CNE. A hand-count audit of paper ballot receipts from a small sample of ballot boxes further convinced the Carter Center and the OAS of the integrity of the count. The day after the vote, Jimmy Carter and Secretary General César Gaviria of the OAS held a joint press conference in Caracas expressing their confidence in the CNE's announcement and urging opposition leaders to accept the results. The observers' statements and subsequent reports quickly convinced the international press and the U.S. government that Chávez had, in fact, won the recall in a landslide.

However else Chávez sinned against democracy, no one could credibly claim that he was unelected. This fact formed a floor beneath his democratic legitimacy.

The 2004 recall referendum also showed how the Chávez government could make the electronic voting system even more transparent and legitimizing. The hand-count audit could have been bigger and more decentralized. In 2004, the CNE chose just 1 percent of ballot boxes nationwide and then informed poll workers at the selected voting booths that they would be responsible for hand counting. Moreover, the audit had not taken place as originally planned. Even if these limitations did not prevent the Carter Center, the OAS, or the international community from crediting the official tallies, they did generate sustained doubts among certain Venezuelan politicians and academics. It was because of this controversy that the CNE later strengthened the hand-count audit, requiring poll workers to open more than 50 percent of boxes nationwide and allowing poll workers to locally select which boxes to open (according to idiosyncratic on-site randomization procedures such as drawing numbers from a hat) rather than choosing the sample centrally.

This strengthening of the hand-count audit protected future elections from the kind of persistent doubt that, in some circles, still clings to 2004. When Chávez won reelection in 2006 and then again in 2012, some in the international community pointed out all the ways in which government spending, hiring, firing, censorship, and intimidation had tilted the playing field in Chávez's favor. But few questioned the veracity of the vote counts themselves. Indeed, the very civil society organization that took the lead in crying fraud in the 2004 recall referendum worked with the Capriles campaign to systematically collect at least 90 percent of tally sheets in 2012—and found that every single one of them matched the results posted on the CNE website. Chávez thereby escaped what Samuel P. Huntington called the "insoluble dilemma" of an undemocratic ruler: that an incumbent win would always be seen as fraudulent, while a loss would end the regime.[6]

As a result, however else Chávez sinned against democracy, no one could credibly claim that he was unelected. This fact formed a floor beneath his democratic legitimacy.

Vote Counting Under Maduro

Unlike Chávez, his handpicked successor Maduro had little luck hanging on to popular support.[7] Yet he chose not to uproot the transparent vote-counting system. Instead, he opted to buy election-loss insurance in the form of the armed forces' loyalty. This loyalty is the base from which Maduro has safely defied the constitution and laws, not only by his reaction to the 2024 election but also by his behavior in previous elections, by the indiscriminate killing of thousands of innocent Venezuelans, and by political assassinations, among other crimes.

Maduro has used all the tools of "coup-proofing." He has promoted loyal officers "at a dizzying pace," such that Venezuela (population about twenty-five million) now has more generals and admirals than does the United States. He has purged dissidents, using Cuban military officials to surveil Venezuelan soldiers and to train Venezuelan officers in internal surveillance. He has showered the armed forces and other security agencies with money—so much so that Venezuela's military budget has surpassed Brazil's—and handed the military lucrative businesses both legal and illicit, as well as cabinet and local-government posts. The top brass now live on "islands of prosperity in a sea of poverty."[8]

Beyond promotions, purges, and perks, the Maduro government has ramped up punishment of officers suspected of dissidence, "turn[ing] a brutal apparatus of repression against its own military."[9] One National Guard captain told his lawyers that he was glad when beatings in jail injured his testicles, "because the heavy bleeding that ensued gave him a respite from interrogations." A retired Navy captain was electrocuted and beaten to the point of needing a wheelchair for his appearance before a military tribunal, only to die later the same day. Just last year, a 32-year-old former Army lieutenant who had fled to Chile, Ronald Ojeda, was kidnapped, murdered, and buried in a suitcase beneath a building outside Santiago.

