

Dueling polls confuse Venezuelan voters

Polls offer vastly different predictions for Venezuela's presidential election Sunday.

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CARACAS - With less than a week to go before Venezuela's presidential election, supporters of both President Hugo Chávez and his main rival, Manuel Rosales, are confident of victory -- thanks in part to an opinion-poll war in which the truth appears to have been the first casualty.

"I've worked a lot in elections, in different countries," said Carolina Bescansa, a political science professor from the Complutense University in Madrid. "But I've never seen anything like this."

There are polls to suit all tastes and political tendencies, ranging from those that project a Chávez victory by more than 30 points in the Sunday balloting to a dubious few that give a clear margin to Rosales, the candidate of a broad opposition coalition.

With both the pro-government and pro-opposition media stressing polls that show their favorites ahead and dismissing other surveys as lies and manipulations, neutral voters have been confused and committed voters have become convinced that only fraud can deprive their man of victory.

Instead of making honest efforts to sort out the mess, some journalists on both sides are shamelessly partisan.

"It's impossible for Chávez to win, except by electronic fraud," columnist and chat-show host Marianella Salazar told the weekly *Quinto Día*, which published a special feature on journalists' projections.

"If we go by the spontaneous demonstrations in the streets and at public events, I have no doubt Manuel Rosales will win," said María Isabel Parraga, who co-hosts the opposition's flagship TV and radio show *Hello Citizen* on the avowedly anti-Chávez Globovisión news channel.

This, despite the fact that no reputable polling company has produced a survey giving the lead to Rosales, governor of the state of Zulia.

A number of serious polls -- including a recent one commissioned by the Associated Press -- suggest that Sunday's result will likely be not much different from those of 1998, 2000 and the midterm recall referendum of 2004. All were won by Chávez by a roughly 60-40 margin.

When the team led by Bescansa published a poll projecting 59.7 percent for the president and 39.7 percent for Rosales, *Hello Citizen* and other opposition programs immediately attacked them, implying they were financed by the government.

To make matters worse, a government-financed group called Journalists for the Truth published a paid advertisement exaggerating the results.

"They said the difference was 30 points, when we gave 20," Bescansa told The Miami Herald. "Things are so distorted by the media that you can't trust anything. The only polls I believe are my own."

The vice president of Journalists for the Truth, César Zambrano, admitted that Bescansa's poll did not support the 30-point claim.

"But as far as we're concerned," he said, "the support [for Chávez] is 70 percent. That's what we perceive in the street."

Zambrano also admitted the group's paid ads in the news media -- including at least one full-color, two-page newspaper spread -- were subsidized by the Chávez government.

Such manipulation fuels conspiracy theories among Chávez's opponents.

Alejandro Peña Esclusa, leader of a small right-wing group called Solidarity Force, circulated via Internet a message claiming that polls giving Chávez the lead were part of a government propaganda war.

"The majority of polls published abroad are falsified, and paid for with the resources of the Venezuelan state," Peña Esclusa claimed. "Their aim is to cover up the fraud that the regime plans to commit on Dec. 3."

Meanwhile, the government has pointed out that some polls suggesting a close race were not measuring voting intention but attempting to describe the breakdown of the electorate in terms of Chávez supporters and opponents.

The publication of polling results in the final week of the campaign is prohibited. But falsified or misinterpreted polling data may already have done their damage, by raising the risk of violence after the result is announced.

Manuel Rosales has called on his supporters to "protect" their vote, and says he will not just win but "collect" on his victory. Combined with calls by some opposition extremists for street demonstrations if Chávez wins, this has led to fears of an open confrontation.

When asked to explain Chávez's lead in almost all polls, some on the opposition point to an alleged "fear factor" -- the fear of some voters to tell pollsters they support the opposition out of concern for government retaliations.

'The `fear factor' may have some influence," political columnist Fausto Masó said. 'But it's really more of a `coercion factor' arising from an overly powerful state. If there was a real 'fear factor,' we wouldn't see so many people marching, demonstrating and expressing an opinion" in support of Rosales.