

## Food, Technology, and Authoritarianism in Venezuela's Elections

**Michael Penfold**

In defiance of all logic, Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro could emerge victorious in the upcoming May 2018 presidential elections and consolidate a fully authoritarian regime. The oil-rich nation is facing the worst economic crisis in its history. Hyperinflation, which is expected to reach five digits by the end of the year, coupled with chronic shortages of everything from basic food to medicine to spare parts, has ground almost all productive activity to a standstill. A mass exodus has drained the country of nearly 10 percent of its population over the 18 years since Maduro and his predecessor, the late Hugo Chávez, rose to power.

And yet, despite the collapse of virtually every institution in the country, a deep erosion of the quality of life, and lack of prospects for change, the Maduro regime seems set to strengthen its iron grip on power.

But just how has Maduro used the country's all-encompassing crisis in its favor? Maduro has successfully dismantled Venezuela's rule of law by following Chávez's steps and using elections to legitimize his government. This has become particularly evident following the opposition's resounding victory in the December 2015 legislative elections. After the elections, the government took important steps—incarcerating opposition leaders, banning political parties, stripping the popularly-elected National Assembly of its constitutionally-mandated powers, coercing voters—to render the opposition's supermajority victory irrelevant and ensure that the regime would never lose another election.

Of the different mechanisms that the Maduro regime has used to secure favorable electoral results, one has stood out as being particularly effective and powerful: the manipulation of

hunger as a means to socially condition voting preferences. The 2017 regional elections painfully illustrated this mechanism's effectiveness. Polling stations were positioned next to booths—Red Points or *Puntos Rojos*—where people had to renew their chip-embedded “Fatherland Card” (*Carnet de la Patria*), which the government uses to allot subsidized bags of food. This electronic card is linked in real time to big data related to an individual's access to social security, public housing, public employment, health services, and direct cash transfers. It therefore has tremendous value for those “users” dependent on these state benefits.

By exploring these new and elaborate “voting tricks,” tested in the previous polls and likely perfected for the upcoming presidential elections, I examine how the likelihood of an opposition victory will be reduced by the strength of this electoral and authoritarian technology. In Venezuela, elections have been transformed from a way for the people to make their voices heard into a tool that legitimizes authoritarianism. Technology, food handouts, and politics are now being used to transform Venezuela's vintage clientelism into a new authoritarian formula through social control over Venezuelan's political behavior in the voting booths. In order to understand the interaction between these different variables, this report examines the regional elections of October 2017, when this new authoritarian formula was first applied successfully.

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## The Context

As Venezuela braces for an openly non-competitive presidential election on May 20, 2018 (an election in which main opposition parties and presidential candidates have been banned), it is worth remembering that the government of President Nicolás Maduro achieved resounding victories during the regional elections in October 2017 as well as the local elections held later that year. In the gubernatorial elections, the ruling *chavistas*—adherents of the late President Hugo Chávez's “21st-century socialism”—won in 18 out of 23 states, with 54 percent of votes cast. To do so, they tested out a sophisticated new system of political clientelism—the quid pro quo exchange of government handouts for votes—by tying electoral participation to the renewal of access to food subsidies through the use of electronic cards. These cards are key for individuals to secure social benefits, but they also allow the government to track political participation in real time. Pre-election opinion polls showed strong support for the opposition, especially in population-dense urban areas. Yet the *chavistas* trounced their opponents. In the local election for mayors in early December 2017, *chavismo* was able to replicate this result and demoralize the opposition even further. For the presidential election in May 2018, Maduro has already promised to expand the use of these different instruments nationally in order to assure a high electoral turnout, as well as to guarantee his reelection for another six years.



