

# Electronic vote distrusted in Venezuela

The Miami Herald  
Nov. 28, 2006

**CARACAS, Venezuela** - Under pressure from opponents of President Hugo Chavez, Venezuela's elections council has adopted safeguards for the country's electronic voting machines to prevent tampering in Sunday's election - conditions so strict that experts say they surpass some standards in the United States.

The opposition boycotted Venezuela's legislative elections a year ago, saying it couldn't trust that the electronic machines would be used fairly. But after thorough checks of hardware and software and some key concessions by electoral officials, presidential challenger Manuel Rosales says he's satisfied - as long as the agreed-upon rules are respected.

"The Venezuelan people and I hope that the electoral council doesn't step outside the rules, that it maintains impartiality," Rosales said Monday. "I'm going to defend the transparency and the results of this process, even if it's with my last breath."

Unlike with most U.S. electronic voting machines, Venezuelans will get paper receipts that verify their choices were properly recorded, and must deposit them into boxes before leaving the polls. After Sunday's vote, election officials monitored by representatives of each candidate will count millions of the paper receipts for comparison to the electronic totals.

Last month, they performed random hardware and software checks of 1 percent of the machines. Officials also will keep them disconnected from the network during the actual voting as an additional safeguard against tampering.

Digital thumbprint devices aimed at preventing the casting of multiple ballots will be used by about 40 percent of the voters in the most populous states and along Venezuela's borders, but in response to fears that thumbprints could be linked to voters' choices, the National Electoral Council says it has tweaked the software so that no record is kept of the sequence in which thumbprints are recorded.

In the United States, only some of the electronic machines used in this month's midterm elections provided voter-verified receipts. In general, the machines are considered proprietary, and vendors have restricted access to the hardware and software for independent review.

Thousands of citizens in dozens of states had problems voting, and some were left with little confidence that their choices were properly recorded.

Chavez's opponents have been suspicious of the machines made by Boca Raton, Florida-based Smartmatic Inc., which is primarily owned by three Venezuelans. Smartmatic bought one of the largest U.S. voting equipment companies, Oakland, Calif.-based Sequoia Voting Systems Inc., which is now undergoing a Treasury Department review over what Sequoia calls baseless allegations of potential influence by Chavez over U.S. elections.

But even prominent electronic voting critics say Venezuela appears to be doing the right things.

Avi Rubin, an electronic voting expert at Johns Hopkins University, has shown in his laboratory how automated voting systems can have glitches and weaknesses, and how someone could insert code to alter the results - for example by switching a certain number of votes for one candidate to his opponent.

However, Rubin said, "a lot of my criticisms of these systems go away when you look at the paper trail that's verified by the voters." If problems emerge, authorities can perform a full manual count.

The random audit of 54 percent of the boxes containing the paper slips is impressive, Rubin said. In the U.S., it's normal for about 2 percent of electronic ballots to be audited, he said.

Rosales' campaign also plans to have about 1 million witnesses at voting centers to ensure compliance, and at least one person from each of the Rosales and Chavez camps will join in the audits.

"We are very well-prepared," said Eliceo Fermin, Rosales' chief of electoral oversight. "We know the errors we committed in the past, we know our weaknesses and we are on alert."

The opposition boycott of last December's elections allowed Chavez allies to capture the entire National Assembly.

Now even the Venezuelan elections watchdog group Sumate acknowledges that the promised safeguards are significant, President Alejandro Plaz said.

It's a stark change from 2004, when Venezuelans first used the touch-screen machines in a recall referendum Chavez won by a wide margin. Observers said Chavez won cleanly and opponents didn't produce hard evidence of fraud, but some questioned the results nevertheless.

Some Venezuelans still have doubts.

"Technology can be manipulated, so I think it's good to recount the votes manually because it's safer," said Javier Gonzalez, a 22-year-old student, pausing to ask for help before using one of the machines in a test run organized by electoral officials.

An AP-Ipsos poll showing Chavez with a wide lead over Rosales also showed less than half of the 2,500 registered voters surveyed were very confident that Venezuelan ballots are counted accurately and votes kept secret.

But electoral officials insist the count will be precise, and that voting secrecy is assured. And Rosales urged voters not to worry, assuring them recently that "No one will know who you voted for."