

The Media's Response to the Venezuelan Elections

One-sided, distorted and inaccurate reporting

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On November 23, Venezuela held regional and local elections for governors, mayors and other municipal offices. Over 5000 candidates contested in 603 races for 22 state governors, 328 mayors, 233 state legislative council members, 13 Caracas Metropolitan area council members, and seven others for the Alto Apure District Council.

As mandated under Article 56 of the Bolivarian Constitution: "All persons have the right to be registered (to vote) free of charge with the Civil Registry Office after birth, and to obtain public documents constituting evidence of the biological identity, in accordance with the law."

It's a constitutional mandate to let all Venezuelans vote. Once registered, none are purged from the rolls, obstructed, or prevented from having their vote count like so often happens in America. In Venezuela, democracy works.

In 2003, Hugo Chavez undertook a major successful initiative called *Mision Identidad* (Mission Identity) to implement the law. Prior to it in 2000, 11 million Venezuelans were registered to vote. By September 2006, it was 16 million, and now it's 16.8 million in a country of 27 million people.

How the Process Works

The electoral process is administered by the National Electoral Council (CNE). Unlike America's privatized system, it's an independent body, separate from the Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches of government or any private corporate interests. It's comprised of 11 members of the National Assembly and 10 representatives of civil society, none of whom are appointed by the President.

Elections are conducted using Smartmatic touchscreen electronic voting machines with verifiable paper ballot receipts. Voters can thus check to confirm their votes and their accuracy. The CNE then saves them as a permanent record to be used in case a recount is needed. It also requires voters to leave an electronic thumbprint to assure no one votes more than once.

The machines work as intended, and, after the 2006 election, the Carter Center said: based on its observations, Venezuela's "automated machines worked well and the voting results do reflect the will of the people." Further earlier independent studies verified the same thing, including ones carried out by vote-process experts at the University of California Berkeley, Johns Hopkins, Stanford and elsewhere.

In design, great care was taken to eliminate the possibility of tampering. It required a special technology that split the security codes into four parts. As a result, numerous voting security reports endorse the process they say makes Venezuelan machines the most advanced and accurate in the world.

On November 23, CNE president Tibisay Lucena said voters turned out in unprecedented numbers at 65.45%, the largest ever total for a regional election. The people spoke and registered a resounding, but not one-sided, victory for Hugo Chavez's United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) candidates – and sent a message. They affirmed the success of Bolivarianism and want it continued.

As the Venezuela Information Office reported, PSUV candidates won 77% of governorships (17 of 22), 81% of mayoral offices, 77% of all contests, and 58% of the popular vote – an impressive result by any standard anywhere in an election that 134 independent observers from 54 countries (from America, Europe, Asia, Africa and the 34-member country Organization of American States – OAS) judged open, free, fair, and efficient like all others under Chavez. OAS secretary general Jose Miguel Insulza called this one “peaceful and exemplary” and described it as a powerful expression of democratic maturity and the trust Venezuelans have in it under Chavez.

Other observer comments were as follows:

— Colombia's CNE representative, Joaquin Vives, called Venezuela's electoral process “a pioneer in the world (and added) Many things dazzled us” about it, such as voters “great desire to construct democracy in Venezuela;”

— Greek legislator Sofia Sakorafa called the process “one that expresses the will of the people and is characterized by a commitment to social and political inclusion;”

— Costa Rica's Maria Elena Salazar said the election was “beautiful, participative, of which all Latin Americans should be proud;” and

— Anthony Gonzales from America admired well-equipped and secured voting centers and that the election was held on a weekend to make it easier for working people.

