

12-24-1999

Voters Overwhelmingly Support Venezuela's New Constitution

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Voters Overwhelmingly Support Venezuela's New Constitution." (1999). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/12722>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Voters Overwhelmingly Support Venezuela's New Constitution

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Venezuela

Published: 1999-12-24

Venezuelan voters gave their overwhelming support to the new Constitution in a referendum Dec. 14. President Hugo Chavez has called the Constitution the cornerstone of his "peaceful revolution" and the only way to defuse "a social time bomb."

But Chavez's project has been dealt a staggering blow as the country, mired in the deepest recession on record, has now been hit with the worst natural disaster in its history. Official results showed the "yes" option took 71.4% of the votes, against 28.6% for "no." Abstention was about 50%, in part because of the inclement weather.

"Some Venezuelans believe they are going to begin to eat better and live better the day after the new Constitution takes effect," said political analyst Fausto Masso. "But the truth is that the majority are becoming impatient, and the abstention should serve as a warning to Chavez.

A poll by the newspaper El Nacional indicated only about 1.5% of eligible voters, regardless of how they planned to vote, had read the document. Voting took place during rains that only intensified during the next few days, triggering the worst flooding and mudslides in the nation's history. The death toll, which will never be known with certainty, could climb to 30,000, officials said.

Opposition fails to sway majority of voters

A last-ditch effort by opponents to sway voters failed to prevent ratification. All traditional sources of power except the military, including traditional political parties, most business leaders, the press, the Catholic hierarchy, most union leaders and professional associations, came out against Chavez and urged a "no" vote. Despite the attacks against Chavez, whom opponents called everything from a communist to a dictator waiting to take over, the poor were so fed up with the abuses of the past 41 years of "democratic" rule that they backed the president wholeheartedly.

But the polarization between the 20% of the population who are rich and the 80% who are poor has increased along with the risk of a violent confrontation in the future. After the acrimonious campaign during which he called opponents "rancid oligarchs" and "squealing pigs," Chavez's tone was conciliatory as he addressed the nation shortly after the results. "Honor to the defeated and glory to the victor," he said. "If we unite we will be invincible....I call on everyone, whatever their position. Here I am with open arms."

Despite the heated rhetoric before the vote, analysts say the Constitution, while emphasizing a strong state role in the economy, is not sharply different from the 1961 Constitution that it replaces. It is the 26th constitution in the nation's history. But critics say that Chavez is trampling the rule of

law as he tries to implement his vision for a new Venezuela. "We are moving toward an economy that is less and less productive, absolute rigidity in the labor market, an administrative centralism that breaks with the trend of recent years," said Alberto Franceschi, one of six opposition delegates in the Asamblea Nacional Constituyente (ANC).

Future uncertain in light of disaster

On Dec. 17, Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE) president Andres Caleca made official the victory of the "si" vote in the referendum. And, on Dec. 20, the ANC officially accepted the new Constitution amid national mourning for flood victims. As the scope of the disaster became clearer, Chavez postponed the formal victory speech he had been scheduled to deliver to direct rescue and relief efforts.

The disaster also delayed analysis of the changes to be implemented when the Constitution goes into effect Jan. 1. It was assumed that voters would return to the ballot boxes sometime in late February in a "mega-election" to choose a president, legislators, governors, Supreme Court justices, and mayors.

Chavez, 45, said he would run in the elections. With the opposition fragmented and leaderless, he would likely win easily. ANC president Luis Miquilena said the new Constitution gives the ANC until Jan. 30, 2000, to convoke elections, and 180 days from the approval of the Constitution to hold the elections. Nevertheless, he said elections might have to be postponed because of the catastrophe. Once the shock of the disaster subsides, Chavez will face multiple challenges. He has promised to extricate the country from the economic hole the traditional parties created, but the task and the needs are now much greater.

Hundreds of thousands of people have been left without homes, creating an incredible burden for the government that is compounded by mandates of the new Constitution that guarantee every citizen housing, health care, and access to services. Referendum results in end of Congress One immediate impact of the vote affirming the 350- article Constitution is the closure of the opposition-controlled Congress.

The ANC, with a mandate until Feb. 3, 2000, will assume congressional functions until then and will select a legislative committee to continue until the election of the new National Assembly.

Other major changes in the Constitution include:

*The name of the Republic of Venezuela is changed to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. *The traditional three government branches executive, legislative, and judicial are now five with the creation of electoral and citizen branches.

*The citizen branch will include the public defender, the attorney general, the comptroller general.

*The electoral branch will handle all elections, including the consultive referendums provided for by the new Constitution.

*The presidential term is extended from five years to six. The president can run for immediate re-election once. The post of vice president serves as liaison between the legislative and executive branches.

*The bicameral Congress is eliminated, replaced by a single-chamber National Assembly. The president may dissolve the National Assembly if it votes to dismiss three of his vice-presidents.

*Active members of the armed forces are allowed to vote, and legislative approval of military promotions is scrapped.

*The Central Bank must present accounts to the National Assembly and report on its spending and success in meeting macroeconomic targets. * The government cannot sell shares in state oil company Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) but may divest subsidiaries.

*State health care, education, and pensions are guaranteed for every citizen, including homemakers. At present pensions are provided only to those who contribute to the social security system.

*The working week is cut from 48 to 44 hours. * Tax evasion is punishable with prison. * The name of the Supreme Court is changed to the Tribunal Suprema de Justicia and a constitutional chamber is created to interpret the new charter.

*The media is obliged to provide only "timely, truthful, and impartial" information. *Indigenous communities' rights to their own culture, languages, and territories are recognized. [Sources: Spanish news service EFE, 12/11/99, 12/14/99, 12/16/99, 12/17/99, 12/21/99; CNN, 12/15/99, 12/17/99, 12/20/99; The Financial Times (London), 12/15/99, 12/16/99; Associated Press, 12/15/99; Reuters, 12/15/99, 12/16/99; The Miami Herald, 12/15/99, 12/16/99; The New York Times, 12/15/99, 12/16/99; Notimex, 12/15/99; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 12/17/99; Inter Press Service, 12/16/99]

-- End --