

# Chávez Chastened in Venezuela Vote

## Rejection of Bid for More Power Shows Limits of Support

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CARACAS, [Venezuela](#), Dec. 3 -- A day after the first electoral loss of [Hugo Chávez](#)'s presidency, the calculus of political affairs in [Venezuela](#) has fundamentally changed.

A once-demoralized, inept opposition won an important victory in Sunday's national referendum on constitutional changes, exposing weaknesses in Chávez's traditional base of support and slowing, at least for the moment, a process that would have eroded the country's system of checks and balances.

"The first thing we did was to defeat that giant leap of the president to his totalitarian project," Américo Martín, a longtime leftist leader here opposed to Chávez, said Monday. "That has an enormous significance. The second thing we did was to show that the vote does work here."

Analysts said the rejection of 69 constitutional amendments demonstrated that important segments of Chávez's base of support -- the poor and the working class -- are not willing to accept his vision wholesale, no matter how popular his social and economic programs. Even some of those who had ardently backed the president in the past had their doubts this time.

The president acknowledged the significance of his loss after midnight Monday, minutes after authorities announced that voters had rejected, 51 percent to 49 percent, amendments that would have permitted him to run for office indefinitely, control the country's finances and appoint governors. Chávez noted that 7.3 million of his countrymen had reelected him last December, but that his supporters didn't turn out in the same numbers this time.

"We had 3 million fewer votes than we received a year ago, imagine that," he said in an interview on state television.

Chávez has five more years in office and under the current constitution cannot be reelected. He could call for an elected constituent assembly to change the charter, though it could prove difficult for him to ensure such a body is full of his supporters.

During a predawn speech Monday in which he conceded the defeat of his proposal, Chávez said he thought the majority of Venezuelans still supported his government. But he said that the high abstention rate among his supporters should prompt deep reflection in his populist government, now ending its ninth year in power.

"They abstained because of doubts, fears, because there wasn't enough time or preparation to explain, perhaps," he said. "But there you find many political elements and statistics that we need to take into account to continue this battle."

Many voters said the proposed changes to the constitution would simply have given the president too much power. He already controls the National Assembly, the courts and most state and local governments. In one [Caracas](#) district, Carlos Sanabria, 44, said that he had voted for Chávez or his reforms in every election since 1998 but that he could not back him in the referendum.

"Everything is not for him, like he thinks," said Sanabria, a shoemaker. "We're not in [Cuba](#) -- this is [Venezuela](#)."

The opposition was deflated after dramatically losing a 2004 recall referendum and then last year's presidential election. But Sunday's outcome triggered euphoria among the university students, church leaders, politicians and even former Chávez allies who had risen up against the president's plan.

Analysts, as well as some of the president's foes, said the opposition movement remains fragile. While it coalesced against an unpopular proposal, it still lacks a cohesive message, a high-profile leader and alternatives to Chávez's so-called Bolivarian Revolution. The government's myriad social programs are immensely popular with the poor masses.

"This result is more one of discontent in the internal base of Chavismo than a victory for the opposition," said Margarita López Maya, a historian at the Central University of [Venezuela](#). "They continue to have many challenges. There are still no clear proposals to counter the Bolivarian project. The Bolivarian project is still there, with contradictions and weaknesses, but there."

Elections for governorships and mayoral seats -- most of them controlled by government allies -- will be held across the country next summer, and analysts say opposition hopefuls, to succeed, need sound proposals that will resonate with voters.

For now, opposition leaders are extolling the democratic character of the movement that defeated Chávez's proposal. And some are calling for reconciliation in this highly polarized country.

"We have to be humble," Stalin González, a prominent student leader, told reporters at the "No" camp's headquarters shortly after the results were announced. "This is the opportunity to open a path. President Chávez recognized the defeat, and it's an opportunity to debate together what kind of country we want."

[Manuel Rosales](#), who ran against Chávez last December, told his followers, "I invite Chávez to initiate with us the paths to peace and understanding."

Another opponent of the proposed changes, former defense minister Raúl Baduel, said [Venezuela](#) could unify by organizing an elected assembly to rewrite the constitution, which was approved by a mostly pro-Chávez assembly in a 1999 referendum.

Chávez, meanwhile, sounded both magnanimous, when he congratulated the opposition on its victory, and disdainful, when he said that some elements had been opting to destabilize the country rather than abide by the referendum's results.

The president also said his efforts to consolidate socialism in the oil-rich country would continue, adding that he would not change "a single comma" of his proposal.

"I continue making the proposal to the Venezuelan people," he said. "The proposal is alive, not dead. . . . We couldn't do it for now, but we maintain it."

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In interviews in a poor Caracas district where support for Chávez is strong, a number of people voiced dissatisfaction with the government.

"He talks about improvements, but here, nothing changes. What change?" said Sanabria, the shoemaker. "There's more crime. There's more problems."

Oswaldo Medina, 52, who abstained from voting, called the defeat a "disaster" for the president and predicted that he would weaken. "He was so sure he'd win, but not now. If they held presidential elections, he'd lose."

But support for Chávez remains solid in districts that have benefited from the government's so-called missions -- programs in literacy education, health care and nutrition. Many people noted that previous governments had not given them the same level of assistance.

"The people who have supported him still support him," said Maria Monterola, 37, a housewife. "The opposition never admits those programs are good."

Franklin Guardia, 35, also voted Sunday for the constitutional changes, and he said he took the defeat in stride. He said the president should, too.

"They won this one and that should pump them up, but remember it's eight elections to one, so it doesn't mean that much," he said. "The president's attitude was good. He accepted the defeat. You can't win them all."