Neither the Venezuelan opposition nor the U.S. government is able to offer credible guarantees to officers who might be subject to prosecution. The Joseph Biden administration might have promised immunity from prosecution by the U.S. Justice Department, but could make no promises on behalf of (what was then) a possible second Donald Trump administration. Venezuela's domestic opposition could promise immunity from local prosecution (and persecution), but military officials might reasonably have worried that opposition leaders would renege if they were to reach office. And no one in Washington or the domestic opposition could make any commitments on behalf of the International

Criminal Court at The Hague, which has been investigating the Venezuelan military for crimes against humanity.

Maduro's coup-proofing forms the basis for his bet on Venezuela's electronic voting system: If he actually wins more votes in a given election, accurate vote counting will validate his victory; if he loses, the military lets him keep power anyway.

Both possibilities had played out in elections prior to the 2024 presidential contest. In 2013, little more than a month after Chávez's death, Maduro—then the vice-president and Chávez's named successor—faced challenger Henrique Capriles. Opinion surveys showed a dead heat. Late on election night, the CNE announced that Maduro had won by just 1.5 percentage points, or approximately 224,000 of more than fifteen-million votes.

Capriles challenged the results, claiming fraud. Even though the hot audit (the hand count of the paper ballots from more than half the ballot boxes) all but ruled out systematic rigging of voting machines, the Capriles campaign initially requested a "recount" (as the Carter Center pointed out, the meaning of this word is unclear in a context in which electronic votes are tallied by software). The CNE responded by counting *all* the paper ballots from all the ballot boxes by hand. This hand count matched the machine tallies, save tiny discrepancies attributed to voters pocketing their receipts.

Capriles also denounced voter impersonation, or individual voters' visiting multiple voting booths with fake ID cards, and then obtaining manual overrides that allowed them to vote despite their fingerprints' failure to match the biometric database. The press documented several such cases. The CNE thereupon carried out a duplicate-fingerprint audit in which technicians combined automated and human comparisons of fingerprints across all voting booths, according to the CNE and the Carter Center. This audit uncovered 245 definite cases of duplicate fingerprints and an additional 10,726 cases of possible duplicates. Even if all possible duplicates were indeed duplicates, therefore, and even if all voter impersonation favored Maduro, this form of voter fraud would still not have come close to changing the outcome.

The fingerprint audit satisfied neither Capriles nor the opposition Democratic Unity Roundtable. Governments across Latin America and Europe *did* accept the outcome as legitimate, however, and the United States quickly resumed dialogue with Maduro. The Roundtable soon went on to mobilize for the 2015 legislative elections, suggesting internal confidence in vote counting. In other words, Venezuela's electronic voting system convinced substantial internal and international audiences that, in a very close and hard-fought race, more voters had cast ballots for Maduro than for Capriles.

Maduro did not abolish Venezuela's vote-counting technology when his electoral support declined. Instead, he explored extraconsti-

tutional methods outside elections to minimize the political damage of electoral losses.

In December 2015, for example, the opposition coalition won a supermajority in the National Assembly. In response, Maduro's government moved to retroactively disqualify some candidates and then stripped the Assembly of its powers. The opposition-led Assembly persisted as a vestigial body while the government engaged in a new round of autocratization and repression.[10]

Maduro had little luck hanging on to popular support. Yet he chose not to uproot the transparent vote-counting system. Instead, he opted to buy election-loss insurance in the form of the armed forces' loyalty.

In the 2017 gubernatorial election in the state of Bolívar, the CNE actually published voting-machine–level tallies indicating that the Chavista candidate had won. But witnesses for the opposition contender had collected the machine-printed tally sheets, which contradicted the CNE's online totals for eleven voting machines: The CNE had doctored the tallies. (Results in those eleven cases had not been transmitted electronically from the voting machines to the CNE. If they had been, doctoring them would have been much harder.) Those eleven voting machines were sufficient to change the outcome of the election. The CNE, then composed of Maduro allies and unfazed by the exposure of this cheating on the regime's behalf, handed the governorship to the Chavista candidate anyway.

Venezuela's voting technology has also failed to stop Maduro from holding blatantly phony elections. In the 2023 referendum on Venezuela's claim to the territory disputed with Guyana, as in the election of members to a Constituent National Assembly in 2017—both votes that the opposition boycotted—the government broke tradition (and in the 2017 case, rules) by simply announcing favorable top-line results without publishing voting-machine–level tallies. Neither the Venezuelan courts nor public outcry compelled the government to substantiate the CNE's claims by publishing disaggregated data. Nor could the opposition directly disprove the government's announcement: The boycott decisions had meant that no opposition witnesses had been present to collect tally sheets.