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At first glance, the regional electoral results seem to reveal that the incumbent party was successful at mobilizing its base and swaying opposition voters. But upon closer examination, it becomes clear that the sudden change in political tides had little to do with messaging or organization. Rather, the key to understanding the electoral result lies in the social context. Political corruption, failed agricultural policies, and hyperinflation have created crippling food shortages in Venezuela. In 2014, the Maduro government instituted a food rationing system called CLAPs (*Comités Locales de Abastecimiento y Producción*, or Local Committees for Distribution and Production). Food subsidies allocated through CLAPs are accessed through electronic, government-issued cards, called “Fatherland Cards,” which must be periodically updated. Nearly 70 percent of the population relies on CLAPs in one form or another, and over 63 percent of individuals say that they depend on the card to access other key subsidies.

With a tight political race looming, the government realized it needed to mobilize its base and flip some opposition supporters. Therefore, it decided to link the election to a mechanism guaranteed to mobilize vast swaths of the population: the update of the Fatherland Card. Days before the election, the government positioned food subsidy renewal stations (“Red Points”) next to polling stations. They were equipped with wireless internet connections that allowed voters to renew their Fatherland Card or access CLAPs as they voted. As some voters explained, this created a clear impression that the renewal of their cards was conditional on their turning up to vote (even though voting is not mandatory in Venezuela). Others described how they were told to leave their electronic cards at the Red Points while they voted, and to retrieve their updated cards only after submitting their vote. Given the prevailing extreme food scarcity, this system guaranteed the government high voter mobilization at a low cost. Even politically apathetic people were coerced to vote because of their reliance on government food rations and other social subsidies.

The result was a substantial uptick in the number of voters, with some cities registering a 10 to 15 percent increase from the previous regional elections. Political allegiances are divided along socioeconomic lines, with large segments of the middle and working class supporting the opposition and the poorest classes supporting the *chavistas*. Therefore, most of the voters motivated to vote by food subsidy renewal represented votes for the government. But the increase in *chavista* voter turnout was not the only factor that explains the government's victory. The placement of Red Points next to polling stations also helped to flip voters who would have otherwise supported the opposition. By linking the renewal of the Fatherland

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Card to the elections (and tracking voter participation), the government could have intimidated many voters who previously had backed the opposition—especially as the

*chavistas* have long been accused of withholding food parcels or barring access to other social benefits for individuals who express opposing beliefs.

The proven effectiveness of their new system has emboldened the *chavistas*, who decided to move the date of the presidential election forward from October 2018 to late May. The electoral successes of 2017 have also encouraged President Maduro to run for re-election, even though he has presided over Venezuela's deterioration into a country with the world's highest levels of inflation and homicide. This newly-minted form of clientelism is arguably the most developed and most authoritarian in Latin America, and it poses a colossal threat to the return of democracy in Venezuela.

But understanding is the first step on the path towards change. The international community must take note of *chavismo's* latest innovation. Just as important, the opposition must emerge from its current state of depression and confront its foe, one it can only defeat through unity of leadership and strategy.

## The Issue of Abstention

Many analysts have pointed to opposition voters and the deep divisions among the coalition of opposition parties to explain the results of the last two elections. Following this line of reasoning, the government succeeded in demoralizing opposition voters and political parties and forced them to withdraw from the electoral arena. For example, low voter turnout is one of the main reasons used to explain why *chavismo* was able to win 18 governorships in the regional elections. According to this explanation, abstention benefited the pro-government candidates. Political analysts and even spokespeople from the opposition explained the results using this variable. They base their conclusions on polls conducted before the elections that showed that voter intention was significantly higher among government supporters.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Opinion polls in September 2017 from Datanálisis and Delphos seemed to confirm both that the opposition would win in the majority of state and that abstention rates could affect their performance.

Analysts note that abstention was particularly high among the urban middle class in Venezuela's biggest states; traditionally this sector has voted in favor of the opposition. But when you look closely at the electoral results by state, the data do not necessarily support this argument. Perhaps there are isolated cases in some municipalities that are in accordance with what the polls suggested, but in general terms, the results do not indicate that the middle class overwhelmingly abstained from voting.

