

# ELECTIONWATCH

## VENEZUELA



### Venezuela Pre-Election Watch: September 2010 National Assembly Elections

On September 26, Venezuelans will elect a new national assembly, the third such election for the national legislative body since the Venezuelan Constitution was redrafted in 1999. All 165 assembly seats will be contested, with winners beginning a new five-year term in January 2011.

These elections are being closely watched nationally and internationally as a possible bellwether for the 2012 re-election bid of President Hugo Chavez, and for an overall measurement of Venezuelans' satisfaction level with the current state of affairs in their country. Chief among the issues being discussed during the campaign is the weak Venezuelan economy, past shortages of electricity and water, the state of media freedom, private property expropriation, and the country's record-high levels of crime and violence.

Opposition parties widely boycotted the last national assembly elections in 2005, resulting in an electoral outcome that gave almost total control of the legislative process to parties and individuals aligned with the President. In 2007 these factions coalesced to form the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), constituting an undefeatable majority in the assembly with 123 seats. This advantage, along with a judiciary branch exclusively loyal to President Chavez, has allowed Venezuela's executive branch to administer power with a limited system of independent checks and balances.

With one week until Election Day, public opinion research indicates that the races are tight. While various polling firms are offering differing figures, most findings suggest that opposition candidates will draw 43-47 percent of the popular vote. Some opposition leaders are cautiously predicting that their support could rise above 50 percent. How the popular vote will correspond to legislative apportionment, however, is still a question as recent redistricting measures instituted by the government heavily favor pro-Chavista candidates, especially in rural Venezuela. Analysts agree that it is entirely possible that the opposition could attain a majority of votes, but be left with less than a majority of assembly seats. Conversely, PSUV could win approximately 61 percent of the seats in the assembly with only 50 percent of the vote.

PSUV leaders have publicly stated that their aim is to retain two-thirds of the assembly (at least 110 seats), which will allow their bloc to pass most kinds of legislation without opposition support.

While opposition leaders have not dramatically changed their 2005 assessment that the political playing field is uneven in Venezuela, most have agreed in 2010 that representation at the national level is fundamental to offering alternative policies to dissatisfied Venezuelans.

In 2009, more than a dozen opposition political parties and movements formed the Democratic Unity Tables (*Mesas de la Unidad Democratica*), an electoral coalition designed to run a single slate of candidates against the PSUV. While the ability to successfully coalesce has been an Achilles heel in the past for the opposition, all signs indicate that the *Mesas* coalition has remained intact.

President Chavez and the Venezuelan National Electoral Council are not permitting international observers to monitor the national assembly elections, and are limiting the number of domestic, civil-society observers as well. As in other countries, the rejection of requests to monitor these elections casts doubts on the integrity of the process, whether it is deserved or not. Political party polling agents *are* permitted to observe the process, with representatives from numerous parties expected to be present at most of the 12,000 polling sites around the country on Election Day.

Despite these being parliamentary elections, the popularity of President Chavez will play a major role in the results, as it has with every Venezuelan election since 1998. PSUV campaign ads explicitly draw on the charisma of the President, and campaign ads identify PSUV members as "Chavez's candidates." In this way, PSUV is framing the vote for individual candidates as a vote for - or against - the President and his "21st Century Bolivarian Revolution," a tactic that has been successful in the past. In its national platform, PSUV proposes to deepen and make permanent social programs for the poor such as government healthcare, education and social enterprise initiatives.

However, compared with years past, the state of affairs in Venezuela is undermining the President's promises and vision. While high oil prices between 2003 and 2007 enabled lavish government spending on social programs, the global economic crisis has severely affected the petroleum-export economy on which the Venezuelan state relies. Despite tightening government controls on prices and currency exchange, inflation remains the highest of any Latin American country.

At the same time, a series of national crises have lent credence to accusations of cronyism, corruption and mismanagement among the Venezuelan bureaucracy, and have increasingly implicated the President himself. In 2009, recurring power outages in major cities forced the government to mandate rationing and led to questions regarding the upkeep of Venezuela's energy grid, its state-owned oil company *Petroleos de Venezuela* known as PDVSA, and the rest of the country's power infrastructure. In spring 2010, the discovery of thousands of tons of food left rotting in ports by the Chavez-created food importation agency, *Produccion y Distribucion Venezolana de Alimentos* known as PDVAL, cast negative attention on that multi-billion dollar effort.

While the general population has historically demonstrated approval for the expropriation of large foreign operations, Chavez's seizure of *privately-owned* land from Venezuelan farmers and the nationalization of *domestic* businesses such as banks and grocery stores have infuriated the middle-class population and have even alienated citizens who were aligned with Chavez over the past decade. The recent death of well-known hunger-striking activist Franklin Brito, whose own farm was seized by the Venezuelan government, further fueled the debate during this campaign.

While the precarious condition of Venezuela's economy is negatively affecting most citizens, it is the country's rising crime and murder rates which are at the top of voters'

minds, according to a [poll conducted in June 2010 \(Consultores 21, slide 14\)](#). Over the past decade, Venezuela's crime rate, and homicide rate in particular, have steadily soared. Recently-released numbers indicated more than 19,000 murders occurred in Venezuela in 2009, a four-fold increase over 1998 when President Chavez was first elected. Accordingly, polling over the past year has shown that security is the primary concern of Venezuelans: In a [poll conducted May of this year \(Varianzas, slide four\)](#), 41 percent of respondents called it their biggest concern.