Long-time Latin American expert James Petras commented on the significance of the victory:

— few European, North or South American parties have as high a level of support as the PSUV; certainly none in the United States in particular where growing numbers of voters have little faith in a deeply corrupted process;

— the PSUV is popular “in the context of several radical economic measures, including the nationalization of major cement, steel, financial and other private capitalist monopolies;” even so, business in Venezuela remains strong (though slowing) at a time of a global economic crisis;

— the PSUV won in spite of declining oil prices; fluctuating around \$50 a barrel, they're down about two-thirds from their peak price; even so, “the government maintained most of its funding for its social programs” and intends to continue doing it – in contrast to America where social programs have eroded for years and show no signs of revitalization under either party;

— the electorate was selective in its voting choices – “rewarding candidates who performed adequately in providing government services and punishing those who ignored or were unresponsive to popular demands;”

— most important: “the decisive (PSUV) victory provides the basis for confronting the deepening collapse of world capitalism with (impressive and workable) socialist measures;” compare them to the looting of the US Treasury to reward criminal bankers for their malfeasance and failures; the differences between both countries are dramatic and breathtaking – democratically impressive (though not perfect) in Venezuela compared to criminally corrupted under either party in America; no one dares mention this in the corporate media.

In the election’s aftermath, Petras explained that “most Venezuelan firms are heavily indebted to the state and local banks.” Chavez can ask them “to repay their debts or hand over the keys (and be able to bring) about a painless and eminently legal transition to socialism.” It remains to be seen if he’ll do it to advance his socialism of the 21st century – or perhaps remain defensive, proceed cautiously, and fail to take advantage of an important opportunity.

Responses from the Dominant Media

With some exceptions, it’s been pretty much as expected – one-sided, distorted, inaccurate, and not at all reflecting the will of Venezuelans and their impressive support for Chavez and Bolivarianism.

For example, The New York Times in a November 25 editorial headlined: “Hugo Chavez’s Choice.” After he took office in February 1999, The Times kept up a steady attack against him in editorials and commentaries. Here it states: Hugo Chavez “is not feeling the love. Collapsing oil prices have sharply curtailed his ability to ‘buy’ public sympathies,” and after Barack Obama’s election he no longer has “a convenient foe.”

Sunday’s elections “showed just how fed up (Venezuelans) are with his government’s ‘authoritarianism and incompetence’ by rejecting the president’s allies in significant races.” Even by Times standards, these comments are way over the top and mirror opposite of the facts.

The Times continues: “Mr. Chavez did pretty much everything he could to skew the elections. His government increased public spending by 60 percent in the last year.” Of course, he’s always used the nation’s wealth for his people and not as handouts to the rich like in America.

“A government watchdog (also) disqualified many opposition candidates,” but The Times omitted saying that the Venezuelan Supreme Court (YSJ) barred them because of corruption, misuse of public funds, and convictions of these offenses. The Times called them “bogus.”

It then exaggerated Sunday’s results, suggested Chavez’s popular support is waning, referred to his “rejected (December) power-grabbing constitutional reform,” and stated “Venezuelans don’t want to give Mr. Chavez even more power. He should heed the message (and) accept democratic limits to his rule.” Unstated was:

— Chavez’s popular support at over 60% compared to George Bush scoring lowest ever for a

US president at around 20%;

- the nation's impressive social democracy;
- the kind few other nations have;
- the type absent in America;
- the kind Venezuelans never before had and cherish; and
- are committed never to give up.

Simon Romero is The Times man in Caracas where his reporting is mediocre and inaccurate. His November 24 article was typical. It's headlined: "Chavez Supporters Suffer Defeat in State and Municipal Races" in which he refers to their "stinging defeat in several state and municipal races." Unnoticed were all the victories and how impressively they were won.

Instead Romero noted "festering discontent" and how "celebratory fireworks went off over parts of (Caracas) after the results were announced." Perhaps so but mostly for Chavez and his PSUV.

Romero preferred to quote Caracas opposition mayoral winner, Antonio Ledezma, saying "Those who should feel defeated are the criminals." An urban Caracas Petare carpenter as well being "tired of Chavez treating the entire country as if it were his military barracks."

Well into his article, Romero had to say that "Voting unfolded without reports of major irregularities" but ignored the fact that few at all occurred and they were minor. He also admitted that pro-Chavez candidates won 17 of 22 states but added sour grapes about some being small "in terms of population."