National abstention for these regional elections (38.9%) was much lower than for the local vote conducted four years earlier (46.1%), and it was slightly higher than in 2007 (34.5%). Abstention in many states does not deviate considerably from the average, which suggests that voter turnout was not influenced by political variables. Curiously, the opposition won in the oil-rich, western state of Zulia, where the abstention rate was the highest in the country (44.35%). If abstention was the determining variable, how can we explain why the opposition won in such an emblematic state?

Similarly, the opposition lost in states like Cojedes and Lara, where the abstention rates were among the lowest (30% and 36%, respectively), but won in Mérida (with a 35.2% abstention rate), where the rate of participation was one of the highest. These results show that abstention was distributed in a similar fashion across the country and across both camps. Simply put, the empirical evidence does not back up the claim that variations in electoral participation among political groups account for the electoral results, just as polls suggested.

In Venezuela, however, the abstention theory has taken hold, despite being extremely problematic: the theory transfers responsibility for the opposition's defeat onto society and fails to identify its true causes. In reality, figures from the National Electoral Council (CNE for its Spanish acronym) show (and these must be questioned) that Venezuelans turned out to vote in similar patterns as they had in the past.

After dismissing the abstention rate as an explanatory variable, variations in voting patterns among citizens who did vote emerge as a potential explanation.

As we shall see, these changes are considerable but also extremely difficult to interpret, especially because they still show *chavismo* succeeding across the country. Despite high levels of discontent among the population due to scarcity and hyperinflation, *chavismo* has remained able to successfully mobilize voters to the polls across the country in order to secure elections.

## Relative Differences in Mobilization

In order to paint a clear picture of what happened during the October 2017 regional elections, it is useful to compare them with previous elections. These comparisons can help illustrate how voter turnout varied in each state and among supporters of both the opposition and incumbent parties. The only way to ensure that these calculations are comparable is by normalizing the data by the level of abstention in all regions. Otherwise, the effect of

migration (more than 1 million voters have left the country over the past two years) may skew the results and lead to an underestimation of the real value of mobilization and shifting voter preferences among the different parties.

Following this methodology, I recalculated the results for the legislative elections in 2015 by state (this election featured the best electoral performance by the opposition), using abstention during the 2017 regional elections as a reference point. During the legislative elections, the opposition was able to win by a landslide, and it obtained a qualified majority of seats in the National Assembly. This comparison of participation normalized by abstention allows us to estimate the growth of voting in real terms, as well as the effect of voter mobilization efforts. To put it differently, it captures the real changes in voting patterns for both camps, independent of abstention or of the number of Venezuelans who might have left the country in the last few years.

The results show significant changes in the voting patterns. In general terms, when compared to the legislative elections, *chavismo* successfully increased its support during the regional elections in all states except Apure (one of the poorest states in the country). For the first time since Maduro assumed power, this growth also included all the major urban centers in Venezuela. There are five states that show very high rates of growth—between 15 and 25 percent (Mérida, Miranda, Guárico, Lara, Nueva Esparta, Sucre, Trujillo and Yaracuy). In Amazonas state (a state with a large indigenous population), *chavismo* grew by as much as 44 percent.

These figures indicate that government's machinery was particularly effective in capturing votes among those who went out to vote in both big, urban centers and poor, rural states.

The opposition, on the other hand, shows a pattern of decline in all states (except Delta Amacuro) with a very low rate of mobilization in

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the major states. These figures also reflect a considerable decrease in turnout by opposition voters in the urban states that, until recently, had been the parties' biggest bases of support.

Initially, the story that emerges from these statistics is one in which *chavismo* was substantially more successful at mobilizing and coopting voters, especially in the central, urban cone, which is the most densely populated part of the country. How did *chavismo* sway the urban vote in its favor?

