

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Venezuelan Constitutional Referendum: More Years for Chávez?

Peter DeShazo

February 12, 2009

Q1: What is at stake in the referendum to amend Venezuela's constitution?

A1: On February 15, Venezuelans will go to the polls to vote on amendments to the Venezuela constitution that would allow President Hugo Chávez—along with any other elected official in Venezuela—the potential to be reelected indefinitely. Without this change, Chávez would be barred from running for reelection when his term expires in January 2013. Chávez has been in power for 10 years and has stated frequently that he intends to be president of Venezuela for as long as possible. In December 2007, Venezuelans rejected by a narrow margin a package of constitutional reforms that would have permitted reelection—a stinging and unexpected defeat for Chávez. Local elections for governors and mayors held last November resulted in another setback, as the opposition won in five key states and in several important municipalities, including metropolitan Caracas. On the heels of these local elections, Chávez chose to move ahead promptly with another attempt at constitutional reform, judging that the timing would favor his chances.

Q2: What is the likely outcome? Which variables will be the most important?

A2: Chávez is making an all-out effort to win, mobilizing the resources of the state to encourage a large turnout by his supporters and to win over uncommitted voters. Pro-“yes” vote publicity is omnipresent, with public employees and state entities, such as the national oil company PDVSA, taking an active role. The forces promoting a “no” vote in the referendum, on the other hand, have been handicapped by the short lead time in mounting an opposition and are at a large disadvantage in terms of resources, reportedly having exhausted their funds in the November 2008 local elections. As in the December 2007 referendum, Venezuelan university and high school students have been a key human resource in encouraging a “no” vote. Polls indicate that the result will be close, although they may underestimate the overwhelmingly pro-Chávez vote in rural areas. Voter turnout will be key to both sides, with the “yes” camp focusing on the least advantaged urban voters by raising the specter of an alleged end to government programs for the poor should Chávez not remain in power past 2012, while the “no” campaign hopes for a large turnout by middle-class voters, independents, and disaffected *chavistas*, banking on what it hopes will be a widespread rejection of indefinite reelection.

Q3: What can be expected if Chávez wins? If he loses?

A3: Chávez is unlikely to make major changes in his political agenda whether he wins or loses. If the “yes” vote comes out on top, especially if he wins big, his overall position will be strengthened, and the way will be made clear for him to run again. If the “no” side prevails, Chávez suffers another political setback but remains in power for years more and will look for another opportunity to amend the constitution. Time is a factor that is increasingly not on his side, however, regardless of the outcome of the plebiscite. Venezuela's economy is being hit hard by the fall in oil prices and static hydrocarbons production, as well as by Latin America's highest rate of inflation. Shrinking oil revenues will put an increasingly greater crimp on Chávez's ability to spend both domestically and abroad and will hurt him politically. Although the opposition will get a lift if the “no” vote wins, it is disunited, exhausted from a constant cycle of elections and plebiscites against a well-entrenched president with deep pockets, and still lacks a standard bearer.

Peter DeShazo directs the Americas Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.

Critical Questions is produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).

© 2009 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.