

The Truth About Hugo Chávez: “Bernie Sanders is Wrong — Hugo Chávez was no Dictator”

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Bernie Sanders is wrong — Hugo Chávez was no dictator.

Dear Bernie,

Like millions of Americans, I've been watching your campaign with growing excitement. You're spot on about the pernicious effects of rising inequality and absolutely correct that the United States now resembles an oligarchy more than a democracy. I applaud your willingness to directly and repeatedly denounce the billionaire class that runs this country. And I wholeheartedly support your call for universal health care.

It's been a joy to watch you make Hillary Clinton squirm as your poll numbers rise. I smile every time I imagine the possibility of a self-described socialist calling for a political revolution winning the Democratic nomination. I'm encouraged that you have made fighting racism a priority in your campaign, alongside the rest of your progressive agenda.

So I was surprised and dismayed to see you label the late Hugo Chávez a “[dead communist dictator](#)” last week. I would expect this from candidates like Marco Rubio, Jeb Bush, or Hillary Clinton — not from someone who supported the Sandinistas in the 1980s and [accepted](#) discounted heating oil from Chávez for low-income Vermont residents.

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Supporters of Hugo Chávez at a demonstration.

I know you're busy these days, Bernie, so I've compiled a list of ten reasons why you might want to think twice before calling Chávez a dictator.

1. Hugo Chávez was democratically elected. Not once. Not twice. But *five times* over the course of fourteen years.
2. Chávez won these elections by massive margins. He prevailed in the 1998 presidential election with 56% of the vote. He was reelected in 2000, netting 60% of votes cast. In 2004, Chávez won a recall referendum with 59%. In 2006 he was again victorious, receiving a whopping 63% of the vote. And in the 2012, while dying of cancer, he still triumphed, this time garnering 55%.
3. On the rare occasions when Chávez suffered a political defeat (e.g., the December 2007 referendum on constitutional changes), he accepted the loss immediately. It's true that Chávez engaged in certain practices that are open to criticism, such as gerrymandering and using executive decrees to get around congressional opposition. But these practices are common in many actually-existing democracies, including the US, and hardly constitute evidence that Chávez was a dictator.
4. Chávez's electoral success was not due to electoral fraud. The Venezuelan opposition (which supported a military coup against Chávez in 2002) and US mainstream media frequently level this charge, but there is [no credible evidence](#) to support it. Jimmy Carter [has said](#), "Of the 92 elections that we've monitored [at the Carter Center], I would say the election process in Venezuela is the best in the world."

5. The reason Chávez was so successful politically is because he implemented some of the same sorts of policies you support. After Chávez took office, the Venezuelan state [more than doubled](#) spending on health and education. (Sure this was made possible by the high price of oil from 2003 to 2008, but it was also possible because of Chávez's success in reasserting state control over the oil sector, which was quasi-privatized in the 1990s.)

6. The policies implemented under Chávez led to vast improvements in access to health care, education, housing, and pensions. Poverty in Venezuela was [cut in half](#) between 2003 and 2008, with extreme poverty falling by 72%.

7. Chávez also made progress on the issue you care the most about: inequality. By 2012 Venezuela was the [most equitable country](#) in Latin America.

8. While you haven't declared that you want to build "twenty-first century socialism," Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution bears at least some resemblance to the type of "political revolution" you claim to favor. In 1998, when Chávez was first elected, turnout was just 63%, one of the lowest percentages in Venezuela's democratic history. In Chávez's last election, it was 81% — the highest percentage since 1988, when voting in Venezuela was still mandatory. In December 2013, 59% of registered voters went to the ballot box for local elections — a higher turnout than every US presidential election since 1968.

There was also a [significant increase](#) in Venezuelans' interest in politics during Chávez's time in office. In the three years before Chávez took office, Venezuelans' interest in politics was consistently below the Latin American average (by 7-8% each year). Since 2003, Venezuelans' interest in politics has been consistently above the Latin American average. In 2013, the year Chávez died, the percentage of Venezuelans who expressed interest in politics (47%) was the highest in Latin America and far higher than the Latin American average (28%).

9. Under Chávez, Venezuela made significant, if contradictory, progress towards the goal of becoming a "participatory and protagonistic democracy." This was done through the establishment of numerous types of participatory institutions: communal councils, health and water committees, communes, participatory budgeting, and more. These institutions are not perfect, but they have undoubtedly [fostered](#) greater decision-making power for ordinary Venezuelans.

I learned this firsthand through a year of research in various cities in Venezuela, including Torres, a municipality in central-western Venezuela where ordinary citizens decide how to spend 100% of the city's investment budget. Miriam Gimenez, a grassroots activist from Torres, [told me](#) about the improvements she saw when Chávez was in office: "Life has changed substantially for our people because this process has given society a place to speak, to study, to work, to struggle. Now we know that we're living, that we're worth something, and that we can have hope of a dignified life and country."

10. Portraying Chávez as a dictator is a profound insult to the millions of Venezuelans who supported him. Chavistas [were not mindless drones who offered](#) their unconditional support to a "great leader." They were and are active participants in a messy and imperfect but inspiring and profoundly important attempt to forge a radical transformation.

I hope you'll take some time to consider these points. Not only because bad things tend to happen to Latin American countries when US presidents call their democratically elected leaders dictators, but because Chávez engaged millions of people in a democratic process of far-reaching reform. And even if you're setting your sights a bit lower than Chávez, you more than anyone else should recognize that redbaiting will just end up hampering your own reform efforts.

Sincerely,

Gabriel

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