It is highly likely that this change in preferences was the result of social spending through mechanisms of social control, like the CLAP food bags, Red Points, and Fatherland Cards. According to polling data, 63 percent of the population holds the electronic card; 95 percent of those that identify as *chavistas* reported that they both have card and voted for the government. By contrast, 31 percent of voters that identify themselves as opposition supporters hold the electronic card and also voted for the government.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> These are the results of a telephone survey conducted on the third week of October 2017 with 1,200 respondents by a team of electoral experts working for the opposition in order to measure the impact of these different instruments during the elections.



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Even if we accept the clientelistic effect of the purchase of votes, the results for the regional elections also reveal that the opposition ceased to be competitive in the urban centers and that their offer was less successful than in the 2015 legislative elections. There is only one way of explaining this: voters who had previously supported the opposition in the 2015 legislative elections shifted towards the government in the regional elections.

In real terms, the opposition lost over 2 million votes, and *chavismo* won 656,000 votes that could only have come from its opponent. Thus, the opposition failed to mobilize 1,350,000 people who turned out for the legislative election, even after controlling for abstention. These figures suggest that the opposition had an enormous organizational problem and that *chavismo* was able to put in place formidable electoral machinery in order to flip opposition votes.

This transformation in the patterns of mobilization could have happened for several reasons: voters shifted their preferences (they punished U.S. sanctions and the street protests) or their votes were bought through clientelistic means (using CLAPs, Red Points, and Fatherland Cards). Another possibility is that the votes were electronically cast using another voter's identity, a practice known in Venezuela as a *voto puyao*, or a pierced vote, which amounts to nothing other than ballot stuffing.

All of these hypotheses are perfectly legitimate, but they are not sufficient to explain all of the marked increase in the *chavista* vote and the low vote for the opposition. How is it possible that support for the government grew by 17.4 percent and 10 percent in Miranda and Carabobo, respectively, the two main urban centers?

It is somewhat suspicious, given the context of the biggest economic contraction in Venezuela's history and a hyperinflationary process in full swing, that the government still obtained 54 percent of the national vote and was virtually immune to economic voting. It is

very suspicious that the opposition candidates showed high levels of voter intention in all the opinion polls in big, urban centers (Miranda, Carabobo, Lara, and Aragua), and yet they lost every mayor state except for Zulia (where abstention was the highest).

This electoral snapshot presents serious questions that must be addressed: was the pro-government vote the result of an organic growth in support, or does its considerable increase stem from irregularities and electoral crimes that might have altered the results in some of the regions? Some analysts argue that this change can be explained as the sum of several effects (substitutions, relocations, “pierced vote,” etc.). However, the change in voting patterns is so large throughout the whole country that only a significant factor can explain the change in electoral preferences. The partial effect of several factors seems too small to explain the magnitude of the observed change at the national level. One thesis that might help to answer several of these questions would be the massive use of clientelism and intimidation.

## The Red Points and the Fatherland Card

The most significant difference in the conditions surrounding the 2015 legislative and the 2017 regional elections was the establishment of the Red Points at voting sites and the mass distribution of Fatherland Cards, even more so than the clientelistic use of the CLAPs food bags and the establishment of the new CNE. During the legislative election of 2015, the Fatherland Card was not in effect. Currently, these electronic cards are fundamental to access the CLAPs and their renewal is imperative to access the subsidized food program. In practical terms, this ID card is a mechanism of social control and potentially of political manipulation, as it determines an individual’s access to government-run social programs and, more specifically, to the CLAPs food bags.

According to several polls, 48 percent of the population claims to receive the CLAPs food bag on a regular basis; 21 percent reported having received the bag in the past, but lately receiving it irregularly; and 29 percent said that they have never received this subsidy. These figures suggest that at least 3.7 million households have registered to use the Fatherland Card and have interacted with the CLAPs program. The majority of these households are located in low-income urban areas. *Chavista* national and community leaders also publicly present the card as a mechanism of electronic control over the behavior of families. Interestingly, 63 percent individuals who registered in the CLAPs program voted in the regional elections, while 35 percent abstained. Of those that voted, 60 percent voted for *chavismo*.