Perhaps the only election in which Venezuela's transparent vote-counting technology actually checked a government's fraud attempt took place in the state of Barinas, Chávez's birthplace, in 2021. In that contest, opposition candidate Freddy Superlano ran for governor against Argenis Chávez, Hugo's brother, and the Superlano campaign systematically collected tally sheets. For the first time, tally sheets carried QR codes that conveniently held the electoral results, obviating the need for time-consuming transcriptions of machine-printed tally sheets. In a

preview of the 2024 presidential election, the 2021 Superlano campaign used these QR codes together with a dedicated app to sum vote totals from hundreds of tally sheets. The results indicated a Superlano victory, which led the CNE to move toward declaring him the winner, only to have the Supreme Court retroactively declare that Superlano had never been eligible to run for public office.[11] But in the repeat election held off-cycle in Barinas the following year, the opposition candidate won—and became governor.

This is all to say that, by October 2023, Venezuela's transparent vote-counting technology had served Maduro well during his ten years plus six months in office. When Maduro won, the technology proved it. When he lost, the military backed his extraconstitutional efforts to contain the damage to his rule.

The Stunning Election That Wasn't

Heading into the 2024 presidential election, Maduro might reasonably have expected one of these histories to repeat itself. If he were to win more votes outright, Venezuela's transparent vote-counting technology would render that victory maximally legitimizing (as in 2013). If he were to lose in the absence of systematic tally-sheet collection by the opposition, he could declare victory without any definitive evidence to the contrary (as in the 2023 consultative referendum). And if he were to lose in the presence of paper-trail evidence showing his loss, he could neutralize that defeat. He might neutralize it via a court ruling (as in Barinas in 2021), via CNE tally fraud in a close race (as in Bolívar in 2017), or, as a last resort, via brazen election theft backed by a show of force.[12] He had every reason to expect the Venezuelan military to support him.

The first of these scenarios—Maduro earning more votes than opposition candidate Edmundo González—was far more plausible than it may have seemed in retrospect. Opinion surveys did put González thirty points ahead of Maduro. But those same polls had overestimated opposition performance by more than twenty points in the most recent regional and legislative elections.[13] Moreover, the Venezuelan economy had improved since 2021, when government candidates and their opposition rivals had obtained nearly identical numbers of votes (3.86 million for each side) in gubernatorial and mayoral elections. A growing economy typically favors incumbents.

Moreover, although millions of 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. Presumably, opposition voters were more likely to have left Venezuela than government-friendly voters, meaning that the mass exodus was expected to help Maduro at the polls.[14] The Maduro government had also buoyed its chances by bar-

ring opposition leader María Corina Machado from running and by designing a ballot that blatantly favored the president.

The government also ramped up its own mobilization efforts. The government party, the PSUV, had long since adopted the "1x10" strategy of requiring each of its approximately 330,000 local party officials to personally bring ten voters to the polls. The PSUV created a smartphone app that party officials used to report their respective lists of ten voters, including each voter's national ID number; this system ensured that no voter would appear on more than a single 1x10 mobilization list. As the 2024 balloting approached, PSUV chiefs announced a new strategy: Not only would party officials keep bringing ten voters each to the polls, but the government would enlist six additional groups—principally public employees and members of progovernment parties other than the PSUV—in the 1x10 mobilization effort. The new strategy was called "1x10x7," meaning that each person in each of the seven allied categories would each bring ten people to the polls. Diosdado Cabello, the regime's number two, told the party that seventy symbolized the seventieth birthday that Hugo Chávez would have celebrated on the day of the election. If each of the 330,000 PSUV cadres successfully mobilized ten voters, and if even another 300,000 public employees and members of allied parties each mobilized ten voters, the resulting 6.3 million votes would likely have been sufficient to win. This outcome appeared plausible: In 2018, during the previous presidential election, Maduro had garnered more than six million votes.

