



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

June 14, 2016

Venezuela's risky recall?

Why a new vote could backfire

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Facing a crumbling economy and a resurgent opposition, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro is in the fight of his political life. On May 2, the opposition coalition led by Enrique Capriles, handed in a petition with 1.85 million signatures demanding a recall election. Maduro's supporters in the judiciary and regulatory agencies are currently trying to kill the measure, but the president's unpopularity — the country is facing 700 percent inflation and major food shortages — gives him plenty of reason to fear a vote. Ironically, for the many unpopular leaders who have preceded Maduro, a recall is not always bad news. In fact, a revote rarely does what it sets out to do — depose an incumbent leader — and in some cases can even reinvigorate the regime in question.

Recalls — compared with the lengthy legal process of an impeachment — have become a popular shortcut across the world for removing unpopular or incompetent leaders in recent years. The United States helped bring it back in 2003 when film star Arnold Schwarzenegger replaced Gray Davis as governor of California after the latter failed to deal swiftly with both an energy and a budgetary crisis. It was the first time a recall had successfully deposed a governor in the United States since 1921. The next year, Venezuela held a recall vote against Maduro's predecessor and patron, Hugo Chávez, following his firing of the board of directors of *Petróleos de Venezuela* (or *Pdvsa*), the Venezuelan oil company. But it failed to push Chávez from power and actually ended up strengthening his regime.

In fact, although Chávez was highly unpopular at the start of the recall campaign, his approval ratings eventually rebounded. In the end, even though there were some disputes on the fairness of the vote, nearly 60 percent voted to keep him in power. Chávez used the recall to solidify his support among the poor and working class, as well as to punish his opponents who signed the recall petitions. These proved to be popular tactics, and in his next election, he nabbed 63 percent of the popular vote.

Since then, a number of both national and local leaders have faced recall votes: in 2011, Adolf Sauerland, mayor of Duisburg, Germany; in 2012, Romanian President Traian Basescu and Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker; and in 2013, Warsaw Mayor Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz and Lima Mayor Susana Villarán. And in all of them, except for the Duisburg case, the incumbent survived the vote. Other countries, including Australia, Canada, India, Myanmar (also called Burma), Russia, and the United Kingdom, have looked into adopting recall laws so that they, too, can kick leaders out of office before their terms are up.

One of the key reasons for the recall boom is that technology and social media make it easier to get the number of signatures needed to legitimize such petitions. In many places, those requirements are daunting, with Venezuela being one prominent example. For an actual election to take place, Venezuela's National Electoral Council must first obtain 197,978 signatures, or one percent of registered voters, to qualify for the establishment of an organization that can lead

the full recall effort. That organization must then submit a second petition 30 days later containing about four million signatures, or 20 percent of registered voters. This second petition is what puts the recall to a vote.

In the latest campaign, Venezuelan petitioners have turned in roughly 1.85 million signatures in the first phase alone, but the National Electoral Council has stalled the process, claiming that there are forgeries. This is a common complaint that elected officials use to discredit a petition, even if the number of fake signatures is so low that it would not affect the legitimacy of the petition. For example, during the recall of Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker, he tried to invalidate the process by pointing out that there were signatures from Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse, even though there were over 900,000 signatures on the petition. In Venezuela, Maduro's supporters are claiming that up to 10,000 signatures would fail verification, but even if those signatures were removed, at 1.85 million legitimate votes, the petition would still qualify for a second round.

If the opposition does eventually succeed in forcing a recall vote, there are a number of laws in place to prevent it from succeeding. The basic structure of such a vote is simple: it is usually either a new election or a simple referendum on whether the official should stay in office, followed by a second vote for his replacement. But in Venezuela, recall laws require opponents to win a new election with more votes than the incumbent won in the previous election, and more than 25 percent of registered voters must turn up. This means that Maduro's opponents must bring in more than the 7,587,579 votes Maduro received in 2013. (Because the seven million votes are more than 25 percent of registered voters, voter turnout would not likely be much of an issue.)

Such stringent turnout provisions are rare in the United States (most jurisdictions run on a simple first-past-the-post system, meaning that the person who gets the most votes wins), but these rules are not uncommon elsewhere. Most notably, Basescu survived his 2012 recall (as well as an earlier one in 2007) because the law required 50 percent of eligible voters to cast ballots. Only 46.13 percent did, even though 87.5 percent who turned up to vote wanted to see him out of office. It seems that most of Basescu's supporters realized that the best strategy was simply not to show up at all.

To similarly reduce voter turnout, Maduro may attempt to deter Venezuelans from casting their ballot and, perhaps, prevent the opposition from hitting the required 7.5 million votes. Maduro recently implemented a state of emergency that has increased the number of police on the streets. The country is also reeling from violent riots against him. Both the heightened police presence and escalating violence, particularly in the countryside, could drive people away from the ballot box.