

Poll: Chavez's charter changes opposed

The Miami Herald
Nov. 24, 2007

CARACAS, Venezuela --

An independent poll released Saturday showed voters balking at President Hugo Chavez's proposed changes to the constitution ahead of a referendum next weekend.

The survey, published in the Venezuelan newspaper El Universal, found about 49 percent of likely voters oppose the reforms while 39 percent favor. The poll was conducted by the Caracas polling firm Datanalisis, which has consistently predicted Chavez's victories in past elections.

"Chavez has never gone into an election without an overwhelming majority from the beginning," Datanalisis pollster Luis Vicente Leon told The Associated Press. "I was surprised when I saw the numbers. ... This is the first time it's reversed."

Voters will decide Dec. 2 whether to approve changes that would let Chavez run for re-election indefinitely, extend presidential terms from six to seven years, and create new types of property to be managed by cooperatives and communities, among others.

Critics warn the changes would endanger democracy and expand Chavez's powers, including giving him authority over the Central Bank and letting his government detain citizens without charge during a state of emergency.

The president and his supporters insist the reforms are meant to deepen democracy and give Venezuelans more voice in government, especially through neighborhood-based "communal" councils.

Opposition leaders are urging voters to turn out in large numbers despite a dearth of international election observers and a general distrust of Venezuela's electoral agency.

Chavez is seeking to shore up support and is urging supporters to approve the 69 constitutional changes if they truly believe in him.

"He who says he supports Chavez but votes 'no' is a traitor, a true traitor," the president said in one of three campaign appearances Friday. "He's against me, against the revolution and against the people."

Chavez says the changes are vital to moving the nation toward socialism, and his government has cited other polls that predict victory at the ballot box.

The Datanalisis poll surveyed 1,854 Venezuelans nationwide between Nov. 14-20, and had a margin of error of 2.5 percentage points. The "likely voter" results were based on the responses of 1,088 interviewed who said they definitely would vote.

Leon predicted that much will depend on efforts to get voters to the polls.

"In no way does that mean those numbers indicate Chavez is going to lose," he said.
"It's still very, very volatile."

A flurry of national, regional and local elections under Chavez - nine since he took office in 1999 - have been closely monitored by both the Organization of American States and the European Union. But the short notice before the Dec. 2 vote - on reforms approved by the National Assembly just one month before - has prevented both institutions from sending delegations that normally take six months to prepare.

"In this case, they would have had to have been invited in June," Victor Diaz, one of the five members of the country's National Electoral Council, told The Associated Press.
"With Venezuelan observers and witnesses, we are perfectly capable of instilling faith in our electoral process."

Some 1,200 Venezuelan electoral observers will monitor the vote, along with representatives of electoral agencies from Latin America and Europe, Diaz said.

Chavez's opponents have questioned the National Electoral Council's impartiality, especially after he named its former chief, Jorge Rodriguez, as his own vice president in January.

But media close to the opposition and anti-Chavez student leaders are urging Venezuelans to vote nonetheless - and to closely monitor the results.

Chavez, a close ally of Cuban leader Fidel Castro, was first elected in 1998 and has maintained high popularity in recent years, handily winning re-election last December with 63 percent of the vote.