

Venezuela's 2024 Elections

Understanding Participation under Unfree and Unfair Conditions

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THE ISSUE

For many observers, the upcoming presidential elections in Venezuela serve as a focal point on which to pin hopes for a democratic transition. However, the challenges faced by the opposition—from internal divisions to an ongoing humanitarian crisis, captured electoral institutions, and persistent human rights abuses—cannot be understated. While there is potential for elections in 2024 to generate momentum and re-galvanize resistance to the Maduro regime, the balance sheet of risks and rewards remains indecisive. This report breaks down the positive and negative aspects of elections in Venezuela and outlines three likely scenarios for policymakers to consider as Venezuela's 2024 presidential election approaches.

INTRODUCTION

Following the Maduro regime's perceived victory in the country's 2021 legislative elections, discourse on the country's push for a return to democracy has, in many ways, fixated on the planned 2024 presidential election as a potential turning point. With the stakes higher than ever, the Venezuelan opposition has an opportunity to gain trust and legitimacy and unite around a consensus candidate. This optimistic sentiment about the 2024 elections has taken root in Venezuela and beyond, especially as the opposition recently announced its [commitment to conducting party primaries](#) in 2023.

To a certain extent, such anticipation is only natural. Policymakers, politicians, and electorates consistently use significant future events to orient their horizons and anchor their policy process and strategic planning. Equally, the idea of showing just how unpopular the Maduro regime is in a presidential election—and, even if nearly impossible, the idea of defeating the regime—is tantalizing. After all, a political transition in Venezuela has seemed a distant prospect for several years, and even longer in the case of the executive branch, where Chavismo boasts a (self-

proclaimed) unbroken record of five successive presidential victories since the first election of Hugo Chávez in 1998.

Yet, this idea is also fraught with pitfalls and caveats. An overly optimistic assessment of 2024 could cloud the judgement of both policymakers and the opposition as to the possibilities for change inherent in these elections—much less a political transition away from the Maduro regime. Given the severity of the challenges Venezuela faces under the Maduro regime when it comes to holding free and fair elections, pinning the hopes of a country on a sea change in 2024 appears unrealistic.

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Nevertheless, even improvements at the margins can pay dividends in the slow, deliberate process of reinstitutionalization and redemocratization in Venezuela. If nothing else, the 2024 presidential elections represent an opportunity to illustrate the utterly authoritarian nature of the Maduro regime, rally currently halfhearted international support, and potentially renew some of the opposition's mandate. By 2024, it will have been nine years since the last time that the opposition participated in free and fair elections, harking back to its resounding victory in legislative elections in 2015. Despite the barriers to participation and the unlikelihood of free and fair elections, an outpouring of popular support for the opposition would send a powerful, badly needed signal to the international community that it still commands support from a wide swath of the Venezuelan people.

The remainder of this policy brief examines the risks and potential rewards of participation in Venezuela's 2024 presidential elections, both for the opposition and for the international community supporting it. This brief analyzes several scenarios, including their likelihood and potential impact, in an attempt to outline the contours of a position of "principled participation" for the opposition.

THE ROAD TO ELECTIONS

The most challenging part of any election takes place long before the polls open. In this regard, Venezuela is no exception, and the currently fraught political atmosphere only adds to the heavy lifting needed from the opposition, civil society, and international community on the road to 2024. The most pressing question in this respect has to do with the repeated calls for primary elections to select an opposition candidate to face Maduro in 2024.

Laying down the requisite institutional and physical infrastructure to conduct opposition primaries is a matter of urgency. Here the opposition will need to determine **whether** to allow for the participation of the National Electoral Council (CNE) in its primary system. The CNE is a notoriously captured institution populated by Maduro regime loyalists who, most recently, presided over a 2021 regional electoral cycle **riven** with irregularities, miscounts, and outright fraud. Given these structural failings, it is understandable that the opposition prefers to exclude the CNE from the primary process. Despite **recent agreements** that secured placement of two opposition-approved members on the five-member CNE, there remains a significant lack of confidence in the institution.

