

## Venezuela's Turn? Age Structure and Liberal Democracy in South America

January 21, 2016 | By Richard Cincotta

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Venezuela seems suspended at a critical juncture. Following national elections in December, the opposition Democratic Unity Roundtable was set to occupy two thirds of the 167-seat National Assembly, an upset that would reduce the late Hugo Chávez's United Socialist Party to a distant second place for the first time and given opposition legislators the power to enact sweeping political changes.

However, the Supreme Court's recent intervention into the seating of three newly elected legislators has cooled this smoldering political reversal. Meanwhile, by imposing a 60-day economic state of emergency, President Nicolás Maduro has acquired additional economic powers with which to control Venezuela's runaway inflation.

Over the coming months, political demographers will be closely watching the evolution of

events in Venezuela. Why? Theorists in this field expect states to rise to stable levels of liberal democracy when they meet two criteria. One is demographic, the other political. For the first time, Venezuela meets both.

## **A Bit of Theory**

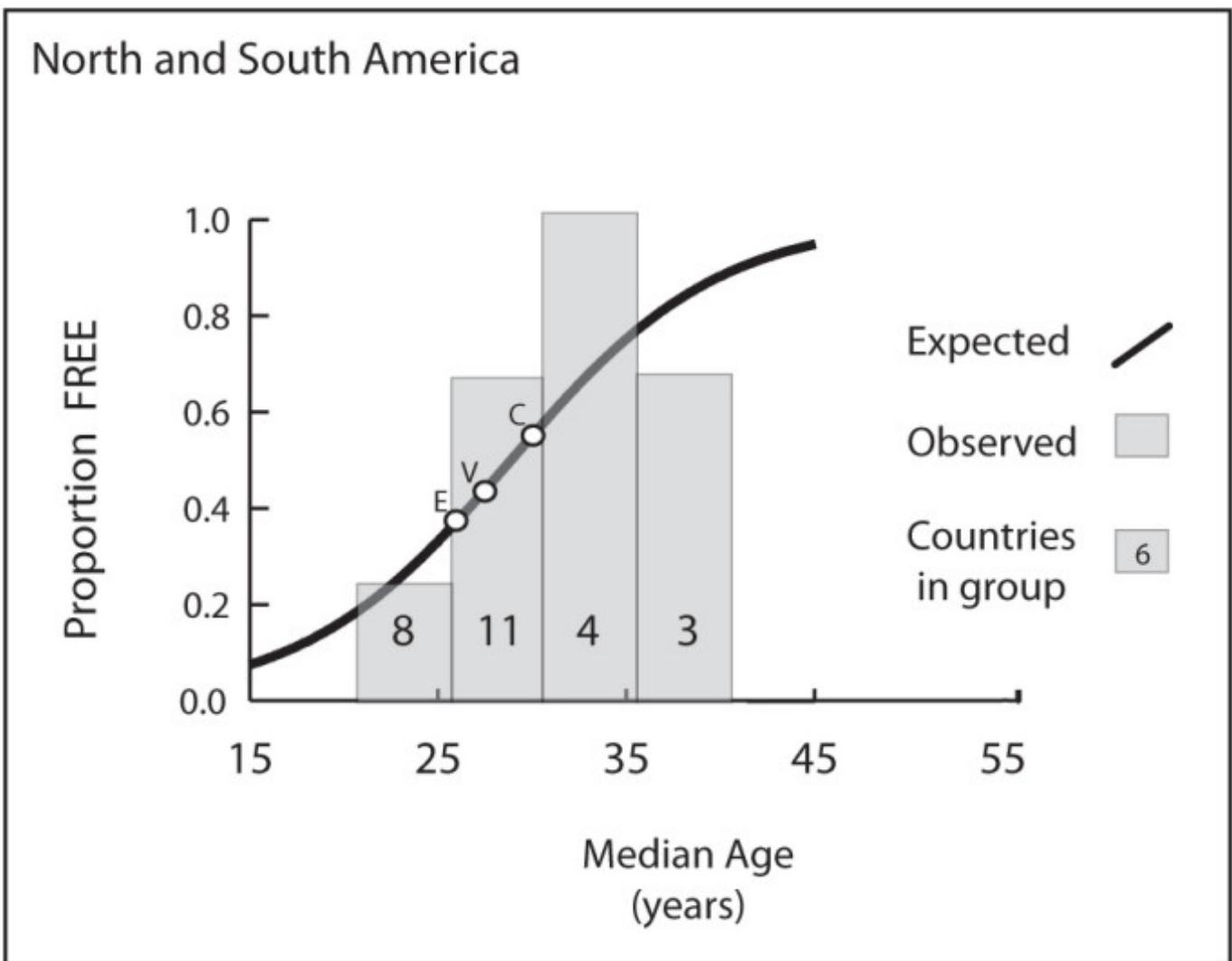
Political demographers have demonstrated that stable levels of liberal democracy – as measured by a “free” rating in Freedom House’s annual “Freedom in the World” assessment – are associated with a country’s position in the age-structural transition. As fertility declines below three children per woman, as it has in two-thirds of all states and most outside of Africa, populations dramatically shift from a youthful profile – where children, adolescents, and young adults are in the majority – to distributions dominated by adults and seniors.

