



Government without a Legislature? Venezuelans Oppose the Idea

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As Venezuela's economic and humanitarian crises deepen, political tension reached a new zenith on March 30, 2017, when the Supreme Court issued (but then seemingly backtracked on) a ruling to strip the National Assembly of its legislative powers. The decision against the opposition-controlled legislature would allocate lawmaking power to the hand-picked pro-government Supreme Court and allow President Maduro to govern without congressional checks and balances (Casey and Torres 2017).

LAPOP's AmericasBarometer surveys in Venezuela show that presidential approval and public support for such extreme consolidation of power in the executive office are exceptionally low, while, in contrast, trust in the legislature and tolerance of the political rights of regime critics are high.¹ As a result, public opinion leans decidedly against allowing Maduro to govern without the legislature, a fact that may have contributed to

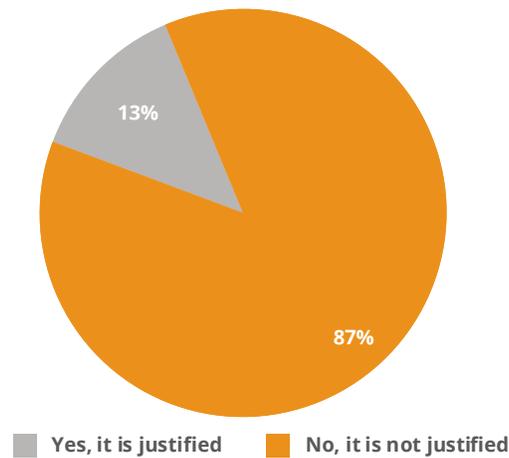


Figure 1: Is it Justified for the President to Govern without the Legislature during a Crisis?, Venezuela 2016/17

the Supreme Court's apparent backtracking on its decision in the days that followed its initial decision of March 30.

The move by the Supreme Court to strip the National Assembly of its power comes after months of inter-branch conflict during which the Court has repeatedly nullified legislation passed by the National Assembly. Recently, a Supreme Court ruling limited lawmakers' parliamentary immunity from prosecution. The Court justified the March 30, 2017 ruling by arguing that the National Assembly was in contempt for failing to follow the appropriate legal procedures when removing three opposition lawmakers who were under investigation for alleged vote-buying during legislative elections in 2015 (Oré and Cawthorne 2017). Various opposition leaders condemned the move, denouncing Maduro's regime as a "dictatorship" carrying out a "self-inflicted coup" (Rueda and Goodman 2017). Even the country's Attorney General, a *Chavista* loyalist and former ally of the Maduro administration, rebuked the ruling as unconstitutional (Cawthorne and Gupta 2017).

The Supreme Court's disturbing action coincides with a new low in

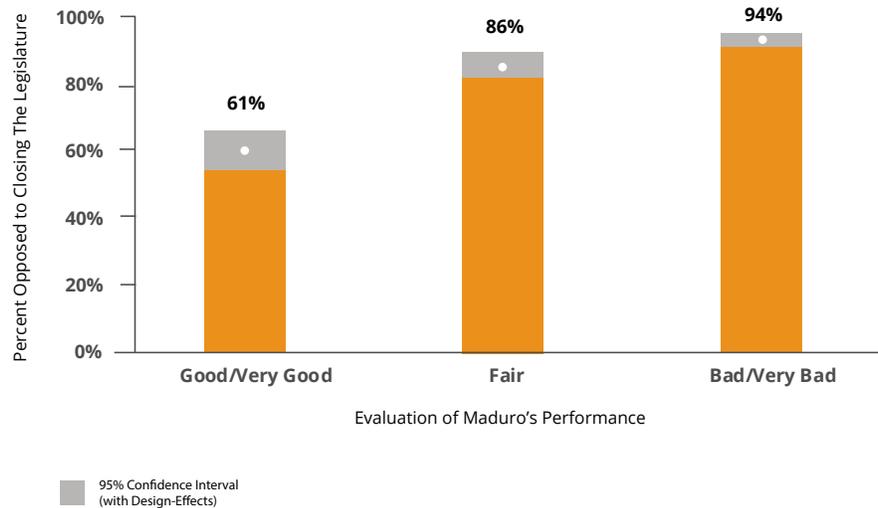


Figure 2: The President is *Not* Justified in Governing without the Legislature during a Crisis, by Evaluation of Maduro's Performance, Venezuela 2016/17