By going around the CNE, the opposition must be prepared to fill in and establish its own committee capable of performing the basic work of election preparation, monitoring, and evaluation. There is precedent for such organizational heavy lifting by the opposition. In **2017** and **2020**, millions of Venezuelans were mobilized without CNE involvement to voice their rejection of the regime's continued efforts to corrode democracy. Nevertheless, the difficulties associated with organizing nationwide primaries should not be underestimated. Basic yet essential tasks include laying down regulations for campaigning, ensuring candidate compliance, creating polling places and communicating these to voters and candidates, tallying the votes and announcing the winners, auditing the process, and adjudicating inevitable disputes, to name **just a few**. As with the performance of the opposition in the election itself, administering primaries without the CNE will be another test of its competence to govern.

A further logistical hurdle will be the critical question of out-of-country voting. With over **6 million** Venezuelans now residing abroad (and an estimated total of **8.9 million** migrants and refugees by the end of 2022), the participation of the diaspora is a major unresolved challenge. Indeed, Venezuelan refugees are all but entirely excluded from the franchise. While nearly 3 million Venezuelans among the diaspora are **estimated to be eligible to vote**, the CNE reports only **about 108,000** as successfully registered. Engaging these populations, especially without the involvement of the CNE to make use of preexisting voter rolls, will represent a further obstacle for the opposition primaries.

To be successful, an opposition electoral council will require a dedicated staff with access to the necessary funds and materials to execute the significant task before it. Furthermore, the body must scrupulously avoid falling the way of the CNE. Opposition primaries will only have a unifying effect, given **recurring tensions** among various factions, if the parties involved trust the process. If the process is instead perceived as biased and not contributing to party renovation and, importantly, bringing new candidates to the fore, it is likely that the primaries will be bifurcated, with party participation split between the main coalition representing the opposition (G4) and the remainder of the opposition parties. Should this happen, the best-case scenario would involve two opposition candidates vying with Maduro for the presidency—a recipe certain to keep him in power. More troubling than a split of the vote, dueling primaries would harden the divisions

between the opposition, with lasting consequences for subsequent elections.

The fate of the current interim government is also at stake in the decision to participate in the 2024 election. Since 2019, this structure has served as the driving vehicle for organizing the Venezuelan opposition and motivating grassroots protests against the Maduro regime within Venezuela. Its recognition as the legitimate government on the international stage by the United States and other countries not only served as a powerful indicator of Maduro's isolation but also had tangible impacts, granting the interim government access to frozen overseas funds and recovered stolen assets, which were employed during the Covid-19 pandemic to provide **critical social** support to frontline healthcare workers. However, the constitutional interpretation used to legitimize the interim government will be difficult to maintain with simultaneous participation in a presidential election against Maduro, since doing so recognizes his position and potentially waters down the “usurper” language employed by much of the opposition. (It is important to note that strictly speaking, the interim president's constitutional status is affixed until such time as free and fair elections are held, irrespective of when those elections are.) The opposition leadership will have to transition from the current structures meant to develop governance to structures intended to organize as a political party and win elections—something that it has not done vigorously in a while, as seen in **recent election boycotts**. The entire process must be geared toward lending as much legitimacy as possible to the Venezuelan opposition and, ultimately, to the candidate who emerges victorious from the primaries.

The benefits of this reorganization may be substantial over the long run, especially if lessons from the 2021 legislative elections are considered, allowing the opposition a chance to reconcile the many internal divides that have left the interim government increasingly **hamstrung** in its ability to execute policy. Key figures in the government, including potentially Juan Guaidó himself, would transition into campaign mode, creating an opportunity to potentially reconcile and reform coalitions around frontrunners. Election organizing also brings with it the potential to disband the interim government in a more graceful manner.

However, these opportunities will come with commensurate risks. In particular, the thorny question of **asset repatriation** and adjudication will need an answer that does not open the door for the regime to seize billions of dollars in currently frozen and sanctioned funds.

Finding a satisfactory resolution to the question of asset repatriation would also furnish the opposition with an opportunity to demonstrate a level of governance and competence that, thus far, it has failed to display in terms of an ability to maneuver frozen and stolen assets for the provision of socioeconomic and political goods.