This shift so strongly influences the timing of political, social, and economic trends and events that, I argue, foreign affairs analysts should monitor countries in “age-structural time,” based on their median age, rather than in chronological “historic time” which is the domain of reference for political scientists and historians.

Regime characteristics matter, too. The same age-structural theory recognizes that democratic timing is constrained by a rather small set of durable illiberal regime types: highly ideological single-party regimes, post-revolutionary regimes, and those run by charismatic reformers. Each of these appears to be nearly immune to the otherwise powerful social, economic, and demographic forces that are associated with the age-structural transition and appear to stimulate political liberalization.

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When put to the test, the relationship between highly democratic states and median age yields a simple S-shaped curve (Figure 1). At a median age of 20 years (i.e., half of everyone is under 20 years of age), countries have historically had about a one-in-six chance of being scored “free” by Freedom House. Even if a few achieve “free” in that youthful condition, their chances are statistically poor for maintaining that high status for a decade. In fact, the evidence of this research strongly suggests that, unless a population is small (under 5 million), encouraging high levels of democracy in youthful countries – where there are large proportions of young adults, rapid workforce growth, and heavily stressed health systems and labor markets – is a poor wager.



As age structure matures, politics can change profoundly. The chances of being scored as free hit one in two at a median age of about 29 years, a point called “Free-50.” Once in that age-structural condition – at the levels of fertility, educational attainment, institutional capacity, and income that it typically suggests – the vast majority of states that achieve liberal democracy are likely to hold on to it.

### A Tale of Two Forecasts

Based on this model, two forecasts were published in 2008: one focused on a three-state cluster in the northwest corner of South America (Ecuador, Colombia, and Venezuela), the other on a five-state cluster along coastal North Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt). All were graded “not free” or “partly free” by Freedom House at the time. The forecasts asserted that, in each cluster, during the years between 2010 and 2020, analysts should expect the rise of “at least one, maybe two” liberal democracies.

To regional analysts’ surprise, six years later Freedom House assessed Tunisia as “free” for the first time, just three years after former strongman Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was deposed.

But with all that has transpired and continues to transpire in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and the greater Middle East, the South American cluster has received little attention. Like the states of North Africa's Maghreb, this cluster is projected to huddle around the Free-50 mark by 2020.

By mid-2016, Colombia is projected to attain a median age of about 30 years. Correspondingly, the country has achieved a remarkable degree of stability over the past five years. However, while focused efforts are underway to negotiate an end to the country's 51-year civil conflict and settle the claims of victims, Freedom House still considers Colombia to be a state where "freedom of movement, choice of residence, and property rights are restricted by violence, particularly for vulnerable minority groups."

Venezuela is projected to hit the "Free-50" mark by 2020

Venezuela is projected to attain a median age of nearly 28 years in 2016, while Ecuador lags behind at about 27. Critics argue that the recent passage of 16 constitutional amendments in Ecuador will likely weaken separation of powers and strengthen the ruling party's hold on key political offices.

Liberal democracy is nothing new for the South American cluster. All three states were previously assessed as free by Freedom House before the 1990s. But, like nearly all states that have attained high democracy scores while their age structures were still youthful, they succumbed to civil strife, coups, executive over-reach, and/or press censorship.

Is this time different for Venezuela? Maybe. Demographically, the country is moving in the right direction; by 2020, it will hit the Free-50 mark. However, to achieve "free" status in real time, as opposed to age-structural time, the newly strengthened parliamentary opposition will have to quickly broker a great deal of reform with President Maduro.

## **Authoritarian Succession**

Chávez's death in office highlights the successional difficulties that arise for autocratic regimes as countries advance along the age-structural transition. Unlike the authoritarian continuity achieved by highly ideological political monopolies (such as China and Iran), the charisma of revolutionaries and authoritarian reformers usually dies along with them.

Some authoritarians have successfully passed their powers to sons and relatives (Francois Duvalier in Haiti, Laurent Kabila in the Democratic Republic of Congo), but these episodes of authoritarian dynastic succession are observed almost exclusively among countries with youthful (and potentially volatile) populations.

In more mature states, the loss of a popular authoritarian typically throws open an opportunity for political liberalization. In some cases, these authoritarians (for example, South Korea's Park

Chung-hee, Taiwan's Chiang Ching-guo, Indonesia's Suharto) used some of their unchecked powers to lay the groundwork for development and the later rise of political liberalism.

For Venezuelans, Hugo Chávez's legacy is liable to be forever mired in controversy. In his 11 years as president, Chávez took the country down a tumultuous political and economic pathway. He dismantled press freedoms, politicized the judicial system, and exercised broad powers of decree. But Chávez also politically mobilized Venezuela's urban and rural poor, and addressed educational and economic inequalities with overdue increases in social spending.

What now for Venezuela? The answer is well beyond the limits of statistical models and ultimately up to Venezuela's political institutions and its people. But save for the unlikely possibility that Maduro could create an ideological single-party state, its age-structural trajectory suggests this election was merely the start of a shift toward a more stable and more democratic political system.

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*Sources: Freedom House, International Crisis Group, The Wall Street Journal.*

*Photo Credit: Workers of the Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA carry a giant inflatable figure of Venezuela's late President Hugo Chavez, during a meeting with Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro outside Miraflores Palace in Caracas January 12, 2016, courtesy of Carlos Garcia Rawlins/Reuters. Chart: Richard Cincotta.*

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