

Venezuela versus Haiti: A Tale of Two Elections

Venezuelans will vote today in fair and transparent elections. But you wouldn't know it from the US government and media

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Electoral [observers](#) who cover Latin America and the Caribbean see the threat of “[systematic, massive fraud](#)” in upcoming elections in a country of [longstanding strategic concern](#) to the United States.

They [argue](#) that “incidents of violence, fraud and voter intimidation” have created a process that falls “far short of minimum standards for fair elections.” The president has been [ruling](#) by [decree](#) for almost a year, fulfilling a promise [articulated](#) in 1997: “First thing, after I establish my power . . . I would close that congress thing.”

A group of leading opposition candidates recently [stated](#) that they are “convinced that honest, free, transparent and democratic elections cannot be obtained under the presidency,” citing “reprisals and repression by police against peaceful demonstrators” that left two candidates injured.

The United States isn't too worried about the state of affairs. In fact, it's invested nearly [\\$30 million dollars](#) in the elections. After all, this isn't Venezuela; it's Haiti.

Contrary to the distorted portrayals of Venezuela repeatedly put forth by the media, think tanks, and the US government, the country's electoral processes couldn't be more different than Haiti's. In Haiti's October 25 presidential primary, over 70 percent of registered voters [abstained](#), just as they did in 2010 for the [flawed elections](#) that brought Michel Martelly to power.

Venezuela's elections routinely produce the opposite result: 79.7 percent of the electorate voted in the 2013 presidential contest, and even its subsequent municipal elections boasted a [58.9 percent](#) participation rate. Polls regarding today's legislative elections [indicate](#) an [expected](#) voter [turnout](#) of above [70 percent](#), suggesting that the Venezuelan electorate appears stubbornly unaffected by the “campaigns of fear, violence, and intimidation” that State Department spokesperson John Kirby [alleges](#) are occurring.

Advancing the State Department narrative, the *Washington Post* editorial board [argued](#) that Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro “will resort to outright fraud or violence to prevent an opposition victory,” [ignoring](#) Maduro's [public demonstration](#) of a signed, written pledge to respect the electoral outcome. The International Crisis Group's Phil Gunson likewise expressed [concern](#) over “unfair practices and even fraud” without the presence of international observers. By “barring” observation from the Organization of American States, he [claimed](#), “the government may hope to obtain at least the benefit of the doubt if the

opposition cries foul.”

Gunson, however, withheld from readers the findings of the Carter Center, whose former Latin America director Jennifer McCoy recently [explained](#) at a Brookings Institution panel that “the voting machines themselves are auditable, have been audited in every election, including by all opposition parties, and have not been found to be problematic.”

Jimmy Carter has thus [asserted](#) that “of the ninety-two elections that we’ve monitored, I would say that the election process in Venezuela is the best in the world.” Additionally, Venezuela’s political parties jointly [audit 54 percent](#) of all paper-receipt ballot boxes immediately after the elections, giving the vote count “a very high possibility of being honest,” in McCoy’s words.

How high a possibility? The statistical chance of the Venezuelan opposition’s claim that the 2013 election was stolen was [1 in 25,000,000,000,000,000](#). The United States took a gamble against those odds when the State Department [joined](#) with the opposition to demand a [full recount](#). The Obama administration became the only government in the Western hemisphere that [refused](#) to accept the results, backed only by the right-wing government of Spain and the secretary general of the OAS, [60 percent](#) of whose annual operating budget is financed by Washington.

Like many similar US institutions preoccupied with Venezuela, the *Washington Post*, the International Crisis Group, and Brookings have published no commentaries and have held no events to probe Haiti’s election problems, such as the more than nine hundred thousand accreditation cards that were circulated and sold in “a thriving black market for fraud,” [according](#) to the *Miami Herald*. These cards made it easy for the possessor to vote multiple times, and such ballots represented over [half](#) of the votes registered.

The State Department’s Haiti Special Coordinator Kenneth Merten appeared disinterested, [simply stating](#), “We look forward to the second round of presidential elections.” The reason for the State Department’s selective demands for recounts is simple: Haiti is safely under US control, while Venezuela is not.