Following any primaries, the opposition would confront a rapidly changing political context in advance of a presidential election against Maduro. Developing an effective communication strategy for reconnecting the opposition to the Venezuelan public will be essential. Indeed, recent **polling data** released by Delphos suggest that while 72.5 percent of Venezuelans surveyed desire a political transition away from the Maduro regime, when asked to identify the leader of the opposition, more than 40 percent said there was none. Thus, while Maduro's government itself remains wildly unpopular, the opposition must fill a leadership vacuum in order to capitalize on this sentiment in the upcoming elections. Furthermore, the opposition will also need to engage and leverage Venezuelan **civil society** and reconnect meaningfully with the electorate to once again gain its trust. Worse still, the opposition faces an unstable, highly circumscribed, and dangerous environment built by the Maduro regime to guard against any electoral challenges.

In the aftermath of the primaries, the opposition candidate (or candidates) will also have to contend with Venezuela's fraught electoral institutions once again. The CNE, Supreme Court of Justice (TSJ), and security forces, all key to the operation of a successful election, are institutions tainted by regime influence and high levels of executive control. In an election against Maduro, the opposition would no longer be able to evade the CNE on matters of electoral operation, a prospect that bodes poorly for both domestic and **out-of-country voting prospects**, where the council has in the past worked assiduously to limit opportunities for the Venezuelan diaspora. Meanwhile, the TSJ may intervene against opposition frontrunners to announce, with or **without** an attempt at a legal rationale, that they are “barred” from taking office or serving as the leaders of their parties. The links between Venezuelan security forces and pro-regime armed groups, such as the *colectivos*, are **well documented**, as is their pattern of selective violence, kidnapping, and detention, intended to manipulate electoral outcomes.

Indeed, the unpredictable nature of the regime overlays all the aforementioned electoral phases, from the decision to conduct primaries, to the election day

itself, to its aftermath. There is little way to accurately predict the Maduro regime's strategic calculus when it comes to presidential elections, other than to anticipate manipulation at various stages of the process. The opposition may become a victim of its own success if primaries prove effective at energizing and unifying the movement, only to result in a wave of crackdowns by the regime before facing Maduro. On the other hand, the regime may prove more tolerant of a strong opposition showing during the presidential elections if it is able to extract significant concessions on sanctions from the Biden administration, such as the return of frozen assets and increased international legitimacy that permit Chavismo to remain in power while Maduro's own star wanes. There is also cause to doubt whether any substantive opposition presence would be truly interested in pressing for a democratic transition, especially as the regime increasingly seeks to co-opt politicians who advocate "cohabitation" with Maduro. In all likelihood, these tides will shift in accordance with local contingencies.

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Finally, the international context will add yet another variable to the complex electoral environment. The Maduro regime may continue to slowly rebuild its international position in the wake of a more **sympathetic** Petro administration in Colombia, compounded by seemingly **miscalculated** efforts at détente from Washington. Without a return to negotiations in Mexico, there is little opportunity for the opposition to earn concessions from the regime that would ensure a sliver of confidence in the CNE, TSJ, or any other institution. Even substantial progress toward institutional reform will likely fall short of the bar set by the European Union's Electoral Observation Mission, whose 2021 **report** laid out a high standard for free and fair elections in Venezuela. This is compounded by the fact that the Maduro regime likely does not want to negotiate, especially now that it has a direct line to Washington; what it seeks is a return of assets and lifting of more sanctions without having to negotiate meaningful electoral concessions. Indeed, in recent weeks it has placed

new demands on a return to the negotiating table. It is also likely that the regime feels time, as well as leverage, is on its side.

THE BALANCE SHEET

The following section lays out salient arguments for and against the claim that presidential elections will contribute to a democratic transition in Venezuela. Each of the 12 arguments—6 for and 6 against—is scored on two principal metrics, probability and impact. The former refers to the likelihood that a given scenario will come to pass, while the latter refers to the degree to which it will influence Venezuela's democratic prospects.

A score of 1 on probability indicates no chance that the supposed development will come to pass, while a score of 10 indicates that it has already happened or will certainly happen before 2024. A score of 1 on impact meanwhile indicates that even if the scenario comes to pass, it will not exert any influence on Venezuela's democratic prospects, while a score of 10 indicates that this is one of the key determinants in whether free and fair elections are possible. While these scenarios are by no means comprehensive, they are an attempt to parse variables, determine costs and benefits, and weigh realities against potentialities in the 2024 presidential elections. For more information on the scoring methodology, please see the final section titled "Analytical Approach."

