

LATIN AMERICAN VOTERS GO LEFT, BUT NOT *THAT* FAR LEFT

Hugo Chávez's victory caps off the region's year of elections, but in many ways, Venezuela stands alone.

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CARACAS, VENEZUELA – The landslide victory of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela's presidential election Sunday caps off 12 elections across Latin America since November 2005 that, taken together, reveal a broad electoral shift to the left.

The triumph of President Chávez, who rails against the "imperialist" US and calls President Bush "the devil," comes on the heels of victories by former US foe Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua and Ecuador's Rafael Correa, who called for a "citizen's revolution."

But in many ways Venezuela stands alone. "There is no Chávismo across Latin America," says Adrian Bonilla, a political analyst at the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences in Quito, Ecuador.

"What we have is a lot of new governments with different ideological trends. You don't have a continental leader," he says.

Indeed, analysts say that the leftist tide that appeared to be sweeping the region earlier this year has ebbed. While President Chávez led the pack in his anti-US fervor, the left comes from widely different ideologies and shares no unified front. Many seek some distance from the US, but don't shun the country. In many cases, candidates have had to moderate their images just to get elected.

There's no doubt that voters in most countries firmly rejected the "Washington consensus" and its orthodox free-trade policies this year, but they aren't necessarily seeking revolution. "The region is in great flux, and there is enormous frustration with persistent poverty. But there is no great revolutionary fervor in Latin America," says Michael Shifter, vice president for policy at the Inter-American Dialogue in Washington. "There is certainly distrust of the US, but at the same time most [leaders] want to explore areas of cooperation with the US."

Nowhere is the confrontation between Latin America and the US starker than in Venezuela. Calls for Mr. Chávez's "social revolution" abound: on banners that hang from skyscrapers, on bags of pasta at the state-run

grocery stores, on T-shirts worn by residents both young and old. With 78 percent of polls counted, Chávez beat his challenger Manuel Rosales 61 percent to 38 percent, bringing a new six-year term that will likely deepen that zeal.

"Long live the socialist revolution! Destiny has been written," Chávez told supporters Sunday night. "No one should fear socialism; socialism is human. Socialism is love."

A central foreign policy goal has been to expand that fervor and provide a counterbalance to the US throughout Latin America and beyond. "He bears the mantle of anti-imperialism and anti-Yankeeism, and he is driven to build global coalitions to achieve this goal," says Jennifer McCoy, a Venezuela expert at Georgia State University. That includes joining Mercosur, the South American trade bloc, and creating energy policies throughout Latin America.

Different shades of red

Peter DeShazo, director of the Americas Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, says that two basic camps of leftists have emerged recently: Those, such as Chávez, who run on authoritarian populist platforms, and those who support representative democracy. The majority, such as Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva of Brazil, fall into the latter group. Mr. Ortega, Mr. Correa, and Evo Morales, the president of Bolivia, "are in the process of defining themselves," he says.

What unites the countries that have elected leftist presidents is the desire to change the status quo, marked by deep, longstanding inequality. That was the case in Ecuador, where Mr. Correa ran on an outsider platform and floated not a single congressional candidate.

"The people are fighting - it's a process, a wave, with the common denominator an attempt to diminish the poverty and education gap," says Oscar-Rene Vargas, an independent political analyst in Managua, Nicaragua, who says that Mr. Ortega won because the conservative presidencies in his country left the poor more impoverished. "The difference is on how to do it."

Yet candidates and presidents have had to temper their more radical stances, for political and pragmatic reasons. In Ecuador, Correa made headlines by threatening to default on the nation's debt. After he came in second place in a first round of voting Oct. 15, he changed his tactic, focusing on issues such as the nation's housing needs.

In Bolivia, Mr. Morales became the first indigenous president of Bolivia after winning 54 percent of the vote last December. He came into office pledging more state control over the country's gas reserves, and just this Sunday signed contracts giving the government control over foreign energy companies' operations, completing a process begun May 1 with the nationalization of the petroleum industry.

During his campaign, he voiced dissent over US-supported coca-eradication programs, but has since showed signs of moderating his stance. "In the last month [Morales] has been very, very open regarding antinarcotic policies," says Mr. Bonilla. "We are seeing a different kind of perspective on the part of Morales."

In Nicaragua, Ortega won in part because he lowered the percentage of votes needed to avoid a runoff - which he did by signing a pact with the former conservative president Arnoldo Aleman. "It doesn't make these labels very meaningful, what it means to be on the left or right," says Mr. Shifter.

US may have to open up to leftists

Morales's win last December provoked anxiety in Washington. But more conservative candidates - Álvaro Uribe in Colombia and Felipe Calderón in Mexico - prevailed in the past six months.

In November, US State Department Undersecretary for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns said that a US priority for 2007 would be its ties with Latin America. Mr. Vargas in Nicaragua says that the US will have to open up even to those leftist leaders who aren't centrist. "The US will have to accommodate to the new reality; they have no other option," he says. "In 20 years, Latin America is going to an important economic region with more equality."

The exception to expectations of a meaningful relationship might be Chávez. At a press conference before Sunday's election, the Venezuelan leader, who called Bush the devil at the United Nations in September - a move that many believe cost him a seat on the Security Council - reiterated that sentiment. "Someone has to say to the devil that he's the devil," he said.

But even in this country, his radical rhetoric - whether railing against the US or talking about land redistribution, one of the more controversial elements of his so-called "21st-Century Socialism" - is not what wins him the majority of fans, says Luis Vicente Leon, director of the polling firm

Datanalisis in Caracas. Instead, it is the billions in oil revenue that he has funneled into social programs for the poor, including literacy and health-care services called "missions."

"We Venezuelans reject his radical offers, but not all of the people reject Chávez because a majority thinks he is a good leader spending money," says Mr. Leon. "Every time his speeches are more radical, he loses popularity."

Rosa Cadiz, a lawyer who voted for Chávez, stands downtown where hawkers sell Chávez and Fidel Castro keychains and T-shirts with the words "Fantastic revolutionaries."

But such rhetoric is irrelevant to her. "I wish he were more diplomatic with the US, but in the end it doesn't affect us," she says. "What I care about is that he follows through on his promises to the poor here. You have to clean your own house first."

Latin American voters go left

Twelve of the region's countries have held presidential elections since November 2005. Half of the countries elected heads of state that are further to the left than the outgoing leaders. The other countries reelected leaders of the same political bent, only two of which – Colombia's Álvaro Uribe and Mexico's Felipe Calderón – are conservative.



| Latin America election results | | | |
|--------------------------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
| COUNTRY | BEFORE | DATE | AFTER |
| Honduras | center-right | Nov. 27, 2005 | center-left |
| Chile | center-left | Dec. 11, 2005 | center-left |
| Bolivia | center-right | Dec. 18, 2005 | left |
| Haiti | transitional | Jan. 8, 2006 | left |
| Costa Rica | center-right | Feb. 5, 2006 | center-right |
| Peru | center-right | Apr. 9, 2006 | center-left |
| Colombia | right | May, 2006 | right |
| Mexico | right | July 2, 2006 | right |
| Brazil | center-left | Oct. 1, 2006 | center-left |
| Ecuador | left | October, 2006 | left |
| Nicaragua | center-right | Nov. 5, 2006 | left |
| Venezuela | left | Dec. 3, 2006 | left |