On the same day, Romero wrote another commentary headlined: "Once Considered Invincible, Chavez Takes a Blow" with as many inaccuracies as the above one. He referred to "many of (Chavez's) supporters desert(ing) him....in areas where he was once thought invincible," but had to admit the results might not "slow his Socialist-inspired revolution or check his power." Why should it when most Venezuelans want it.

He repeated much from his other article, added a few inaccurate quotes (like it's a "myth" to believe "only Chavez can be a champion of the poor"), omitted the most important facts, but again admitted the obvious - that "Mr. Chavez remains by far the dominant and most popular figure in Venezuelan politics," and the election results showed it.

Even so, Romero downplayed his victory and said Chavez candidates won mostly in largely rural states. He quoted economist Luis Pedro Espana, director of the Economic and Social Research Institute at Venezuela's Andres Bello Catholic University, stating: "The more modern part of the country wants political change." What he means, but didn't say, is the more affluent part, now forced to share some of the nation's wealth with its least advantaged and most in need people - the great majority who support Chavez overwhelmingly.

On November 25, the Wall Street Journal was extremely hostile in two post-election articles - one on the results and another feature story headlined: "Chavez Lets Colombian Rebels Wield Power Inside Venezuela." It reeks of inaccuracies, uses Washington and the

Colombian military as its sources, and claims that Chavez is providing a growing “safe haven” for FARC-EP and ELN “guerrillas.”

Unreported was anything about Chavez’s Colombian peace intervention and his successful efforts to arrange FARC-EP held hostage releases – in spite of Washington and Colombia’s president Uribe conspiring to prevent it.

Journal writer Jose de Cordoba accused the Venezuelan military and police of “turning a blind eye to guerrilla activity, and at times cooperating in areas including the trafficking of arms and cocaine.” This and other anti-Chavez agitprop show up often in Journal commentaries, but this time in far more detail compared to much less said about the election results.

That was in a page six article headlined: “Chavez Base Rebukes Him at Polls.” Writer John Lyon referred to Chavez’s “dual ambitions – to stay in power for life and wield outsize influence on the global stage.” He added how “the very people that brought him to power” rebuked him: “the urban poor.”

Like The Times, the article reeked with inaccuracies that are increasingly common on both the Journal’s op-ed and news pages. Lyon suggests trouble for Chavez with his electoral “setbacks add(ing) to a list of growing problems that are likely to slow his swagger.” For example, falling oil prices that may crimp his “checkbook diplomacy that has won him allies outside his borders....”

He also compared him to Fidel Castro, referred to his “foreign adventures....backfir(ing) amid the global financial crisis,” and said his base is “dwindling” at a time it’s impressively strong. He quoted opposition candidate Antonio Ledezma (as did Romero) saying “Now is the time for true change” by which he means ending Bolivarianism, its social democracy, returning power to the privileged oligarchs, and throwing most Venezuelans back into deep poverty. Lyon apparently approves and quotes a leading opposition newspaper, Tal Cual, headlining: “We hit him where it hurts.” For the past 10 years, the Venezuelan people have had the last word.

The Washington Post was just as hostile in a November 25 editorial headlined “How to Beat Mr. Chavez” and his “Cuban-style socialist regime.” It called him “Venezuela’s strongman (and) caudillo” and over-hyped Sunday’s results much the way the Journal and Times did it. It added that Chavez “shows no sign that he is listening to the country,” and post-election said the voters’ message was to “continue down the same road.” Indeed it was and will be.

According to the Post, “the opposition now has an opportunity to show that it can offer a workable alternative to Mr. Chavez’s policies.” Unmentioned was that they had generations to “show” it, failed dismally, Venezuelans overwhelmingly reject them, and want no part of their kind of “change.”

With its large anti-Castro population, Miami is a hotbed of anti-Chavismo, and the Miami Herald reflects it. Post-election, it headlined “Despite foes’ gains, Hugo Chavez will try to get another term in Venezuela.” It referred to state and local elections “slow(ing) his grand ambitions to yank Venezuela and Latin America to the left” but not enough to stop him according to unnamed analysts.