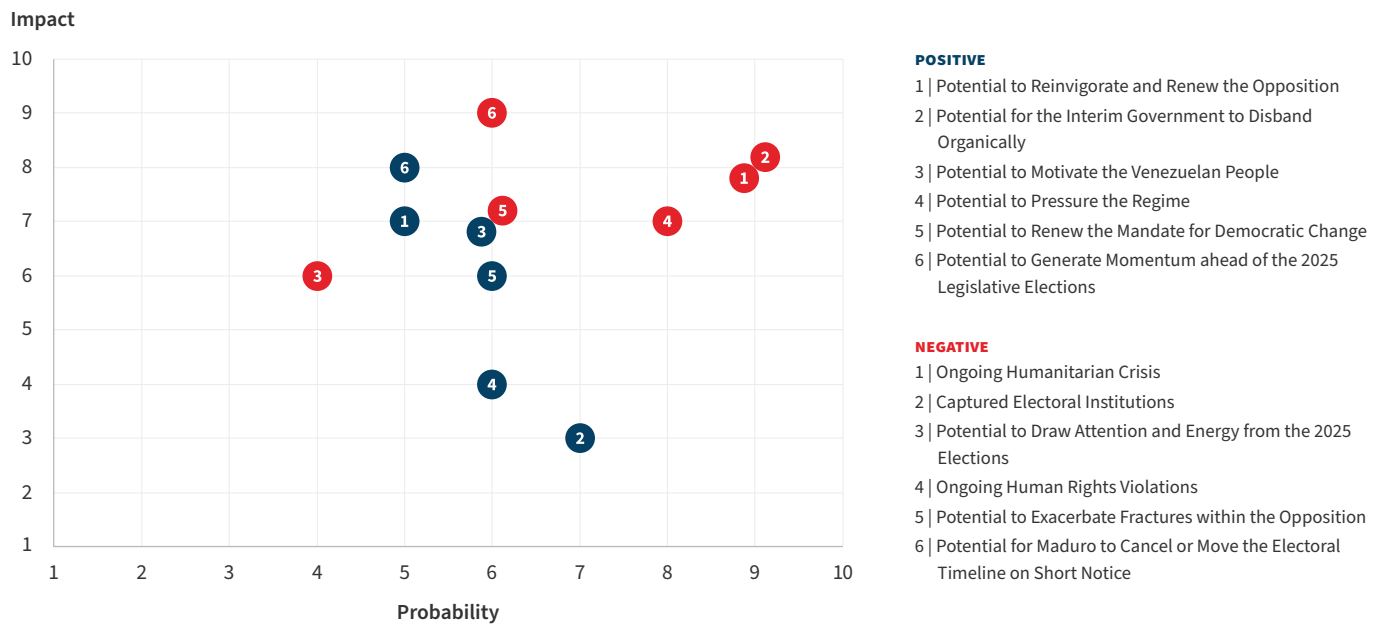
ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR

1. Potential to Reinvigorate and Renew the Opposition

The Venezuelan opposition has faced a multitude of setbacks, most recently underscored in the 2021 regional elections, where the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) won **19 out of 22** governorships and nearly two-thirds of municipal positions. Despite systemic and well-documented instances of electoral manipulation, as well as poor regime showings, these elections illustrated many of the challenges facing opposition coordination. These include a lack of unity, especially between factions in the Unitary Platform and those outside of it. Coordination was further hampered by the polarizing role of negotiations with the Maduro regime in Mexico City, an obstacle which has seemingly returned as Maduro **dangles** the prospect of a renewed dialogue in exchange for additional U.S. concessions.

Accordingly, the 2024 elections can exert a unifying influence on the opposition, illustrating an urgent need to align behind a single candidate to challenge Maduro. In

Figure 1: Scenario Probability and Impact Scores



Source: Authors' design.

this respect, primaries, if conducted correctly, may create sorely needed space for various factions to **resolve their differences** and for the urgent task of **party leadership renewal**. However, as previously noted, the challenges to an effective primary election are numerous, and in a worst-case scenario, the leadup to 2024 may in fact harden battle lines between various opposition elements, as opposed to softening them.

Based on these considerations, this outcome scores a 5 on the probability scale and a 7 on the impact scale. While the potential for the opposition to renew itself is inherent in elections, the old names continue to circulate in political circles. If the opposition were able to renew itself, it would likely have a large impact on Venezuela's democratic prospects.

