



Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the U.S.

VENEZUELA'S ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Gearing Up for the 2012 Presidential Elections

The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela has a busy electoral calendar for the next two years, beginning with presidential elections on October 7, 2012. The National Electoral Council (CNE) – the independent branch of government responsible for overseeing elections and maximizing transparency and popular participation – recently announced this date along with its decision to hold state and municipal elections on December 16, 2012 and April 14, 2013, respectively. The CNE declared itself “in permanent session” to facilitate campaigning.¹ It has also established 1,300 voter registration centers throughout the country.² There are already 17.8 million Venezuelans registered to vote in 2012 (out of a population of 28.4 million), and the number continues to grow.³

Venezuela’s electoral processes are among the most technologically advanced in the world. Their transparency and efficiency are part of the reason that voter turnout is extremely high – 75 percent in the last presidential elections, and 66 percent in the last legislative elections.⁴ The diversity of the electorate is one of the most impressive features of the voting process; European Union observers found that more than half of those that cast votes in 2006 were women, and that voter turnout among indigenous peoples was 75 percent on average nationwide.⁵

These advances have been part of a concerted effort by the CNE to make Venezuela one of the world’s best places to cast a ballot. But this was certainly not always true; as recently as 1998, only half of registered voters went to the polls. For most of the second half of the 20th century, a power-sharing agreement between two main political parties led to massive electoral fraud, a situation that was corrected by the Chávez government.⁶

VOTER REGISTRATION

One of the keys to the rejuvenation of Venezuela’s electoral system has been the emphasis placed on popular democratic participation. While in the past, many citizens lacked the national ID cards needed to vote, or lacked access to voting centers or information about the process, now these things are widely available throughout the country, even in very rural areas. A social program known as “Mission Identity” has issued over 20 million ID cards since it began in 2003. Voting centers have been opened up in traditionally under-served areas such as poor urban neighborhoods, rural communities, indigenous territories, and Afro-Venezuelan communities. The 2012 elections will also feature special voting centers accessible to the handicapped.⁷ Frequent and far-reaching public education campaigns by the CNE has made Venezuelans from all sectors of society extremely aware of – and enthusiastic about – their electoral rights and responsibilities.

TECHNOLOGICAL IMPROVEMENTS

There is a wealth of information available about the technological improvements made to Venezuela’s electoral system. A single, unified system of voting has been put in place nationwide that uses the latest equipment to make the voting experience easy and effective, with mechanisms for vote auditing by the voters themselves, vote monitors, and electoral observers alike. Ahead of the last presidential elections, the CNE adopted

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several measures to ensure voter confidence including pre-election audits in order to test the system, a process which the Carter Center affirmed took place “in extensive consultation with opposition representatives.”⁸

On the day of voting, voter identity is checked using fingerprinting as well as the national ID card. Ballots are cast on electronic voting machines which print a receipt that is cross-checked by the individual voter as well as manually by auditors after the polls are closed in order to ensure the accuracy of the voting machines.

These improvements have made voting and vote counting faster, and have instilled confidence in the voting public. Voters from across the political spectrum have consistently praised the process as free and fair. Likewise, the OAS observation mission during the last presidential elections expressed satisfaction over “the high and exceptional rates of participation we witnessed and the conditions of normality and security that prevailed during the voting.”⁹

INTERNATIONAL OBSERVERS

For the last dozen years, all of Venezuela’s major electoral processes have been audited and declared free and fair by electoral observers. International observer missions have been sent from U.S. organizations including the Carter Center and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) as well as larger, regional organizations like the Organization of American States (OAS) and the EU. Their results have consistently noted high voter turnout and diversity among voters, the efficiency and transparency of the voting centers, and the general atmosphere of peacefulness and tolerance. Here are just a few of their observations:

“Overall, the 2006 Presidential Elections were held in respect of national laws and international standards concerning electoral administration and the electronic voting system. The high turnout, and peaceful atmosphere in which they were held, together with the acceptance of results by all those involved, represent significant progress.” – EU Observation Mission (2006)¹⁰

“The Venezuelan voters displayed a level of engagement and enthusiasm often absent in the U.S. ... Venezuelan voters showed up in droves in the early morning hours and were excited about engaging in this aspect of one’s civic duty. Turnout was apparent among people of all ages and all income groups... The voting machines and receipts were properly audited. The auditing process was witnessed by all of the relevant parties including representatives from the CNE, the incumbent and opposition political parties, military guards, and international observers.” – NAACP (2006)¹¹

“The Carter Center is pleased that the CNE has taken a number of significant measures to protect the electronic voting system from external attack, such as encryption of data using standard industry algorithms, and the implementation of sophisticated data randomization mechanisms. Equally commendable is the introduction of a number of procedural measures that are intended to prevent physical tampering with the machines and voting materials, such as the inclusion of a 32-digit, alphanumeric serial number on each printed ballot receipt.” – Carter Center (2006)¹²

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A MODEL FOR THE REGION

As the above quotes indicate, recent elections in Venezuela have been thoroughly scrutinized by international observers, and the process has affirmed and consolidated the gains made by the CNE in the areas of transparency and popular participation. As the country prepares for the 2012 presidential race, it is drawing on lessons learned over the course of 16 different electoral processes held since 1998. Under the Bolivarian Revolution, Venezuela's electoral system has become fully modern and democratic and is becoming known as a model for the region.

NOTES

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3. See the website of the CNE: www.cne.gob.ve
4. See the website of International IDEA: http://www.idea.int/vt/country_view.cfm?id=236
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7. "CNE habilitará mesas de votación en planta baja para votantes con discapacidad," *El Informador*, Sept. 30, 2011. <http://www.elinformador.com.ve/noticias/venezuela/poder-electoral/habilitara-mesas-votacion-planta-baja-para-votantes-discapacidad/45647>
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9. Organization of American States, "Jefe de la misión de observación electoral de la OEA felicita al Presidente Chávez," Dec. 4, 2006. http://www.oas.org/es/centro_noticias/comunicado_prensa.asp?sCodigo=MOE-VE-12
10. European Union, "Electoral Observer Mission, Final Report: Presidential Elections, Venezuela 2006. <http://www.eueomvenezuela.org>
11. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, NAACP Department of International Affairs, "An Observational Briefing on the 2006 Venezuelan Presidential Election," Feb. 2007.
12. The Carter Center, "Observing the 2006 Presidential Elections in Venezuela: Final Report of the Technical Mission," Nov. 2007. http://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/news/peace_publications/democracy/venezuela_2006_eng.pdf

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