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Referendum on Spending Passes

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Ecuador's second-round presidential election on Nov. 26 included three referendum questions on whether to increase investment in health spending, education spending, and on the redistribution of income from petroleum extraction. All three questions received yes votes by an overwhelming margin, potentially guiding policy for President-elect Rafael Correa (see other article in this issue of NotiSur).

**Voters approve health, education, and petro-surplus spending**

The three questions put to voters were: "Do you agree that the eight policies of the 10-Year Education Plan (2006-2015), stated in this referendum, should be considered as priority policies of state for investment in the public sector?"; "Do you agree that, within five months, the National Congress should debate and approve laws set up to: a. - Direct sufficient resources for Ecuadorans so that the prevention of and medical attention for pathologies is guaranteed, elevating the Universal Assurance of Health to the category of state policy; and b. - Increase by 0.5% annually the participation in health in relation to GDP until the year 2012, or until reaching at least 4% of GDP?"; and, "Do you agree that the National Congress, within five months, expedite laws set up to guarantee that petroleum resources not foreseen or greater than have been budgeted for in the state's general budget be directed toward social investment and productive reactivation?" All three received about two-thirds support from the electorate, reported the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE), the country's top electoral authority.

The first question passed by 67.08%; 6.16% opposed, while 18.99% left their ballots blank and 7.77% were nullified.

The second question won by 66.12% with 7.67% opposed; 17.99% of ballots were blank and 8.22% were nullified.

The third question had the lowest margin of yes votes with 64.23% supporting petroleum surpluses being sent for social spending; 8.24% opposed, while 19.52% left blank ballots and 8.01% were nullified.

The referendum reflects economic reforms that Correa supports, with his main interests being social spending as a method to overcome Ecuador’s widespread poverty. Palacio's shrunken legacy President Alfredo Palacio proposed the referendum, and electoral authorities said it cost US$1.9 million to conduct. Palacio had also called for a referendum to reform the national Constitution, but the Congress rebuffed his efforts (see NotiSur, 2005-08-05 and 2005-12-16).

November's referendum was much less ambitious in its scope. Some analysts saw Palacio's mandate as a transitional president to be too slight to conduct major reforms. He came to power from the vice
presidency after former President Lucio Gutierrez (2003-2005) was ousted amid large-scale popular protests. Correa says he will seek to reform the Constitution and the Congress during his coming term by holding a referendum to set up an Asamblea Constituyente to rewrite the document.

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