Road to the Recall
Some of the main events leading up to the August 15 referendum on Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez’s rule.

Overview
Venezuelans on Sunday will decide whether to remove controversial President Hugo Chavez from power. Polls show voters evenly split between supporters of Mr. Chavez, a populist former paratrooper, and his splintered opponents, who accuse the fiery leader of trying to impose a Cuban-style leftist dictatorship. Although U.S. officials have publicly expressed worries that Mr. Chavez will spread anti-American sentiment elsewhere in South America, Washington has largely stayed on the sidelines during the referendum campaign. The risk of sending prices at the gasoline pump even higher, however, could prompt Washington to put a premium on stability over having friends in power.

Forced by a petition signed by 2.56 million voters, the recall marks the latest stage in an increasingly bitter opposition campaign to oust the president, who has already survived a brief coup, a crippling strike and a previous bid to force a vote on his rule. We trace the history of Hugo Chavez’s turbulent time in office.

Research: Miguel Almeida, Source: WSJ.com research, Photos: AP/Wide World Photos
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Venezuelan crude-oil production

millions of barrels per day

Venezuelan exports to the U.S. by month

3.0

2.5

2.0

1.5

1.0

0.5

0.0

Click on the images to learn more.

OVERVIEW

The Populist Touch
Victorioso Chavez in 1998

The Coup
Carmona sworn in as interim president

At the Boiling Point
Oil strike chaos grips Venezuela

Yes: No: Chavez Recall
A young pro-opposition supporter

J '02 M T W Th F S S O D '03 M T W Th F S S O D '04 M A

Hugo Chavez

Hugo Chavez was elected president in 1998 with a solid 56% of the vote. He immediately began replacing old political structures with his self-styled “participatory democracy,” including a new constitution that voters endorsed in 1999. In 2000, Mr. Chavez was elected to a new six-year term. The same election also gave his Fifth Republic Movement party a solid majority in the new single-house National Assembly and control of a majority of key state governors and mayors. The new legislature named supreme court justices who, for the most part, ruled favorably toward the new regime. Though the Venezuelan economy suffered in Mr. Chavez’s first year in office -- dropping a precipitous 6.1% -- it started to improve in 1999, due to strong international oil prices and jumps in government spending. Foreign investment flowed into the oil and telecommunications sectors. Because of the strong local currency, inflation dropped from 30% in 1998 to a manageable 12% in 2000 and 2001. Lower prices meant more buying power for the country’s poorest citizens, Mr. Chavez’s key voter base.

BY THE NUMBERS

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<th>Metric</th>
<th>Value</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bolivar/US dollar</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monthly average</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inflation</td>
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<td>Annual rate</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
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<td>Figure is from fiscal '99</td>
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Research: Miguel Almeida, Source: WSJ.com research, Photos: AP/Wide World Photos
Chavez Ouster

Hugo Chavez's successes, including improvements in health care and school enrollments, stalled in late 2001. The opposition began to coalesce into an unusual alliance of the million-member Venezuelan Workers Confederation and the powerful national chamber of commerce. Demonstrators took to the streets in Caracas to demand the president's resignation. Nineteen people were killed when shooters, many still unidentified, fired at hundreds of thousands of people marching on the presidential palace. Chavez's top generals rebelled and took him into custody. For nearly two days, an unelected president, Pedro Carmona, was in power. But some opposition leaders soon concluded they'd blundered, when Mr. Carmona announced the dissolution of the congress and the supreme court. Generals who had been sitting on the fence rescued Mr. Chavez. Elements of his old airborne regiment helicoptered to the Caribbean island where Mr. Chavez was being held and returned him to power.

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Referendum Petitions
The National Elections Council announced in June of 2004 that the opposition had enough signatures in a petition for a referendum against Mr. Chavez. The referendum was forced by opponents as a way out of the country's prolonged political crisis. To recall Mr. Chavez, Venezuela's opposition needs more votes than the 3.7 million that he received when he was re-elected in 2000. If the opposition succeeds, elections would be held within a month and the winner would finish Mr. Chavez’s term that ends in January 2007. But many see Venezuela's opposition as a jumble of leaders ranging from labor bosses to media executives, with no clear plan for Venezuela and no clear candidate. A late surge in support for Mr. Chavez, who is spending his country's higher oil receipts on everything from roads to new clinics in poor areas, has many observers betting he will squeeze out a victory. No matter who wins the "yes" or "no" vote on removing the president, however, the referendum promises to produce little relief for Venezuelans weary of political confrontation.

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<tr>
<td>Bolivar/US dollar</td>
<td>1920</td>
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<td>Dollar peg</td>
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<td>Inflation</td>
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<td>GDP</td>
<td>30%</td>
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