

# Venezuela's Chavez wins election, but by narrower margin

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Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez won another six-year term in an election Sunday that saw the margin he enjoyed over the right-wing opposition sharply reduced compared to previous contests.

With 97.6 percent of the vote counted, Chavez held a more than 10 percent lead over his challenger, Henrique Capriles, with 55.11 percent of the vote compared to 44.27 percent. In absolute terms, the incumbent led the candidate of the Venezuelan right by over a million and a half votes, with 8.06 million, compared to 6.47 million.

Reflecting the sharp political polarization that characterized the election, the share of the electorate voting was the highest in recent history, with voter turnout topping 80 percent. The increased turnout favored the opposition. Chavez received 8.2 percent more votes than he did in 2006, while the opposition got 33.2 percent more.

In 2006, Chavez beat the candidate of the right, Manuel Rosales, by a 26 percent margin.

Chavez, 58, hailed the election victory as a "perfect battle" as he greeted supporters from the balcony of the presidential palace waving a replica of the sword of Simon Bolivar. He vowed that "Venezuela will continue its march toward the democratic socialism of the 21st century."

The former paratrooper commander, who led a failed coup in 1992 and in 2002 survived an abortive CIA-backed coup after he had been elected president, sounded somewhat conciliatory, however. He appealed for national unity and promised to be a "better president" and that his government would "respond with greater efficacy and efficiency to the needs of our people."

Chavez also revealed that he had placed a call to his defeated opponent, Capriles, calling for "national unity."

Capriles, the former governor of Venezuela's second most populous state, Miranda, ran as the candidate of the Roundtable of Democratic Unity coalition, known by its Spanish acronym, MUD. This included the remnants of the two parties that alternated in ruling Venezuela for most of the second half of the 20th century, Accion Democratica and COPEI, as well as other sections of the Venezuelan right.

Unlike previous elections, however, Capriles posed as a social democrat or a moderate left, claiming that his aim was to pursue policies similar to those of the former president of Brazil, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. In particular, he promised that he would keep in place the social assistance programs, known as Missions, through which Chavez has diverted a portion of Venezuela's oil revenues to provide cheap food, income for the elderly, and expanded access to education, health care and housing for the country's poorest. Previously, the Venezuelan right had denounced these programs as a government scheme to buy votes.

During the 12 months preceding the election, government spending rose by 30 percent in real terms according to an estimate by Bank of America. Much of this increase stemmed from a government program to provide low-cost or free housing to some 3 million Venezuelans by 2018.

Capriles campaigned on issues such as the country's high crime rate—19,000 murders last year—and deterioration of infrastructure, including frequent power blackouts.

He also attempted to make an issue of corruption, which has manifested itself in the emergence of a new layer of multi-millionaire politicians and politically connected businessmen and bankers, known as the "bolibourgeoisie" (for Chavez's so-called Bolivarian Revolution). This tended to fall flat, however, given popular memory of the corruption that pervaded politics prior to Chavez's rise, and thanks to the surfacing during the campaign of a video showing a Capriles aide accepting a large amount of cash in return for political favors.

Significantly, both the Capriles and Chavez campaigns were advised and at least partially run by Brazilian operatives of the PT, or Workers Party, the principal political instrument of the bourgeoisie of Latin America's largest economy. Lula, who faithfully presided over economic policies dictated by the banks and transnational corporations, backed Chavez and hailed his re-election as "a victory for all the people of Latin America."

Capriles' masquerade as a "left" followed a political career which began in the extreme right-wing Catholic

organization, Tradition, Family, and Property (TFP), and included participation in the 2002 CIA-backed coup and close collaboration with Washington through various NGOs funded by the National Endowment for Democracy.

Washington responded to the Chavez victory by praising the “pacific” character of the vote and urging that the six million votes for the opposition be “taken into account” by the Chavez government.

Chavez’s victory prompted a minor fall on the Venezuelan stock market, which lost 12 percent in value after a week that had seen a 31 percent rise. Overall, the Caracas stock exchange remains the most profitable in the world, recording a cumulative rise of 200 percent over the past year.

The ratings agency Fitch took a sober view of the Venezuelan election results, predicting “economic policy continuity, even as the sovereign credit profile weakens.” It noted approvingly that “concerns over a possible increase in post-election social unrest have subsided,” suggesting that it saw greater risk in an opposition victory. It repeated concerns it voiced in April, when it downgraded Venezuela’s credit rating, warning of the country’s “increased vulnerability to commodity price shocks” and, in particular, to any rapid decline in global energy demand.

The opposition tended to do better than Chavez in urban areas, while the incumbent won overwhelmingly in rural Venezuela. The newspaper *Tal Cual* pointed to election results in the state of Bolivar that suggest that layers of the working class voted for Capriles as a “voto castigo” or punishment vote against Chavez. The state has been the scene of numerous workers’ strikes and protests over the government’s failure to negotiate contracts, the use of contract labor and the repression and criminalization of union activity. In August, during the election campaign, Venezuelan state television cut short the broadcast of a speech by Chavez to assembled workers from SIDOR, the state-owned steel firm and other industries in Bolivar, after they began shouting down the president.

Citing figures released by the CNE, Venezuela’s national election board, *Tal Cual* reported that Capriles won the majority of the votes in urban districts of Heres (Ciudad Bolivar) and in three districts of Puerto Ordaz, where the electorate is dominated by workers in basic industry. The right’s candidate also won in El Callao, a mining district, and in Roscio and Piar, where thousands of SIDOR and aluminum workers reside.

While Capriles would only deepen the attacks on the working class carried out by the Chavez government, such a vote suggests deep frustration among Venezuelan workers with so-called “21st century socialism.”

This political project has attracted support from pseudo-lefts internationally precisely because it is founded on the

conception that socialism can be established by a petty-bourgeois nationalist movement or a populist leader without the conscious leadership of the working class.

Venezuela remains a capitalist country, dominated by international and national banks and a parasitic financial bourgeoisie that enjoys some of the highest profit rates in the world. While a portion of oil revenues has been diverted to provide social assistance to the poorest, poverty remains endemic, with nearly half of the working population subsisting in the so-called informal sector.

The essential elements of Venezuela’s status as a country historically oppressed by and dependent upon imperialism remain unchanged by the “Bolivarian revolution.” Its economy continues to be wholly dependent upon petroleum exports, which account for 90 percent of the country’s earnings, while it imports 70 percent of its food and the overwhelming majority of both consumer and capital goods.

With the elections over, the Venezuelan right is preparing for another face-off with the Chavistas in state elections set for December, while both they and their supporters in Washington are speculating on the health of Chavez, who underwent three operations and chemotherapy treatment for cancer over the last 16 months. If he were to die in office during the first three years of his term, the country’s constitution requires another election.

In the meantime, however, persistent inflation, which reached 27 percent last year, continuing social inequality, anger and frustration with official corruption and the domination of economic and political life by a wealthy elite and a political clique around Chavez will inevitably lead to an intensification of the class struggle, raising the necessity for a new, revolutionary leadership in the working class.



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