National and international press articles, including a [Simon Romero piece in \*The New York Times\* \(8/22/2010\)](#), have drawn global attention to the crime issue. Controversy arose this summer in Venezuela when the government banned the major daily newspaper, *El Nacional*, from publishing what Chavez called "violent photos" as part of its coverage of the crime issue after it placed a picture of morgue shots on its front page. The opposition has made Venezuela's crime and violence problems its primary campaign theme, while the Chavez government has argued that the statistics are being manipulated by his political enemies, bloggers and the international press.

Within this environment, the popularity of President Chavez and his government have suffered - although it remains unclear whether his support has dropped enough to affect a legislative power shift on September 26. According to the [Varianzas May poll \(slide 32\)](#), Chavez' personal popularity now stands at approximately 35 percent, comparatively lower than past polls. Although there are certainly other polls which indicate slightly-higher approval ratings, most analysts agree that President Chavez no longer enjoys the levels of approval which pushed past 70 percent at times over the past decade.

Recent polls also show a very close split among likely voters, with approximately one-third still supporting Chavez and PSUV candidates, one-third strongly opposing them, and one-third either undecided or disaffected by both Chavez and the opposition. The question of these elections is whether opposition parties can mobilize support and the degree to which they appeal to the undecided. The PSUV must make a similar bid to maintain its base and then recapture so-called "middle-ground Chavistas" who have traditionally supported the President but are showing disenchantment as a result of radicalized policies and the dysfunctional economy. Both sides claim to have the edge with this middle ground.

Ultimately, however, the most important factor in these elections is the size and significance of the so-called *ni-nis*, or "neither/nor" voters, meaning those who abstain because they support neither side. Despite various efforts being made by both the PSUV and the opposition to rally their base, the deciding factor may be whether these voters identify a motivating factor in the electoral campaigns that pushes them to vote on Election Day.

It is unclear the degree to which a less positive perception of Chavez might translate into greater approval of opposition parties or support for individual opposition candidates. Though often referred to as if it were a single force, the opposition actually includes a broad array of parties and individuals who oppose the Chavez regime, either for ideological reasons or over disagreements with the country's direction since 1998. This grouping includes the center-left *Acción Democrática* and the center-right *Copei*, which were the two major parties in 20th century Venezuelan politics, as well as a large number of major and minor parties representing a variety of political ideologies: *Primera Justicia*, *Un Nuevo Tiempo*, *Alianza Bravo Pueblo*, and *Movimiento Laborista*. In this respect, the Unity Table is not a party but a mechanism for coordinating candidate lists in order to avoid

splitting the non-PSUV vote.

To achieve their goal of single party slates, certain *Mesas* candidates were chosen through first-ever Unity Table primaries in April 2010, while others were selected by inter-party consensus. Though the process has not been without disagreements, most electoral races in the country now feature a single opposition *Mesas* candidate running against a PSUV candidate. The *Mesas'* strategy and efforts will be tested, however, in districts (also known as circuits) where competitive candidates will be fielded by independent parties such as Fatherland for All, or where non-aligned local party candidates and independents are also on a ballot. Of the 165 seats being contested, 52 will be elected via a list system - a factor which favors PSUV. Three seats are reserved for indigenous representatives.

While President Chavez has dramatically consolidated his executive power over the past 10 years, those who politically oppose his government believe there is a legitimate opportunity to do well on September 26. As evidence of this opportunity, they cite the December 2007 referendum defeat of a Chavez proposal to change the constitution and extend his term limit (Although 54 percent of Venezuelans approved a similar referendum change two years later, the 2009 referendum also offered extended term limits to governors and mayors, thereby attracting more locally-generated approval). The opposition also points to the surprising victory of Antonio Ledezma in 2008, whose mayoral victory in Caracas defied most polls and predictions.

Regardless of the final vote and precise balance of seats, the new national assembly will surely feature more debate and alternative thinking than before, changing the political environment in the country. At the same time, observers will be watching closely to see how these elections augurs for a key vote scheduled for 2012: The possible re-election of President Chavez for a fourth term. Many commentators feel that if President Chavez and his allies maintain political control into 2012 and beyond, then the institutions and dynamics of the Bolivarian Revolution will become the permanent state of affairs in Venezuelan politics. The upcoming elections will determine whether this prediction is born out.

## IRI in Venezuela

IRI has been working in Venezuela since 1994 to promote civic and political participation in the democratic process. Working with political parties, IRI seeks to enhance healthy competition in Venezuelan politics and help all sectors of Venezuelan society build trust in their political leaders by promoting mechanisms for accountability between parties and their constituents.

As part of this effort, IRI offers nonpartisan technical training to help political parties engage with their constituents and develop policies that extend beyond the context of elections and campaigns. IRI works with party leaders and local partners to host topical forums through which participants from across the political spectrum can discuss and debate key issues and improve outreach to constituents. IRI also works to promote transparency and responsiveness in governance at the municipal level.



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