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Venezuela's Legislative Elections: Democratic Opposition Makes Major Gains

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On September 26, Venezuelan voters selected 165 members for its single-chamber National Assembly. Approximately 66.45 percent of an estimated 17 million eligible voters cast ballots. As with every election since 1998 in Venezuela, these elections became a referendum about the rule of authoritarian populist President Hugo Chávez. Despite alarmist predictions of violence by Chávez, the elections took place without violence and with only scattered reports of problems or irregularities.

Supermajority Lost. The results translated into at least 96 seats for Chávez's United Venezuelan Socialist Party (PSUV) and roughly 61 seats for a slate of opposition candidates. Indigenous representatives, members of the Country for All Party, and some undecided races rounded out the 165.

In practical terms, PSUV preserved a clear majority but lost its previous two-thirds majority that allowed it to pass major legislation submitted by Chávez without serious debate or dissent. It also appears that in the cumulative popular vote, the opposition is able to claim majority status over PSUV. The opposition said it received 52 percent of all votes cast, although Venezuela's national electoral council has yet to release official numbers, a delay that has raised suspicions among the opposition.

The results of the September 26 elections are clear. The majority of Venezuelans have not abandoned their historical dedication to defending the fundamentals of representative democracy and protecting individual rights and liberties from the encroachment of Chávez's socialist revolutionary program.

Venezuela Grows Restless After a Decade of Chávez Missteps. Even before the September 26 elections, Hugo Chávez's poll numbers and approval rating were slumping. Chávez's 21st-century brand of socialism had begun to suffer from the same defects as socialism of the 20th century: confiscatory nationalizations, mismanagement, inefficiency, corruption, a lack of productivity, and an overall loss of economic freedom.

Chávez's oil-based economy has become increasingly dependent on the international price of oil, an underperforming national oil company, and shadowy global energy deals. In Venezuela, infrastructure, especially the electrical sector, showed significant deterioration that in turn led to major shortages and blackouts. Venezuelans have also begun to worry deeply about numbers such as the annual inflation rate (30 percent) and the murder rate in Caracas, both among the highest in the Americas.

Venezuelan voters were mindful of Chávez's great affection for the Cuban communist model and his embrace of oppressive, anti-American regimes from the Iran of the ayatollahs and Mahmoud Admadinejad to the genocidal Omar al-Bashir of Sudan and Libya's dictator-for-life Muammar Qadhafi. Nor did

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voters forget Chávez's affinity for terrorist organizations like Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

Democratic Opposition Fights an Uphill Battle. In the 2005 legislative elections, the anti-Chávez opposition chose not to run candidates in protest to what it considered Chávez's manipulation of the electoral system. In retrospect, this was a controversial decision that many in the opposition came to regret.

Learning from its mistakes, the opposition has made substantial progress. In November 2007, a majority defeated a major referendum that would have granted sweeping powers to Chávez. In the November 2008 municipal elections, the opposition showed renewed strength, especially in Caracas and states like Zulia and Táchira. Under the general direction of the Unity Table, the opposition came together and fielded a single slate of candidates throughout Venezuela, paving the way for 60 new opposition legislative members.

The opposition had to stand up to Chávez's polarizing politics on a tilted playing field. Factors favoring a massive PSUV victory included the following facts:

- Venezuela has become a vast patronage machine where employees are under orders to vote for Chávez;
- Nationalizations have gobbled up the independent private sector;
- Government voters are recipients of Chávez's largess;
- The national electoral council remains under the control of Chávez-appointed officials, and many able candidates have been denied an opportunity to run; and
- Chávez has increasingly restricted media freedoms and used automatic media access to sell himself and his candidates.

The 2009 electoral law created electoral districts heavily favorable to Chávez's party and weighted representation to rural, Chávez-dominated states. This helps explain why PSUV was able to win more than 90 seats with less than a majority of the vote.

The new National Assembly does not take office until 2011. This electoral setback for Chávez will likely trigger a series of retaliations and fresh efforts to use the lame duck assembly to pass legislation that could undercut the authority of a new, more pluralist body. Chávez also claims to possess the authority to construct an alternative legislative process based on citizens' councils. The opposition has not forgotten how Chávez unconstitutionally undercut the powers and the resources of elected opposition governors and mayors following elections in 2008.

A Democratic Venezuela Is in the U.S. National Interest. Given its proximity, resources, and long tradition of friendship with the U.S., Venezuela is a nation of strategic importance to U.S. policy in the Americas. The U.S.'s national interests are linked to a restoration of a stable, friendly, and responsible Caribbean neighbor.

Speaking to the U.N. General Assembly on September 23, President Obama stressed the importance of worldwide democracy, noting that "the common thread of progress is the principle that government is accountable to its citizens. And the diversity in this room makes clear—no one country has all the answers, but all of us must answer to our own people." He might well have added that no one president, including Hugo Chávez, has all the answers. Therefore, in response to last yesterday's election, the Obama Administration should do the following:

- Warmly welcome the September 26 vote as an outcome that encourages greater pluralism in Venezuela and indicates a deep-rooted determination to preserve democratic freedoms and executive accountability;
- Together with Congress, work with the National Endowment for Democracy and others to redouble efforts to improve legislative expertise and management skills that bolster accountability and legislative oversight in Venezuela's new National Assembly;
- Work with pro-democracy elements in Latin America and Europe to encourage sustained support for civil society in Venezuela; and

- Keep its focus on the Inter-American Democratic Charter as the central tool within the Organization of American States system for opening political space in Venezuela and as a yardstick for measuring governance in Venezuela in the months ahead.

Looking Ahead. The Venezuelan opposition emerges from the September 26 elections with a

credible and stronger base—as well as a fresh sense of legitimacy and greater unity—as it looks ahead to decisive presidential elections in 2012.

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