2. Potential for the Interim Government to Disband Organically

Fragmentation within the opposition has also contributed to a growing perception that the interim government of Venezuela is reaching the end of its effective lifespan. Indeed, it is unlikely that the interim government will extend its mandate beyond the end of 2022, given recent extensions have been the **subject of fierce debate** within the opposition. Coupled with the fact that the main four-party coalition constituting the interim government (known as the G4) will not have stood in free and fair

national elections for nearly nine years by 2024, the ability of this structure to claim to represent the popular will of Venezuela is quickly becoming tenuous. Accordingly, presidential elections offer the chance for the interim government to disband more organically by transitioning into a more mainstream political movement immediately thrust into campaign mode. (Of course, the opposition would need to find a solution to the question of assets, allowing it to keep them out of Maduro's hands while still disbanding.) Without this natural transition phase, the interim government would force uncomfortable questions upon its supporters in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and elsewhere about the future of the opposition and what form it would take.

Based on these considerations, this outcome scores a 7 on the probability scale and a 3 on the impact scale. Finding a graceful way to climb down from the interim government may assist the opposition in saving face, but it is unlikely to have an outsized impact on Venezuela's democratic prospects, especially since doing so will likely bring only greater legitimacy to Maduro.

3. Potential to Motivate the Venezuelan People

Despite a regime victory in the 2021 regional elections, the PSUV **performed worse** in terms of absolute support than it had in previous elections. Beginning with presidential elections in 2013, the PSUV under Maduro has bled millions

of votes. In the 2021 regional elections, this was further compounded by dismal turnout of just **42 percent**, which suggests an electorate with little confidence in the ability of elections to deliver needed political change. However, in a higher-stakes presidential race with fewer candidates competing, there is a chance that the vast majority of Venezuelans who have grown apathetic about elections as vehicles of change could become reconnected to the political process once again. This includes the potential to reengage, reconnect, and motivate the millions in the Venezuelan diaspora as well. Beyond the elections themselves, the pre-election moment, from primary campaigns through to the general vote, opens significant opportunities for civil society actors to engage. The degree to which civil society can assert itself will be influenced heavily by the Maduro regime's repressive apparatus but nevertheless will likely be greater than the current moment.

Based on these considerations, such an outcome scores a 6 on the probability scale and a 7 on the impact scale. It is more than likely that elections with some element of competition could reduce apathy among the Venezuelan people and reconnect them to politics (not to mention that presidential elections historically draw out a greater level of participation than regional and legislative elections), and such a scenario would have a large impact on Venezuela's democratic prospects.

4. Potential to Pressure the Regime

Even if the regime responds harshly to an empowered opposition and mobilized civil society, this may in fact further weaken its standing. An overreaction could serve as a glaring reminder of the repressive and fundamentally undemocratic nature of Maduro's regime. Doing so could be fundamental to regaling support for the Venezuelan opposition on the international stage. Thus, the 2024 elections could prompt a miscalculation from the regime, potentially resulting in a new round of international pressure and isolating the regime at a time when it is attempting to **claw back** credibility in an **increasingly auspicious** regional and international environment. At a smaller scale, the presidential elections will likely open opportunities to bring pressure against the regime at the margins through increased press scrutiny as well as the deployment of international election observers. Such pressures on the regime can test the strength of Maduro's crony networks and his support within key institutions, such as the Venezuelan armed forces, with the possibility that pressure could reveal critical cracks in Maduro's internal support.

Based on these considerations, this outcome scores a 6 on

the probability scale and a 4 on the impact scale. Elections can test the authoritarian nexuses between the Maduro regime and its cronies. However, the regime has survived worse levels of pressure in the past.

5. Potential to Renew the Mandate for Democratic Change

Given past precedent, it seems unlikely that the Maduro regime or the PSUV would permit an opposition candidate to actually take the presidency in 2024. Nevertheless, as the above arguments illustrate, there is still a possibility for unexpected results and surprises within a fundamentally rigged system, as seen in last year's gubernatorial election for Barinas. Higher turnout than expected in favor of the opposition candidate, for instance, or a surge of demonstrations against the regime along the campaign trail could all act as important indicators that the flame of democracy and civil society has not been extinguished. Furthermore, given the length of time that has elapsed since many of the most prominent opposition figures have campaigned, a strong showing in 2024 could renew the opposition's challenge to the regime, though the overall coalition will have to wait until legislative elections scheduled for 2025 to fully renew their mandate to govern.