Even if Maduro were to fail to earn more votes than González, there was little reason to expect that the opposition would successfully collect and publish tally sheets establishing González's victory. Opposition campaigns and civil society organizations (principally Súmate) had systematically collected tally sheets in previous elections, but they had seldom published or publicized these efforts. There was no precedent for the systematic publication and publicizing of tally sheets that in fact occurred after the 2024 election. What is more, had Maduro lost by a narrow margin, the government could have changed vote totals from a few voting machines—as in the 2017 Bolívar gubernatorial election—and then posted the mostly accurate voting-machine–level tallies on the CNE website. Even if the opposition had been able to collect and scan tally sheets corresponding to the stolen voting booths, the Maduro government could plausibly have claimed that the *opposition*'s tally sheets were forged in those few cases. Rather than furnishing airtight proof of government fraud, the opposition would have found itself mired in a he-said-she-said debate, with Maduro claiming proof of victory and the opposition crying foul with evidence that was suggestive but inconclusive.

This is all to say that Maduro's worst-case scenario—a landslide opposition victory, publicly established through the coordinated publication of tally sheets—was unexpected. Indeed, when that worst-case sce-

nario materialized, with González winning two-thirds of valid votes and his campaign publishing the proof online, Maduro appeared surprised. *New York Times* reporter Anatoly Kurmanaev, after interviewing government and PSUV officials, concluded that the outcome had "delivered a seismic jolt to the government's expectations."[15]

And yet even Maduro's worst-case scenario had an escape route. The Venezuelan military has, as of this writing in early December 2024, continued to back Maduro as he flatly defies the election results. The CNE declared him the winner without publishing any disaggregated data in support of the announced top-line numbers, and Venezuela's highest court upheld the CNE's declaration. Security forces have arrested hundreds of protesters and suspected dissidents. As Maduro exclaimed at a postelection rally: "Maximum punishment! Justice! There will be no forgiveness this time!"

For all these reasons, Maduro had little incentive to undermine Venezuela's transparent vote-counting technology in advance of the 2024 presidential election. Neither the United States nor the opposition needed to pressure him to keep it in place, according to an interview that we conducted with Juan Gonzalez, former senior director for the Western Hemisphere at the U.S. National Security Council. Rather, the premise was always that Venezuelans would cast ballots as they long had done, on electronic voting machines that produce paper ballot slips and paper tally sheets. Maduro kept the vote-counting technology in place of his own accord, and according to his own political logic. Edmundo González's proven victory was both less likely and less damaging to Maduro than many observers had presumed. A rational ruler weighing the possibility of a legitimizing win against the likelihood of an embarrassing but nonbinding loss might well have stuck with Venezuela's auditable vote-counting technology.

Lessons from Venezuela

Elections alone do not and cannot make a country democratic. Venezuela in 2024 provides an especially stark reminder of this fact, because the electoral results were so clear and the political outcome so undemocratic. Other autocracies might hold elections that are questionable or controversial or probably stolen; Maduro held one that was unquestionably stolen. Other opposition candidates might protest that they would have won had the playing field been level; Venezuela's opposition candidate *did* win. The government's own vote-counting technology revealed a two-to-one antigovernment majority and, in doing so, laid bare the government's disregard for the will of that majority.

At this writing, the Venezuelan armed forces continue to support Maduro. But there is no reason to assume that they always will. In Chile in 1988, an overconfident General Augusto Pinochet, then in his fifteenth year as dictator, submitted his continued rule to a referendum.

When early returns suggested that he would lose, the general tried to tamper with the tallies. But the opposition's new, computerized parallel vote count, which quickly collated tally sheets from opposition witnesses at nearly every polling place in the country, revealed his defeat.[16] The chief of the Air Force, Fernando Matthei—part of the very same military that had trained Pinochet, promoted him, installed him as president, and backed him as he perpetrated horrific human-rights abuses—publicly recognized the opposition victory. Other elements of the military joined Matthei in compelling Pinochet to respect the results of the referendum. Thus, the confluence of transparent vote-counting, a stunning election, and a pro-constitution shift within the military produced Chile's return to democracy.

