

# Venezuela Crisis Explained: A Tale of Two Presidents

Venezuela finds itself with two presidents engaged in a high-stakes game to control the country's future. The country has also had two "national assemblies" and many questions about how the constitution should be applied. So, how did it find itself in this position?

President Nicolás [Maduro claims](#) to be Venezuela's constitutional president because he won the [presidential election in July 2018](#).

On January 23 2019, Juan Guaidó, one month after becoming president of Venezuela's National Assembly, disputed Maduro's legitimacy and declared the presidency vacant. He then took an oath to serve as the interim president of Venezuela.

## Guaidó v Maduro

Although involved in politics since 2009, Guaidó was until recently little known outside political circles. A member of the Voluntad Popular ("Popular Will") party, he was an [understudy to Leopoldo López](#), the party's leader who is currently [imprisoned](#) for allegedly encouraging violent protests seeking the ousting of Maduro.

The [1999 Bolivarian Constitution](#), written in the first year of the administration of former president Hugo Chávez, fulfilled a promise Chávez made in his successful 1998 presidential campaign [to replace the constitution of 1991](#). Most Venezuelans had come to see the earlier constitution as a democratic façade, serving the interests of a corrupt, wealthy ruling elite that controlled the only two parties with any chance of winning power through elections.

Maduro was Chávez's vice president and the clear choice to succeed Chávez after his death in March 2013, only five months after winning an election for a third term. Elections during the Chávez years were criticized by observers, [such as the Carter Center](#), for the government favoritism in the campaigns, but most saw the vote count as honest.

Chávez won easily due to [strong support among the country's poor majority](#), who benefited from social programs funded by the country's oil bounty – which, before Chávez, had mostly gone to the wealthy and middle class.

## Maduro's unusual elections

The Maduro era has seen [more questions arise](#) about the fairness of campaigns, but also about official results. Despite Chavez's blessing, Maduro barely won the special election to replace the deceased leader, winning only 50.6% of the vote.

Maduro's political standing plunged further in mid-2014 when the price of oil, which can vary from 20 to 40% of GDP in any given year, [collapsed](#), falling from [US\\$130 to US\\$30 per barrel in late 2015](#).

In December 2015 Maduro's United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) suffered a [severe defeat](#) in the National Assembly elections of December 2015. The opposition won a super majority of seats, enough to undo the programs of the Chávez era. Much of the opposition had [participated in a failed coup](#) in 2002 and never accepted the 1999 constitution – but all now embraced it as a tool to try to remove Maduro.

They gathered enough signatures to force a recall election upon Maduro, but the PSUV used delaying tactics to ensure that an opposition win would result in the vice president taking over. The [recall effort faded away](#).

The opposition-controlled National Assembly began to act to slow or end Chavez's programs and to limit Maduro's power. The country's Supreme Court, filled with PSUV appointees, used a [dispute over the election of three assembly deputies](#) to rule that the body was unconstitutionally abusing its power and threatened to close the unicameral Congress down.

## **A legislature stripped of its powers**

Maduro instead decided to [convene a new National Constituent Assembly](#) (NCA) to rewrite the constitution and create what Chávez himself had called the "communal state". This state would theoretically shift much power over policies and state spending (generated almost entirely by oil exports) to local and regional citizens' councils.

To do this, Maduro used a vague phrase in [Article 348](#) of the constitution that says: "The initiative for calling a National Constituent Assembly may emanate from the President of the Republic sitting with the Cabinet of Ministers."

The opposition refused to participate in the election (turnout was 41%) of delegates to the NCA – as a result it is almost entirely composed of Maduro supporters. On August 8 2017 the [NCA took legislative powers for itself](#), away from the National Assembly, under [Article 349](#) of the existing constitution, which is intended to avoid obstruction of a constitutional assembly's work.

Venezuela's electoral authorities scheduled the May 2018 presidential election half a year early. Though constitutional, the timing made it difficult for the deeply divided opposition to choose its candidate. A large faction boycotted the vote; another backed a candidate, the governor of an important state.

Maduro won with 67.8%. The turnout was 46.7%, low by Venezuelan standards. [Maduro claims this election makes him the legitimate president](#) and accuses the opposition, the United States and other foreign governments of fomenting a coup.

Guaidó claims to be the constitutional interim president after the National Assembly declared the presidency to be “vacant” [under Article 233](#) of the constitution, which allows for an interim president to replace a sitting president “upon abandonment of his position, duly declared by the National Assembly”.

Guaidó [defends](#) his action as a constitutional route out of the country’s economic and political crises – and his move has been [endorsed by much of the mainstream news media](#) in liberal democracies. Maduro has highlighted that he won an election – and Guaidó has not. Guaidó promised he would call elections once he has actual control of government.

Why did both presidents try so hard to justify their status as “constitutional” when almost everyone agrees the military holds the keys to power? For one thing, many in the military feel it’s their job to uphold the constitution. And both sides wanted to appeal to international public opinion.

Both sides wanted the support of Venezuelans in the poor urban neighborhoods and countryside, who see the 1999 constitution as guaranteeing their right, won under Chavez, to be politically included in determining the country’s future.

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