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## Venezuela's Electoral System Is Being Unfairly Maligned

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# Venezuela's electoral system is being unfairly maligned

*Caracas is experiencing rising discontent fueled by economic woes. But it hasn't had trouble holding clean elections*

November 30, 2015 2:00AM ET

by [Lauren Carasik](#) @LCarasik

On Dec. 6 Venezuelans will go to the polls to elect their representatives in high-stakes legislative elections. The vote comes amid international scrutiny over the integrity of the country's electoral process. The U.S. government, the Organization of American States (OAS) and [human rights groups](#) have all called for credible elections. Some in the [U.S. media have already indicted the elections' validity](#).

But these critics ignore the fact that thousands of domestic observers and hundreds of international monitors from the Union of South American Nations and other groups have already signed on to oversee the elections. It is clear that much of the diplomatic posturing is not meant to protect Venezuela's electoral integrity but to further delegitimize the government of President Nicolás Maduro.

No election system is perfect, but Venezuela has one of the most efficient, secure and transparent electoral systems. "The election process in Venezuela is the best in the world," said former President Jimmy Carter in 2012 —[praise echoed](#) by other neutral observers.

Venezuelan voters use electronic machines, which print out a paper receipt that allows voters to check their choices against the electronic ballot. After voting has ended, 54 percent of machines are audited at random, in the presence of witnesses from pro-government and opposition political parties, and compared with a tally of paper receipts. The National Electoral Council (CNE) has

implemented additional [safeguards and audits](#), making the process more inclusive than ever before, with 96.5 percent of eligible Venezuelans registered to vote (compared with [fewer than 76 percent](#) of eligible Americans).

With the support of the Carter Center (a nonprofit organization run by Jimmy Carter and Rosalynn Carter) and other pro-democracy groups, Venezuela has developed strong, independent national observation groups. “Despite refusal of the CNE to allow substantial international observation, its relationship with domestic observers has actually improved,” [according to David Smilde](#), a senior fellow at the advocacy group Washington Office on Latin America. “They have been granted almost twice as many credentials as they had three years ago, which improves their capacity.”

After having international observers in 2004, 2005 and 2006, the CNE decided in 2007 to no longer welcome observation by the OAS. It noted that the OAS, the European Union, the Carter Center and other international observers had repeatedly affirmed the integrity of Venezuela’s electoral system. So the electoral authority replaced the observer missions with a system of international accompaniment — perceived as more respectful of Venezuela’s sovereignty — while strengthening national observation.

Venezuela is not the only country to refuse OAS observation. Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, Canada and the United States have all opted out. Unlike Venezuela, the U.S. faces serious questions about [voter suppression](#), especially in the wake of the Supreme Court’s 2013 decision [gutting the Voting Rights Act](#), and concerns about its [aging voting machines](#).

The OAS knows that Venezuela is not amenable to its observer mission. The new OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro has been far more antagonistic to Maduro’s government than his predecessors were. His antipathy was exemplified by an uncharacteristically harsh [18-page letter](#) he sent to the head of the CNE, Tibisay Lucena, on Nov. 10. The letter lamented that the transparency and fairness of the poll will not be guaranteed without OAS observation. The U.S.

government applauded the letter in a move that further endangered progress toward rapprochement between the two countries.

### **It is up to the Venezuelan people to determine if the Bolivarian revolution has run its course.**

Unsurprisingly, OAS electoral missions have a history of aligning with Washington's interests instead of maintaining neutrality. A disproportionate amount of the funding for the organization, based in Washington — [close to 40 percent](#) — comes from the United States. The 2010 Haitian elections provide the most vivid example of this bias. The OAS contested the election results and arbitrarily changed them, forcing the replacement of a candidate that the U.S. disfavored with one that it preferred, current President Michel Martelly. The head of the OAS mission to Haiti later [admitted](#) there was no statistical basis for the switch, supporting [statements from a whistle-blower](#) as well as [independent analysis](#) of the ballots. This year the OAS [endorsed](#) elections in Haiti that appear even more problematic than those of 2010, favoring the right-wing candidate backed by Martelly.

Almagro's letter to Lucena confirms the continuity of this bias. But unfortunately, much of the U.S. media coverage repeats the OAS stance that the CNE cannot provide guarantees of transparency. For example, on Nov. 22, The Washington Post's editorial board [cited](#) Almagro's letter, which it called "remarkable," as evidence that Venezuela's "dirty elections" won't be free and fair.

Yet the letter did not offer any real critique of the transparency and integrity of the electoral process, which would presumably be the main focus of an OAS observation mission. Instead, he leveled a long and familiar litany of complaints against Venezuela's executive branch, including the attorney general's office, before closing with a vague warning about the vote tallying process that is disconnected from any of the complaints he presented in his lengthy text. His criticisms discount the existence of safeguards that ensure participation by opposition and pro-government parties and independent observers in the voting

and auditing processes. It is no wonder, then, that the CNE is unwilling to reconsider the OAS's request to monitor next month's votes.

While the outlook appears grim for Maduro's Chavista government, the final vote tally may disappoint the opposition. The opposition [needs to win all swing districts](#) to get a majority, and the Chavista get-out-the-vote effort has historically been far superior to the opposition's. "As in previous elections, the opposition campaign has been abstract and content free," Smilde [observed earlier this month](#). Yet Maduro's dismal approval ratings and mounting public frustration over economic hardships may obscure the opposition's failure to articulate a substantive platform.

Critics warn that Maduro may [resort to fraud and violence](#) if his party loses its majority in the National Assembly. However, there is no evidence he will reject the results. In fact, as Smilde and others have pointed out, [Maduro appears](#) to be anticipating legislative losses. And some in the opposition have too often responded to losses with violence, property destruction and calls for extralegal means to achieve what they could not at the ballot box. Let's hope they are not emboldened by the efforts of Almagro and others to discredit the elections either by making unfounded allegations of fraud or by reprising the destabilizing, violent unrest that rocked Venezuela last year.

As with many of its Latin American neighbors, Venezuela is experiencing rising discontent fueled by economic woes, violence and corruption. But Caracas hasn't had trouble holding clean and transparent elections, and the additional safeguards that the CNE has implemented should dispel concerns that this poll will be any different. It is up to the Venezuelan people to determine if the Bolivarian revolution has run its course. Toward that end, the international community, particularly the United States, should respect the integrity of Venezuela's electoral system and the agency of local leaders, including the numerous domestic observers who will be well positioned to challenge any shortcomings in the process.

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*The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera America's editorial policy.*