Despite their differences, Venezuela and Haiti have been linked together over the past fifteen years as the two principal targets of US intervention in the Western hemisphere. Indeed, the remarkably durable success of the [US overthrow](#) of Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 2004 owed greatly to, and built on, the strategies honed during the failed attempt to topple the elected government of Hugo Chávez in 2002.

Foreshadowing its approach in Haiti, the Bush administration, according to a State Department [report](#), [trained and financed](#) “individuals and organizations understood to be actively involved” in the overthrow of Chávez, through entities such as the National Endowment for Democracy, the US Agency for International Development, and the International Republican Institute. The US [withheld](#) prior [knowledge](#) of the coup plot from the elected government, while advancing [grossly exaggerated](#) reports of alleged government misconduct. And finally, the Bush administration immediately recognized the illegitimate coup government while falsely [claiming](#) that Chávez had resigned.

In Haiti, the US similarly provided [financing](#) for Haiti’s recalcitrant political opposition to make the country ungovernable and [cut off](#) international aid essential to public health and education. [US-trained](#) paramilitary groups terrorized the country before the Bush

administration delivered a final coup de grâce, [spiriting](#) Aristide and his family out of the country on a US plane. And like [Chávez](#), Aristide would remain [incommunicado](#) after his “resignation” was declared. This time, however, the US [ensured](#) that he would be held an ocean away in the Central African Republic.

Most critically, after having faced a Western hemisphere united in its repudiation of Venezuela’s coup government in 2002, the United States pushed through a UN resolution just days after the coup that created an [armed occupation](#) of the country with much of Latin America participating, as well.

By providing protection to the still-fragile US-installed regime of Gérard Latortue, the UN occupation also [permitted](#) the use of unmitigated force to quell dissent, particularly in poor, pro-Aristide neighborhoods. Port-au-Prince registered roughly two thousand [political murders](#) a year, which was met largely with [silence](#) by leading US human rights groups. After being frustrated by the overwhelming [mobilization](#) of Chávez’s supporters, who flooded Caracas and overturned the coup regime, the United States learned its lesson in Haiti.

In intervening years, the US-led political management of Haiti has shifted to the OAS, which is key to understanding today’s elections in Venezuela. In Haiti, the OAS [overturned](#) the results of the first round of the [2010 elections](#) without any statistical basis and simply advanced the US-preferred candidate, Michel Martelly, to the second round. The OAS similarly [endorsed](#) the results of October’s fraud-riddled election in which Martelly’s favored candidate performed best.

For these reasons, Venezuela — which the Obama administration still officially [designates](#) an “unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security” and which recently learned of widespread National Security Agency [espionage](#) of its state-owned oil company in 2011 — has balked at the US’s insistence that the OAS observation its elections. OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro, who served as Uruguay’s foreign minister, behaved so undiplomatically in his calls for an OAS presence in Venezuela that his former boss, Uruguayan ex-president José “Pepe” Mujica, [publicly disowned](#) him.

The concerted campaign to discredit Venezuela’s elections consists of US media, NGOs, and public officials proclaiming virtually identical concerns about democracy while ignoring or actively promoting exactly the anti-democratic tendencies that they profess to deplore in a country firmly within their sphere of influence.

Latin America rightly sees this dishonest discourse emanating from Washington as a component in an effort to advance a deeply unpopular agenda for the region. Latin America’s long-held resentment toward the imposition of that agenda has led to increasing rejection of a US-run multilateralism that furthers US intervention. To that end, these countries have developed a range of alternatives over the past decade: the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, the Bank of the South, ALBA, and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR).

The presence of the electoral delegation of UNASUR in Venezuela, [led](#) by the Dominican Republic’s former president, Leonel Fernandez, is therefore a sign of progress. Largely fulfilling [the vision](#) with which it was created in 2008, UNASUR, which excludes the United States and Canada, has rapidly displaced the OAS as the region’s preferred institution for resolving conflicts and managing multilateral affairs.

Within this context, today's vote — whatever the outcome — is one more step in Latin America's ongoing independence movement

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