

Trade pact boosted

While praising Venezuelans for voting down President Hugo Chávez's constitutional revisions, President Bush made another pitch for a free-trade agreement with Colombia.

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WASHINGTON --

President Bush on Tuesday praised the defeat of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's proposals for constitutional reforms and declined to recognize his outspoken foe for accepting the loss, as other governments have done.

Bush, as well as several Republicans lawmakers, instead used Chávez's defeat in a vote Sunday to drive home the message that Washington should reward friendly nations in Latin America by approving free-trade deals.

"The Venezuelans rejected one-man rule and voted for democracy," Bush said at a news conference when asked about Venezuelan voters' rejection of Chávez proposals for revisions that included allowing him to seek unlimited reelection.

Other governments, from Spain to Cuba, have praised Chávez for accepting the stinging defeat, and the Venezuelan embassy in Washington issued a statement boasting that the results show the country's electoral authority, long accused of bias by Chávez opponents, remains neutral and that democracy is healthy.

Bush quickly moved on to a free-trade agreement with Colombia, held up in Congress because of Democrats' concerns over the human and labor rights record of conservative President Alvaro Uribe. He reiterated the argument that Congress should approve the agreement because it helps counter Chávez's populist influence in Latin America.

"The United States can make a difference in South America in terms of Venezuela's influence. Here's how: Congress can pass a free trade agreement with Colombia."

Bush added that failure to pass the agreement would be an "insult to a friend" and a "contradictory message" to a "very strong leader who is working hard to deal with some very difficult problems" -- a reference to Colombia's long conflict with leftist guerrilla groups.

Venezuela also surfaced Tuesday during the Senate debate on a trade agreement with Peru. Florida Republican Sen. Mel Martinez said the pact would help stabilize democracy there and combat what he called "the false prophets that would preach to the people of Peru that the paths to their better future lies in antagonisms to the United States, lies in the path of socialism."

