

# WebMemo



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## Fighting the Odds: Venezuela's Opposition Scores Key Victories

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On November 23, Venezuela's previously fragmented opposition scored key victories in state and municipal elections. President Hugo Chávez's march to create a socialized economy and install a one-party state à la Cuba continues to encounter resistance from wary voters. This electoral setback is the result of several everyday problems that have blemished Chávez's social track record and placed him on the defensive, including: high inflation, food scarcities, skyrocketing crime, and poor service delivery. Consequently, the electorate's reluctance to further embrace Chávez's socialist, one-party vision is drawing the opposition together.

By winning in key populous states like Zulia and Miranda and gaining the mayor's office in the capital district of Caracas, the opposition showed it is able to build electoral strength and that its message is penetrating deeper into urban areas—Chávez's traditional stronghold. The opposition also claimed victories in the states of Carabobo and Táchira. Overall, Venezuela's democratic opposition will take heart that its efforts to resist the unchallenged imposition of Chávez's socialist dream finds resonance with voters and that political pluralism survives in Venezuela.

At stake during the November 23 elections were a total of 22 governorships, 328 mayoral positions, and hundreds of local legislative council seats. The elections pitted Chávez's new United Venezuelan Socialist Party (PSUV) against a handful of leftist dissidents and remnants of the more centrist and

conservative opposition of Venezuela's late-1990s two-party system.

Even pro-Chávez analysts credit opposition candidates with running effective campaigns. These campaigns were tightly focused on local, everyday issues—issues on which Chávez was vulnerable—such as the government's inability to deliver on commitments and address such problems as garbage collection and its failure to respond to increases in homicides, kidnappings, and other violent crimes

**Opposition Gains Despite Heavy-Handed Intervention.** The campaign, which began months ago, was marked by massive efforts from Chávez and his supporters to tilt the elections' outcome. Chávez's strategy focused on polarizing and radicalizing the elections, making it appear as though he was "the only candidate in the contest" and that the November 23 vote was a referendum on "Socialism for the 21st Century." Often the elections appeared to be more about Chávez and less about candidates and issues, thereby reinforcing an argument made by critics like the distinguished Mexican historian Enrique Krauze that Venezuelan politics are increasingly dominated by a "cult of personality."

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
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Before the elections, the government barred hundreds of candidates, including popular figures, for alleged corruption charges. Chávez's officials worked to deliver visible social assistance and to reduce the absenteeism that helped pave the way for the defeat of the constitutional referendum last year. Chávez warned that states voting against him would not receive federal funding. He launched threatening direct attacks against opposition figures such as Manuel Rosales, the outgoing governor of Zulia and candidate for mayor of Maracaibo. In an effort to discredit Rosales, government stations aired intercepted telephone calls placed by Rosales. On November 11, Chávez warned voters in Carabobo that if they voted for the opposition, he would unleash an armored brigade to defend the revolution.

**Opposition and Chávez Claim Victories on November 23.** The voter turnout set a record for state and municipal elections, with approximately 11 million voters going to the polls on Sunday. While there were no major allegations of fraud, many in the opposition questioned the decision to extend voting hours past the announced 4 p.m. closure, a move that gave the PSUV more time to get out stay-at-home supporters.

Overall, Chávez's followers claimed victories in 17 of the 22 states. Among those eking out a win for the PSUV was Chávez's older brother Adán, who won a slender triumph (49.63 percent) in the state of Barinas and will replace clan patriarch Hugo de los Reyes Chávez. Although Adán won, it is important to note that opposition candidate Julio Cesar Reyes campaigned against the nepotistic rule of the Chávez family and nearly succeeded.

The opposition scored important victories, retaining Zulia and Nueva Esparta. It also gained Miranda, a populous state, and claims victories in two other states. In the greater Caracas area, opposition figure Antonio Ledezma won a surprise victory over the PSUV candidate Aristóbulo Isturiz, promising to end the anarchy that has characterized local governance in Venezuela's capital. In Zulia's capital, Maracaibo, despite Chávez's allegations and threats, Manuel Rosales won with 60 percent of the vote.

**An Opportunity for the Opposition.** It is premature to interpret opposition gains in Venezuela's

elections as sufficiently large to derail Chávez's ambition to change the constitution and run for a third presidential term in 2012. The PSUV is Venezuela's primary political force and Chávez vows to "deepen the socialist project." Chávez can still command approximately 60 percent of the national vote and enjoys a similarly high approval rating. Moreover, Chávez exercises predominant control over the National Assembly, the Supreme Court, the national bureaucracy, and every nationalized company. He will likely utilize these controls to make life more difficult for opposition governors and mayors.

Yet 2009 is stacking up as a tough year for Chávez. He must cope with plunging oil prices, lowered expectations for economic growth, and hard economic choices as the global economic recession begins to hit the oil-dependent domestic economy. Venezuelan crude is cheaper than oil found elsewhere in the world. Last week it commanded a price of only \$41/barrel because it is more expensive to refine. Add to that the increased costs to produce oil in Venezuela by the state-owned PDVSA due to corruption and mismanagement. Consequently, there will be less money with which Chávez can buy influence and friends in the future.

As Chavez encounters more difficulties in the coming months and years, the opposition must continue to develop constructive alternatives, reenergize efforts to win back support lost to Chávez's charisma and populist handouts, and further develop programs for electoral unity and cooperation. As popular opposition figure Leopoldo Lopez commented, "It is now time to begin the movement from opposition to becoming an alternative" to the Chávez model of governance. The next major challenge will be the 2010 legislative elections. Therefore, the following actions should be taken:

- The Obama Administration must continue to provide vigorous support for pro-democracy efforts throughout Latin America, including in Venezuela, as these movements seek constructive and principled opposition to one-party democracies.
- The Obama Administration needs to reaffirm the central concept that Latin America's social agenda,

democratic governance, human rights, and free markets are fully compatible with one another.

- Finally, before sending a new ambassador to Caracas, the Obama Administration should develop a comprehensive strategy for responding to the multiple challenges Venezuela poses to regional security, to the fight against the drug trade, and to the prevention of international terrorism, as

well as to Chávez's efforts to construct an anti-U.S. coalition with Iran, Russia, and other antagonistic regimes.

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