Maduro's popularity, as Venezuelans face a worsening economic recession, hyperinflation, and severe shortages of food and medicine. Only 17% of Venezuelans in the 2016/17 AmericasBarometer survey evaluate Maduro's performance as "good" or "very good."² One motivation for the ruling may have been to diminish the legislature's capacity to confront an increasingly vulnerable Maduro.³ Yet, measures to silence regime critics have a high likelihood of backfiring, given that Venezuelans express high levels of support for the rights of dissenters to peacefully protest, vote, and run for public office (Rodríguez and Zechmeister 2015).

Fortunately, LAPOP's AmericasBarometer has a long-used question in its standard battery on democracy, to tap into the kind of action taken in Venezuela. Results from the latest round of the 2016/17 AmericasBarometer survey in Venezuela show that a vast majority of citizens opposes governing without the legislature even when the country is facing difficult times. As seen in [Figure 1](#), 87% of Venezuelans believe that allowing the President to govern without a legislature, even in times of crisis, is not justified.⁴

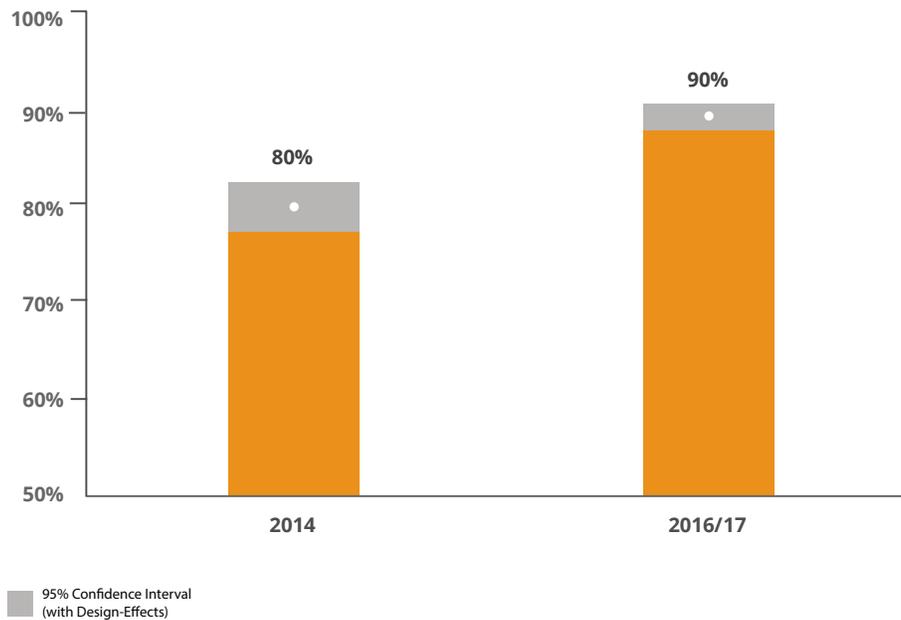


Figure 3: Percent Reporting that National Economy Has Worsened, Venezuela 2014-2016/17

Unsurprisingly, public opinion on allowing the executive to govern without a legislature varies by evaluations of the president’s job performance. An overwhelming 94% of those who evaluate Maduro’s job performance poorly (as bad or very bad) reject the notion of allowing the executive to govern without the legislature (see [Figure 2](#)). Yet, even those who approve highly of Maduro’s performance, on balance are not supportive of this type of move. As shown in [Figure 2](#), even among those who evaluate Maduro’s job performance as “good” or “very good,” 61% oppose closing the legislature.