Based on these considerations, this outcome scores a 6 on the probability scale and a 6 on the impact scale. Elections can provide a sorely needed and renewed democratic mandate, which could contribute significantly to Venezuela's democratic prospects.

6. Potential to Generate Momentum ahead of the 2025 Legislative Elections

Perhaps the most consequential argument in favor of treating the 2024 elections seriously is the potential the presidential race has to prepare the opposition for critical elections scheduled the following year. In 2025, rather than a single election viewed as a life-and-death struggle by Maduro himself, Venezuela is scheduled to vote for representatives to the National Assembly as well as local representatives. The number of elections scheduled to take place in 2025 would make it much harder for the regime to effectively manipulate the entire electoral space, and a more unified, energized opposition could capture enough seats to present a genuine challenge to the PSUV's ability to rule unilaterally. Under this construction, the 2024 presidential race should be viewed less as a potential turning point for Venezuela and more as an exercise in conducting the necessary logistical and strategic activities, such as running primaries and devising an effective

messaging campaign, needed to compete seriously in 2025. Based on these considerations, this outcome scores a 5 on the probability scale and an 8 on the impact scale. It is about an even chance that the 2024 presidential elections generate momentum for the 2025 legislative elections, but if momentum does build, this would have a large impact on Venezuela's democratic prospects.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST

1. Ongoing Humanitarian Crisis

It is impossible to separate the challenges to democratic transition in Venezuela from the dire humanitarian crisis that has engulfed the country. **Claims** by the Maduro regime to have slowed or reversed the spiraling economic situation notwithstanding, in practice, millions of Venezuelans remain without access to basic services and economic opportunities and are suffering from crime and predatory state institutions. A 2020 World Food Programme report estimated that nearly **one in three** Venezuelans suffer from food insecurity, while **more than three-fourths** of the population live below the UN baseline for extreme poverty. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated these factors, overlaying them with a persistent public health crisis straining already decrepit infrastructure. Under such conditions of dire humanitarian need, even substantial improvements in terms of opposition unity or messaging may not suffice to bring out the vote in 2024 or renew enthusiasm for political change. The humanitarian crisis has also incentivized many to flee the country, further complicating any efforts to meaningfully advance out-of-country voting efforts. Furthermore, the inability to bring meaningful relief may reflect poorly on the Venezuelan opposition given its perceived access to and ability to mobilize frozen assets.

Based on these considerations, this outcome scores a 9 on the probability scale and an 8 on the impact scale. The complex humanitarian emergency in Venezuela will not disappear anytime soon, especially as Maduro continues in power, and it will continue to exert a negative impact on Venezuela's democratic prospects.

2. Captured Electoral Institutions

Venezuela's electoral institutions remain mostly under the influence of the Maduro regime. While the CNE has made **some progress**, such as appointing five new commissioners in May 2021, including two linked to the opposition, the CNE has remained lax in responding to electoral irregularities and violations, demonstrating a

lack of transparency throughout the process. Ultimately, for instance, the CNE was unable to resolve the electoral farce in Barinas's gubernatorial election. Meanwhile, the TSJ has proven an active obstacle to free and fair elections, repeatedly intervening to limit opposition participation and bar candidates from standing and leading their respective parties. Recently **pared down to 20 justices** (from 32), the court does not exhibit signs of moving toward independence before 2024 and instead remains packed with regime loyalists and willing to assert itself on behalf of the ruling PSUV. The options for the opposition to respond to these institutional roadblocks are limited. Negotiations with the regime and some sanctions lifting may secure a somewhat more balanced composition, but both the CNE and TSJ will almost certainly remain under the yoke of the regime. Conducting primaries independent of the CNE provides one mechanism for maintaining opposition independence, but this also carries the risk that the CNE or TSJ could declare any primary winner illegitimate on the basis of the CNE's exclusion.

Based on these considerations, this outcome scores a 9 on the probability scale and a 8 on the impact scale. It is unlikely that the Maduro regime will relinquish any meaningful control over the electoral institutions in Venezuela, which is a key component of Chavismo's continued hold on power.

