

Venezuelan people score a victory

OUR OPINION: FOR THE MOMENT, VOTERS PUT A BRAKE ON CHAVEZ'S POPULISM

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A funny thing happened to Hugo Chávez on his way to transforming Venezuela into his personal hacienda -- he lost his magic touch with the electorate. Sunday's historic referendum marks the first time that voters have refused to go along with the president's populist design for Venezuela, but the wily Mr. Chávez won't give up easily. His pride has been wounded and his immediate plans ruined, but Venezuelans have a long way to go before reclaiming the democracy that Mr. Chávez has been dismantling for years.

Down but not out

Even with this rebuke, Mr. Chávez still wields awesome political power. He controls the armed forces, the Supreme Court and Congress. Twenty of 22 governors are *chavistas*. He is down but not out, and his grudging acceptance of the outcome of Sunday's referendum -- "for now" -- signals his determination to get his way, sooner or later.

Given a choice between dictatorship and democracy -- what's left of it -- Venezuelans edged back from the abyss. Voters in Chile did the same in 1988 when they said No in a plebescite to extend the dictatorial rule of Gen. Augusto Pinochet. Mr. Chávez, like Gen. Pinochet, misinterpreted the silence and indecision of large segments of the population as consent for his dictatorial intentions. He was wrong.

For the opposition, the lessons of this vote are clear enough. First, the strategy of boycotting the vote, as some Chávez critics counseled, is no strategy at all. He who forfeits, loses. No amount of post-electoral sophistry can change that.

Second, a united opposition -- in this case, united by rejection of Mr. Chávez's self-serving scheme -- is a strong opposition. Third, the political courage of students who refused to go along with Mr. Chávez emboldened a large segment of the population to come out and vote No -- and it will take similar courage to stay the course.

Sunday's vote marks the first time that Venezuela's opposition has had reason to hope that the country's headlong slide into dictatorship is not irreversible. That alone should instill a measure of hope into Mr. Chávez's many critics and those who have been standing on the sidelines looking for a sign that their political involvement can still make a difference.

Aura of invincibility

They should take heart. Mr. Chávez has lost his aura of invincibility. Venezuela's destiny will be decided by all of its people, not just one. One of the basic rules of democracy is generally attributed to Abraham Lincoln: You cannot fool all of the

people all of the time. Hugo Chávez forgot that, but next time he no doubt will try harder. For the moment, however, the people of Venezuela have slowed down his populist project. The victory belongs to them.