Some argue that the threat of international criminal prosecution, which emerged *after* Chile's return to democracy, precludes an analogous military about-face in the Venezuelan case, as we noted above. Whereas Chilean generals could hope to retire in comfort, the thinking goes, their Venezuelan counterparts fear the fate that eventually befell Pinochet: arrest on an international warrant. Others counter that the threat of international prosecution affects only a tiny fraction of members of the Venezuelan armed forces; in this view, changing circumstances and opposition strategies could plausibly reconcile a sufficient number of officers to enforcing the Venezuelan constitution.

Even in this latter camp there is no agreement about which circumstances or which strategies are most likely to separate the military from Maduro. Some advocate the reimposition of oil sanctions and "maximum pressure" on the Venezuelan economy; others argue that sanctions will devastate ordinary citizens without producing military defection, and that engagement is a more fruitful U.S. strategy. Some push for justice for officers who committed crimes; others propose instead that protections like those instituted in Chile—an amnesty law and continued Chavista control over the armed forces, for starters—hold more promise. Some believe that the opposition should take part in the not-yet-scheduled 2025 regional elections, emboldened by Edmundo González's clear win in 2024; others counter that winning in 2024 brought only repression and hardship. Amid so much debate, our aim here has been to argue in favor of one point: Any effort to promote democracy in Venezuela should embrace the country's two-decade-old tradition of transparent vote counting. That way, when the military is ready to respect the constitution, an unambiguously elected president will stand ready to take power.

NOTES

1. See President Carter's remarks at a 2012 Carter Center event, *www.youtube.com/watch?v=l9Dmt2_QioI*.

2. This section and the one that follows draw extensively, in places verbatim, from Dorothy Kronick's working paper "On the Validity of Vote Counts Published by the Venezuelan Opposition," 22 August 2024, *https://dorothykronick.com/28J.pdf*. On the Venezuelan regime as an autocracy, see Francisco Rodríguez, *The Collapse of Venezuela: Scorched Earth Politics and Economic Decline, 2012–2020* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2025).

3. Thomas Fujiwara, "Voting Technology, Political Responsiveness, and Infant Health: Evidence from Brazil," *Econometrica* 83 (March 2015): 423–64.

4. Francisco Toro, "Venezuela's Election: The Basics," *Caracas Chronicles,* 4 December 2015, *www.caracaschronicles.com/2015/12/04/venezuelas-election-the-basics*.

5. "Observing the Venezuela Presidential Recall Referendum: Comprehensive Report," Carter Center, February 2005, *www.cartercenter.org/documents/2020.pdf,* 59.

6. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 85.

7. Javier Corrales, *Autocracy Rising: How Venezuela Transitioned to Authoritarianism* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2023).

8. Quotations in this paragraph are from John Polga-Hecimovich, "Coup Proofing in Crisis: The Venezuelan Military Under Nicolás Maduro," in John Polga-Hecimovich and Raúl Sánchez Urribarrí, eds., *Authoritarian Consolidation in Times of Crisis: Venezuela Under Nicolás Maduro* (London: Routledge, 2025), ch. 2.

9. Anatoly Kurmanaev and Isayen Herrera, "Venezuela's Maduro Cracks Down on His Own Military in Bid to Retain Power," *New York Times,* 13 August 2019.

10. Maryhen Jiménez, "Contesting Autocracy: Repression and Opposition Coordination in Venezuela," *Political Studies* 71 (February 2023): 47–68.

11. Francisco Rodríguez, "How Clientelism Works: Evidence from the Barinas Special Election," *World Development* 184 (December 2024): 106734.

12. On fraud as a show of force, see Alberto Simpser, *Why Governments and Parties Manipulate Elections: Theory, Practice, and Implications* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

13. Francisco Rodríguez, "Data Set of Venezuelan Polling Results, 2004–2024," University of Denver, 24 July 2024.

14. Nicolás Idrobo, "Why Economic Sanctions Backfire: The Role of Emigration in the Venezuelan Case," SSRN, 28 October 2024, *https://ssrn.com/abstract=4930490*.

15. Anatoly Kurmanaev, "Venezuela's Strongman Was Confident of Victory. Then Came the Shock," *New York Times,* 6 August 2024.

16. Robert Barros, *Constitutionalism and Dictatorship: Pinochet, the Junta, and the 1980 Constitution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 306.