

Polls: Support for Chávez proposals on the decline

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Support for Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's controversial proposals for constitutional reforms appears to be dropping as the Dec. 2 referendum on the changes approaches, according to recent polls.

At the same time, the number of voters who say they will abstain has been showing a steady decline over the past two months, a swing that would favor the no vote, according to analysts.

Chávez's opponents have split over whether to abstain from a referendum they consider illegal and perhaps even subject to fraud, or turn out to vote and risk legitimizing the tally if the reforms are approved.

While public opinion surveys in Venezuela often have been challenged as politically biased, the latest polls may give Chávez a measure of concern.

The polling firm Mercanálisis' most recent measurement registered 58 percent in favor of no, and 37 percent in favor of yes.

But only 67 percent said they were "eager" to vote in the referendum -- meaning that the abstention rate will play a critical role in the results.

Two other polling firms reported a virtual tie between the yes and no options among those who expressed an intention to vote.

Support and opposition to the reforms appear technically tied at about 30 percent, but support has a tendency to increase "if we take into account the people who have expressed their definite disposition to vote" said a report by the respected polling firm Datanálisis.

Luis Vicente León, director of Datanálisis, said Chávez could run into trouble if critics of the reforms turn out in large numbers and supporters of Chávez, who has won several votes since his first election in 1998, stay at home in significant numbers.

"The president is a favorite, but he's not armor-plated," León said.

"Chávez is more popular than the reform he is pushing," said Joaquín Pérez Rodríguez, an electoral consultant who has advised various political parties and campaigns in the United States, Mexico and Venezuela.

The firm Hinterlaces, after its own poll Nov. 6-9, reported that 45 percent would vote no while 31 percent would vote yes.

But the 61 percent who said they would "definitely vote" showed a 45-43 margin in favor of the yes vote.

"The no vote would easily win if people participate," said Oscar Schemel, president of Hinterlaces.

Another poll conducted Nov. 13 by the firm Instituto Venezolano de Análisis de Datos showed 42.7 percent would reject the reforms and 38.8 would favor them. The figures contrast sharply with the previous IVAD less than a month ago: 17.4 percent against and 62.3 percent in favor.