

Did Maduro's party really dominate Sunday's election in Venezuela? These polls should make you skeptical.

[washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/10/20/did-maduros-party-really-dominate-sundays-election-in-venezuela-these-polls-should-make-you-skeptical/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/10/20/did-maduros-party-really-dominate-sundays-election-in-venezuela-these-polls-should-make-you-skeptical/)

By Noam Lupu and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister October 20

Voters wait in line outside a Caracas polling center during Venezuela's elections for state governors Oct. 15. The regime of President Nicolás Maduro claimed wins in 17 of the 23 states, results that defied polls predicting widespread wins by opposition candidates. (Wil Riera/Bloomberg)

Venezuelans went to the polls Sunday to elect 23 new state governors. According to the [polling](#), opposition candidates aligned with the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) stood to win 13 to 16 of those states. That didn't happen.

In the midst of [the country's deep economic crisis](#), soaring crime rates, and constant protests and counterprotests, an opposition sweep would have been unsurprising. But late Sunday night, Venezuela's election commission announced that the ruling Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) had achieved a [stunning upset](#), capturing 17 governorships, with one governorship remaining contested.

President Nicolás Maduro quickly accepted the official results and declared victory, while opposition leaders alleged that the results were [fraudulent](#).

Which side is telling the truth? In such a polarized and charged political environment as Venezuela's, it can be difficult to know. True, there has been little evidence of large-scale election fraud in past Venezuelan elections. And it is reasonable for people to question pre-election polling results published by partisan media with little or no transparency about methods and samples.

[\[Venezuela's latest elections are likely to trigger a regional migration crisis\]](#)

But a sweeping government victory in the midst of profound economic and social unrest, after months of widespread protests against the Maduro government, beggars credulity.

Our skepticism mounts when we look at survey data

[Our study](#) of Venezuelan public opinion provides additional reason to be skeptical. In late 2016 and early 2017, we fielded a nationally representative survey in Venezuela as part of the 2016/17 round of [LAPOP's AmericasBarometer](#). This is a regular series of scientific studies of public opinion dating to 2004 and covering 34 countries in the Americas. The AmericasBarometer is a treasure trove of information on citizens' experiences, evaluations and preferences. All data from the project are [freely available](#) on the project's [website](#).

The survey asked Venezuelans to evaluate Maduro's performance in office, whether they think he ought to step down via recall, and how they would vote if a presidential election were held that week. The survey used a [multistage sampling strategy](#) and sophisticated methods to ensure high data quality — including silent images of interviewers, audio checks and GPS tracking.

The graphs below show how Venezuelan citizens responded to our questions. When asked to evaluate Maduro's overall performance, a clear majority graded it "bad" or "very bad." When we asked them how they would vote if an

election were held, a majority said they would vote for the opposition.

Venezuelans' evaluations of Maduro. Note: Responses to the question, "Speaking in general of the current administration, how would you rate the job performance of President Nicolás Maduro?" (N=1,510)

What's more, fewer than 1 in 5 Venezuelans told us they would vote for the PSUV, Maduro's party. And a majority said they would support a recall referendum of Maduro.

Venezuelans' vote intentions. Note: The left panel reports responses to the question, "If the next presidential elections were being held this week, what would you do?" (N=1,399). The right panel reports responses to the question, "If a recall referendum to remove President Maduro were held this week, how would you vote?" (N=1,468).

Because the AmericasBarometer survey uses a national sample, we do not have representative samples within each state. But the sample design does give us representative samples by region. The map below compares the proportion of Venezuelan respondents to the survey who said they would vote for the PSUV and the proportion who reportedly voted for PSUV candidates Sunday. In all but one region, our survey registered far less support for the PSUV than was reported in the official results from Sunday's elections.

Comparison of opposition support according to the AmericasBarometer and official election results, by region. Note: AmericasBarometer results are based on responses to the question in the first graph above. Official reports come from National Election Commission. Estimates for the Guyana region do not include the state of Bolívar because the results there have yet to be released.

Governments that perform poorly don't do well at the polls

Several months have passed since we conducted our survey in Venezuela. It is of course possible that Venezuelan public opinion turned dramatically in favor of the PSUV and Maduro's administration in the intervening months.

We think this would be highly unlikely. The economic crisis has only [gotten worse](#), [violent confrontations](#) have increased, and there has been no relief in [crime rates](#).

The story must be told.

The Washington Post

Your subscription supports journalism that matters.

When a government performs poorly, [standard theories](#) of voter choice hold that public support for the incumbent's party declines. [Latin America](#) is [no exception](#) to this rule. As such, we find it difficult to imagine that millions of Venezuelans flocked to the government's candidates.

Our analyses suggest that Sunday's elections were less than free and fair. Reliable survey data show that a majority of Venezuelans were inclined to support the opposition.

So what happened Sunday? It appears that opposition supporters were systematically deterred from the polls — or else their votes were not tallied into the official count.

Noam Lupu is associate professor of political science and associate director of the Latin American Public Opinion

Project at Vanderbilt University. [Elizabeth J. Zechmeister](#) is Cornelius Vanderbilt professor of political science and director of the Latin American Public Opinion Project at Vanderbilt University.