3. Potential to Draw Attention and Energy from the 2025 Elections

In contrast to the idea that participation in the 2024 presidential elections will act as a springboard to 2025, the opposite could be true: by investing time, energy, and money in the run for president, the opposition could use up resources necessary to contest elections the following year. Assessing this claim requires a great deal of speculation as to exactly how seriously the opposition, and all its various factions, view their chances in 2024. It is important to recall that participation in elections is not necessarily a binary between total participation and no engagement whatsoever. Indeed, the Venezuelan opposition has itself illustrated that even the conscientious boycott of elections can have a political effect. Thus, whether the 2024 race will hinder the chances of the 2025 races depends on how much the opposition mobilizes in pursuit of seizing the presidency.

Based on these considerations, this outcome scores a 4 on the probability scale and a 6 on the impact scale. There is slightly less than an even chance that the 2024 presidential elections sap energy from 2025 national

elections; if this comes to pass, it will have a slightly less intense impact on Venezuela's democratic prospects.

4. Ongoing Human Rights Violations

In addition to the institutional barriers for candidates, many opposition leaders in Venezuela confront far more visceral threats to their campaigns. Arbitrary detentions of activists, opposition members, and civil society representatives remain commonplace, with the watchdog group Foro Penal documenting **several hundred political prisoners** being held in Venezuela at any given moment. Violence, intimidation, and **extrajudicial killings** by both the **security forces and pro-regime vigilante** groups also represent tools in Maduro's arsenal to restrict civic space and remove challenges to his government. Given that the armed forces are **aligned with the Maduro regime**, it seems unlikely that Venezuela will improve significantly in terms of physical safety for democracy advocates before 2024. In this context, making a concerted effort to support an opposition candidate could expose many Venezuelan citizens to detention, abuse, and potentially death if the regime elects to beat back any challenge to its survival with significant repression. However, there remains a chance that **international scrutiny**, most notably in the form of the ongoing International Criminal Court **investigation** into human rights abuses perpetrated by the Maduro regime, may yet limit the level of force the government is willing to deploy.

Based on these considerations, this outcome scores an 8 on the probability scale and a 7 on the impact scale. The Maduro regime will not cease committing human rights abuses, and these abuses will continue exerting a negative impact on Venezuela's democratic prospects.

5. Potential to Exacerbate Fractures within the Opposition

With the opposition beginning to contemplate and plan for primaries, it remains unclear whether this mechanism will allow for a meaningful reconciliation and unification of purpose or the much-needed **renewal and renovation of political parties**. This is especially true with respect to the rift between the traditional parties that have made up the Unitary Platform and newer groups more open to cooperation with the regime. In other words, there remains a schism between those who favor full political transition and those aiming at cohabitation (i.e., *convivencia*) with Maduro. A scenario could emerge in which one opposition candidate triumphs in the primaries, only for that result to be rejected by another faction, or as

mentioned previously, for two or more primary processes to occur simultaneously. The results of such a divide would not only be harmful for the opposition's prospects in 2024 but likely crystalize into more permanent fissures, allowing the regime to continue its current strategy of divide and conquer. In a more extreme scenario, Maduro may decide to dismantle parts of the opposition that present credible threats to his regime.

Based on these considerations, this outcome scores a 6 on the probability scale and a 7 on the impact scale. There is slightly greater than an even chance that the 2024 elections will fragment the opposition further, considering the opposition is already notoriously fragmented. If the opposition remains fragmented, it will have a moderately intense impact on Venezuela's democratic prospects. Much depends on the relative success or failure of the planned opposition primaries.

6. Potential for Maduro to Cancel or Move the Electoral Timeline on Short Notice

In addition to political detention and repression, another weapon Maduro could brandish against a reenergized opposition could be canceling or postponing presidential elections. A change to the electoral timetable, either bringing it forward or pushing it back, would likely be used to **exploit** divisions within the opposition. Maduro is more likely to organize the election if he perceives there is no real threat, which to him means a more complacent (or complicit) candidate from the opposition that will avoid conflictive topics, such as the regime's pervasive human rights violations). Such an opposition candidate would likely mean the ability to accept defeat without denouncing fraud. An outright cancellation, while more extreme, is nevertheless conceivable, especially if Maduro feels sufficiently threatened by the prospects of a close race or comfortable enough with the international concessions he has managed to extract without heading to the polls. If the election appears to be a potential destabilizing process, Maduro may be tempted to cancel or defer the election. Either move would disrupt the opposition's momentum and likely indicate a new phase in Venezuela's struggle with dictatorship.

