

Venezuela Fact Sheet



Venezuela was a marginal part of the Spanish American Empire, unlike New Spain (Mexico) and Peru, both of which had complex indigenous civilizations and the latter silver to boot. Venezuela's first political importance came when it was one of three major centers of revolutionary movement during Spanish American Independence in the 1810s – 1830s, the other revolutionary centers being La Plata (Buenos Aires) and Mexico.

Simon Bolivar, The Liberator of South America, was Venezuelan. He was from a planter class and was a self-taught military man, unlike another South American revolutionary leader, La Plata's Jose de San Martin, who was a true military man. Bolivar, after liberating militarily the

northern half of the South American continent, tried to develop a system of government appropriate for his newly freed society. His model, built on the notion of a republic with a president-for-life was the more centralized model that competed with the constitution of Cadiz-inspired republics and those who emulated the US's Constitution of 1789. While the president-for-life model, resuscitated in some form by Hugo Chavez in the 21st century might be seen as extreme, in the 19th century it was comparable to a constitutional monarchy, which Brazil was until 1888 (when it abolished slavery).

With a simple 19th century economy based on coffee, Venezuela was apolitical until the 1920s and was ruled by strongmen (*caudillos*). The discovery of oil in the country in the 1880s and its development in the 1920s gave rise to modern mass politics in Venezuela. The AD (Democratic Action) was the first modern political party in the country created in the 1940s, and COPEI, a Christian Democrat party, arose soon thereafter to compete with AD. While parties existed, competition for the presidency was not fully competitive until the Trienio (three-year period) of 1945-48. In 1948 the repressive Perez Jimenez military regime took power and would rule until 1958. Civilian leaders, having learned from mistakes of the Trienio period, retook control in 1958 under the agreements of the Punto Fijo pact, an elite-negotiated accord for competitive political procedures.

Many Latin American countries suffered under military dictatorships in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, but Venezuela was countercyclical with its civilian two-party democracy from 1958 to about 1999. President Carlos Andres Perez (CAP) nationalized the oil industry, and Venezuela had one of the most efficient Third World oil companies at the time. Sociodemographic change and a restrictive political process however contributed to the rise of Hugo Chavez, a strongman who would rule Venezuela from 1999 until his death in 2013. Chavez systematically dismantled many of Venezuela's checks and balances and strengthened the power of the executive. His

hand-picked successor, Nicolas Maduro, now oversees a failing economy with widespread shortages of basic consumer goods, medicine, and with high levels of inflation. Venezuela's per capita murder rate averaged about 3.5X that of Mexico *for the entire period of 2000 to 2014*, and was never lower than twice that of Mexico during the time period.

Population: 31 million (about the size of Uzbekistan or Canada)¹

Language: Spanish (97%, Ethnologue 2016)

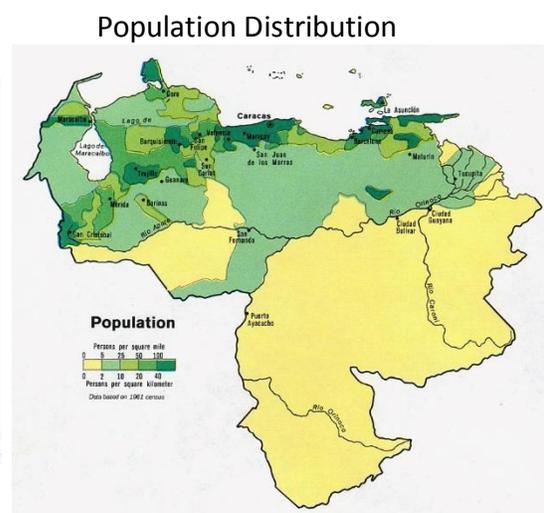
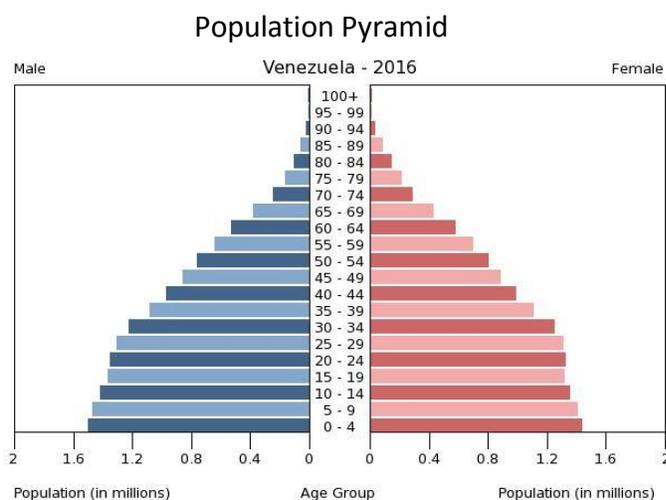
Urbanization: 89% of population live in urban area

Area: about twice the size of California

Freedom Rating: Partly Free (Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela>)

Economy:

- GDP/capita (PPP): \$19,100 (2013), \$16,800 (2015), 96th in the world, about the same as Lebanon or Botswana
- GDP composition: industry 33%, services 63%, agriculture 4%
- 50% of government revenues come from oil



source: Perry Castaneda maps, U. of Texas

Further resources:

Javier Corrales and Michael Penfold, *Dragon in the Tropics: Venezuela and the Legacy of Hugo Chavez*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015).

Daniel H. Levine and Brian F. Crisp, "Venezuela: The Character, Crisis, and Possible Future of Democracy," in Larry Diamond, et al, eds., *Democracy in Developing Countries: Latin America* (Boulder, CO: Lynn Rienner Publishers, 1999).

Moises Naim, "The Tragedy of Venezuela," *The Atlantic*, February 25, 2014.

¹ data from CIA Factbook, unless otherwise noted