On election day, Red Points were installed next to polling centers throughout the country. These Red Points used wireless internet access to renew the Fatherland Card. According to anecdotal accounts, at several Red Points, the renewal of the card required the cardholder (and thus his or her family) to vote, despite the fact that voting is not compulsory in Venezuela. While these reports cannot be confirmed on a wide scale throughout the country, it is possible that this clientelistic mechanism facilitated mobilization for *chavismo* at a very low cost.



Other accounts suggest that voters were required to leave their Fatherland Cards at the Red Point while they voted, and that the cards were only returned to them after they had cast their ballot. This practice would likely have driven home the message to voters that their ballot might not remain secret. This could have determined who they voted for. The possibility of losing access to the CLAP food bags after failing to renew their Fatherland Card could have generated a powerful conditioning of the vote as well as an increase in mobilization.

At the end of the afternoon on election day in October 2017, the Red Points had the capacity to check, in real time, who had failed to renew their carnets. These individuals were immediately contacted and persuaded to go renew their cards, and thus vote. The CNE extended voting hours at several centers well beyond 9 p.m., expanding the reach of this collectivistic mechanism. Additionally, many opposition witnesses reported having been violently expelled from their centers. These actions would have allowed for even fewer controls or written reports of voting irregularities.

The government's decision to link the renewal of Fatherland Cards to the election may help explain how *chavismo* was able to increase its share of the vote in low-income urban centers and large states where social discontent is high. The effectiveness of this mechanism of social coercion in a hyperinflationary context is truly astounding. If this mechanism proved successful in, for example, mobilizing or flipping 30 percent of the voters using the card, then it is possible to explain both the increase in *chavista* mobilization and the failure of polls to predict the opposition vote. As polls conducted after the regional elections seem to reflect, 31 percent of self-identified opposition voters that use the Fatherland Card voted for *chavismo*. Therefore, it seems that citizens revealed their true preferences in polls, but their votes were swayed by this new mechanism during the election.

This mechanism may immunize the government from social discontent and inflation. Even more important to *chavismo*, it is a mechanism

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that cannot be accounted for in the CNE's official audits, even though it renders the electoral process unfair for voters whose voting preferences are influenced by the Red Points.

Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to say that, with the Red Points and Fatherland Cards, Venezuela has arrived at a new level of both technological sophistication in clientelism and authoritarianism.

The effect of this system is best illustrated by the example of the electoral centers in Miranda, where the *chavista* candidate, Héctor Rodríguez, obtained 50 percent more votes than the late President Chávez won in his best election. In those electoral centers, voting turnout was as high as 85 percent. It is also possible that these centers were affected by electronic ballot stuffing. However, this can only be proved through an audit of the voting books and fingerprint scanners.

## The Real Test Regarding Electoral Conditions

Some analysts have argued that electoral conditions, although significant, are not the most important variable to help explain the opposition's defeat in October 2017. Instead, the opposition's failure to mobilize its own electoral base—due to internal divisions over whether or not to participate in the electoral process—was the driving factor behind their poor electoral performance.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, the opposition not only lost an important number of votes against *chavismo* (656,000 according to my estimates), but it also failed to mobilize over 1,350,000 of its own voters.

This argument, however, fails to take into account the fact that electoral conditions may have convinced opposition voters to vote for *chavismo*. If, in fact, the opposition lost more than 2 million votes compared to the legislative elections, and we know that 656,000 votes shifted to *chavismo*, this would translate to a convertibility power of the electoral conditions into support for *chavismo* of almost 33 percent. In other words, one out every three opposition voters that turned out to vote in the regional elections may have been coerced by the electoral conditions to vote for *chavismo*. Therefore, even if 1,350,000 million more opposition voters had decided to participate in the election, then over 442,000 of their votes may have gone to *chavismo*, and only around 900,000 voters would have actually voted for the opposition. As a result, *chavismo* would have still won 51.4 percent of the national vote. In other words, even assuming that the opposition could substantially increase vote mobilization, thanks to biased electoral conditions, *chavismo* would have still been able to win the national vote during the regional elections of October 2017.