Based on these considerations, this outcome scores a 6 on the probability scale and a 9 on the impact scale. As with the 2018 presidential elections, Maduro is more than likely to adjust the presidential election schedule, which will have an intense impact on Venezuela's democratic prospects, since he can be expected to only do so if it would bring him an electoral advantage.

SCENARIO PLANNING

Based on this balance sheet of opportunities and concerns, several potential scenarios emerge. What follows is an attempt to outline these scenarios from best to worst and sketch policy recommendations for the U.S. government should any of these scenarios come to pass.

BEST-CASE SCENARIO

In the best-case scenario, some of the major roadblocks identified above are mitigated. For instance, if negotiations in Mexico City yield a more impartial CNE or changes in the institutional landscape provide more certainty and guarantees for the opposition because the TSJ acts more independently, this could lead to a groundswell of opposition unity. In the best case, the situation of out-of-country voting is resolved satisfactorily, opening the vote to millions in the Venezuelan diaspora who have voted with their feet against the regime already. In this scenario, the U.S. government should remain cautious but consider supporting the process of presidential elections in 2024 and the 2025 elections. In this sense, support could be defined as offering to furnish third-party election observers or offering technical assistance to the opposition to organize their primary process. The United States should also recognize that the road to such a scenario will depend heavily on the regime's own cost-benefit analysis and whether it can afford to stonewall electoral concessions. Thus, as Washington has currently extended an offer of sanctions relief in exchange for returning to the negotiating table, it should also come prepared to credibly threaten new sanctions if significant progress is stymied.

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STATUS QUO SCENARIO

In another scenario, the status quo in Venezuela remains, meaning that there is no further deterioration in the electoral infrastructure, but neither are there meaningful improvements to it. Any improvement or deterioration would occur along the margins. In this case, the U.S. government will have to maintain a nuanced approach

to understand what improvements on the margins look like, such as slightly more civic space, slightly less use of the security forces to crack down, fewer arbitrary arrests, and shorter sentences. In this case, the U.S. government should ratchet up pressure on the Maduro regime and hone its messaging strategy to reflect that the elections will be fraudulent and run under unfair conditions, thus curtailing the Maduro regime's ability to claim legitimacy to the international community. The United States should also be prepared to impose new sanctions against the regime, as well as ensure that those punitive measures that have been allowed to lapse can snap back quickly in response to violations. In this scenario, it is possible that the 2025 elections may offer a small opening that does not exist in the 2024 presidential elections, since the longer timeline could accommodate the need for greater effort to deconstruct and scale back the regime's elections apparatus.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO

In the worst-case scenario, presidential elections occur in 2024 but only in a highly managed fashion. In this scenario, the institutional landscape deteriorates further and there is greater opposition fragmentation. The Maduro regime would ensure not only that the opposition loses but that Maduro himself wins so dramatically that the election strengthens his claim to legitimacy on the international stage, weakening the case for diplomatic isolation and support for sanctions against his regime.

Under an even more extreme scenario—perhaps a worst-worst-case scenario—the Maduro regime feels sufficiently threatened that managed elections in Venezuela follow the pattern established by the [sham November 2021 elections](#) held by the Ortega-Murillo regime in Nicaragua. This scenario involves significantly increasing imprisonment of leading opposition candidates, intimidation, systematic human rights abuses, and increasing reliance on extra-hemispheric actors to mitigate the inevitable fallout and consequences.

In this scenario, the U.S. government would be advised to have a firm plan to counter the Maduro regime's messaging about the elections and ensure that the regime's international supporters have little opportunity to claim the legitimacy they so badly crave. In this case, the U.S. government should also consider new rounds of sanctions and identify strategies for increasing coordinated international pressure and deploying frozen assets in a post-2024 landscape where the interim government no longer exists.

ANALYTICAL APPROACH

The scores reflect a qualitative assessment of each argument's probability and impact. Both authors conducted extensive analysis of the literature, including academic research, news articles, and think tank reports for all 12 arguments. Based on these, each author independently assigned the arguments a probability and impact score. The final scores were generated first by comparing results between the authors and subsequently by soliciting external expert peer reviews to arrive at a consensus on the relative probability and impact of the arguments.

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