Adding to Maduro’s woes, and likely making the public even more wary of a move to transfer ruling power exclusively to the executive branch, is the fact that evaluations of the country’s economic situation have reached their most negative point in recent history. As shown in [Figure 3](#), 90% of Venezuelans in 2016/17 believe the country’s economic situation has worsened over the past year.⁵ This marks an increase of 10 percentage

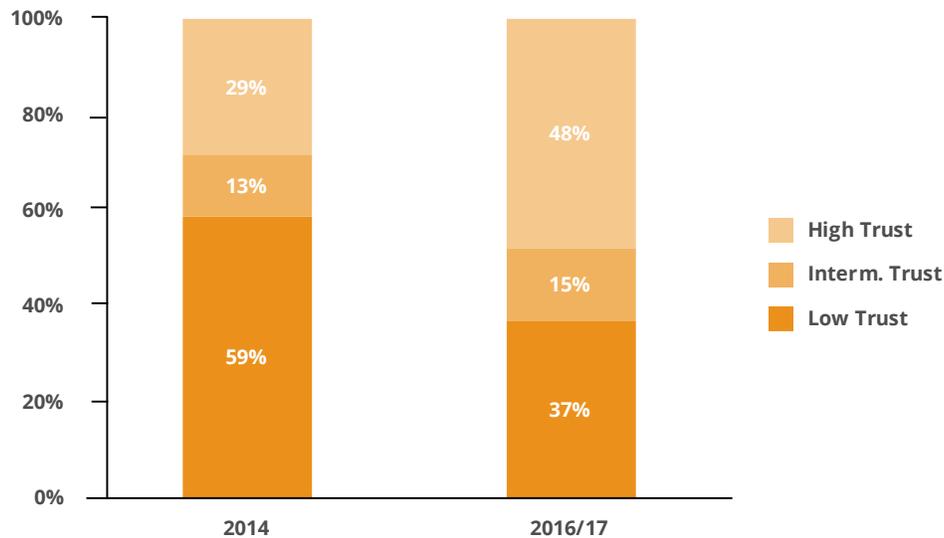


Figure 4: Trust in the National Assembly, Venezuela 2014-2017

points from the proportion of Venezuelans who said the economy had worsened in 2014.

Conversely, trust in the National Assembly has increased sharply in recent times. Figure 4 shows that the percentage of Venezuelans with high levels of trust in the legislature jumped from 29% to 48% following the opposition's sweeping electoral victory in December 2015 when it gained a majority of congressional seats.⁶ Though the 2016/17 AmericasBarometer did not include a question about trust in the Supreme Court, trust in the legislative branch appears to be higher than trust in the judicial system. Respondents were asked the extent to which they believe the "courts guarantee a fair trial." Fewer than one-in-five individuals provided a positive response to this question, whereas nearly one-in-two individuals gave a positive response to the trust in the legislature question.

In short, the Supreme Court's action on March 30, 2017 is likely facing exceptionally strong resistance from the majority of the public. LAPOP's AmericasBarometer surveys in Venezuela document significant and in-

creasing public criticism of Maduro's job performance and of the state of the national economy. Widespread disagreement with the notion of dissolving the legislature coupled with a recent uptick in trust in the legislature suggest that maneuvers such as the one taken last week by the Supreme Court are more likely to weaken, rather than improve, President Maduro's public support.

Notes

1. This report draws on data from multiple rounds of the AmericasBarometer. Fieldwork for the most recent, 2016/17 AmericasBarometer, was carried out in Venezuela between October 2016 and January 2017.
2. Another 25% report that Maduro is doing a "fair" job, while 58% say he is doing a "bad" or "very bad" job. The percentage of those that give Maduro a negative evaluation increased from 2014, when 54% of Venezuelans said he was doing a "bad" or "very bad" job. Based on the following question: **M1**. Speaking in general of the current administration, how would you rate the job performance of President Maduro? (1) Very good; (2) Good; (3) Neither good nor bad; (4) Bad; (5) Very bad.
3. Following the opposition's success in the 2015 legislative elections, the National Assembly attempted to activate a presidential recall referendum. This movement was thwarted in 2016 by the Supreme Court and the National Electoral Committee.
4. Based on the following yes/no question: **JC15A**. Do you believe that when the country is facing very difficult times it is justifiable for the president of the country to close the National Assembly and govern without the National Assembly?
5. Based on the following question: **SOCT2**. Do you think that the country's current economic situation is better than, the same as or worse than it was 12 months ago? (1) Better; (2) Same; (3) Worse.
6. Based on the following question: **B13**. To what extent do you trust the National Assembly? Original 7-point scale recoded: 1-3 (Low trust); 4 (Intermediate trust) 5-7 (High trust).

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