## What Lies Ahead

The government seems to have developed a powerful new mechanism of coercion and vote conditioning that is highly effective and technologically very sophisticated. The results of the 2017 regional and municipal elections show that the electoral system undermined voters' rights and eroded all conditions for free elections while working for *chavismo*. The government is certainly working to perfect its system for the presidential elections in May 2018. How can any opposition party compete under such a system? It is hard to know. No other country in the Western Hemisphere has possessed a system of this nature. Potential consequences of the use and spread of this clientelistic technology are listed below:

1. This clientelistic system explains how *chavismo* mobilized its electoral base, despite the dire social, economic, and political conditions that the country is living through. The cost of mobilizing voters falls considerably thanks to the logistics infrastructure (Red Points) as well as the technological infrastructure and the mechanisms of social control provided by the Fatherland Card.

<sup>3</sup> Dorothy Kronick and Francisco Rodríguez. "150: Fraud or Fatigue?" Venezuelan Politics and Human Rights, October 26, 2017. Washington Office on Latin America, <https://venezuelablog.org/150-fraud-fatigue/>



Photo Credit: Government of Venezuela / Public Domain

2. This technology helps to sway the electoral balance even more in favor of the government. Transportation costs of voter mobilization are reduced, as people must drive to polling stations to renew their cards. *Chavismo* has expanded on this classic form of clientelism (transportation).
3. The technology has made *chavistas* feel increasingly comfortable in calling for elections, and the government is likely to win even more votes. The National Constitutional Assembly (ANC for its Spanish acronym) already pushed mayoral elections forward to December 2017 and the presidential elections to the first semester of 2018. The probability of Maduro winning after this experiment has also increased dramatically.
4. This clientelistic system was effective in mobilizing the *chavista* base and in coopting the “punishment” vote from the dissidents and even the opposition. The 656,000 votes that shifted between the 2015 legislative elections and the 2017 regional elections towards *chavismo* may have been the result of these mechanisms, particularly the Red Points. This type of voter coercion can only be prevented with the checks and balances of an independent electoral council.
5. It is imperative for the opposition to pressure Venezuelans living overseas to cast their vote abroad (almost 10% of Venezuelan voters live overseas). It is not so much a matter of fighting against abstention as much as it is about shielding votes, so that voters, regardless of their ideology, are not subject to social and political controls. Without the vote from abroad, the opposition’s chances of winning the election will be even slimmer.
6. The government is going to promote the growth of these clientelistic platforms by enlisting their new governors and local governments to put the Red Point and Fatherland Card systems in place before the May presidential election. It is not a coincidence that the expansion of the Fatherland Card to all regions was one of the first announcements that Maduro made following the October 2017 election. It is a sign that *chavismo* is preparing to win the presidential elections by extending its reach. Maduro has also announced large direct cash transfers allocated through the Fatherland Card in order to boost the power of these vote-buying mechanisms for the May 2018 election.


7. The only way the opposition can compete electorally with such a robust system is with a change both in the electoral conditions as well as a change in access to state resources. Additionally, the opposition urgently requires the construction of true political unity that is able to emotionally and effectively mobilize its base. Only under an incredibly charismatic leadership, joined by a social alliance, can this objective be reached. In order to prevent this outcome, the Maduro regime has already banned two of the largest political parties as well as potential presidential candidates who could have mobilized the vote. Therefore, those other opposition parties that believe they can run in a presidential election in a traditional race are truly deluded. *Chavismo* seems to have found a new way to electorally consolidate its authoritarian regime.

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