It suggested an upcoming “titanic battle” as Chavez is expected to hold a national plebiscite

next year “that would allow him to campaign for an additional six-year presidential term in 2012.” It quoted pollster Luis Vincente Leon of Datanalysis, who publicly called for Chavez’s assassination, saying: “He wants to change the constitution to run again. There’s no doubt about that,” but again unsaid is what the people want. Chavez wants them to choose and like always will honor their will.

On November 23, the far right Washington Times headlined a John Thomson commentary on “Chavez’s fraud game” and referred to “The kinds and extent of fraud already being applied by the Venezuelan government to crucial elections today.” He called them “unprecedented (and) unmitigated electoral larceny (and) Venezuela’s pilfer process starts well before the day the votes are cast and counted.”

In an age of breathtaking anti-Chavez agitprop, this comment takes the cake or at least matches the worst of it. Thomson called the “fraud potential” on election day “staggering” and listed a menu of absurdities and rubbish ranging from “jumbled” voting lists to “rigged” voting machines, and “manipulation” of results.

It’s much like Journal writer Mary O’Grady’s agitprop – her latest on November 17 in a commentary headlined: “Dodd’s Democrat Tightens His Grip.” Dodd, of course, is Senator Chris Dodd, and her article is about Venezuela’s election, the country’s “numerous setbacks for democracy,” and the chance Venezuelans have to “rid themselves of Mr. Chavez.”

She refers to his “authoritarian powers....deteriorating living standards (and) the widespread assumption that the government will use tricks to win” on November 23. “Venezuelans saw this coming. From his earliest days as president in 1999, Mr. Chavez began working to destroy any checks on his power.”

She attacked Chris Dodd for “throw(ing) a fit over Mr. Chavez’s (48-hour) removal” in April 2002. “This self-styled Latin American expert (referred to) a US-backed coup and insisted that since Mr. Chavez (was) democratically elected in a fair vote” no one should question his legitimacy.

“Of course it wasn’t a coup,” according to O’Grady, as she questions the “circumstances (of his) political resurrection,” again called him a “strongman,” warned earlier about his budding “dictatorship,” and now says her view about him is accurate.

“Political prisoners are rotting in Venezuelan jails without trials. Being identified as a political opponent of the revolution is a ticket to the end of the unemployment line. Private property has zero protection under the law and the economy’s private sector has been all but destroyed....(and Chavez) has made it clear he will not accept defeat at the polls.”

Breathtaking hardly describes this rant. It’s mirror opposite the truth. Venezuela’s social democracy is unimaginable in America, and one reason why O’Grady and others vilify it. It’s also why they reported inaccurately on Sunday’s election.

A Sane Voice in the Wilderness

On November 22, the London Independent published “Letters: In praise of Hugo Chavez.” One confronted Latin American writer Phil Gunson’s “bleak picture” of Venezuela in his article titled: “Tough-talking Chavez faces rising dissent.” It was grossly inaccurate, mentioned the usual kinds of criticisms, and pretty much read like the US and Venezuelan corporate media agitprop.

The writer asked: If Gunson is right, “why are President Chavez’s approval ratings at 58%, as he reports.” He doesn’t mention “how (his) government has delivered free healthcare to millions of people for the first time, eradicated illiteracy and used the country’s best economic performance for decades to halve the poverty levels.”

Suggesting that poll results may trigger a “violent reaction....turn(s) reality on its head. It was the Chavez government itself that was briefly the victim of an opposition-led military coup in 2002. In contrast, (his) government has showed a consistent commitment to democracy....Moreover, last week the respected Latinbarametro survey showed that Venezuela is now the country with the greatest support for democracy in Latin America and the region’s second-most satisfied with the functioning of its democracy. Venezuela’s combination of democracy and social progress under Chavez has inspired widespread support.”

It’s signed by Colin Burgon, MP, Chair, Labour Friends of Venezuela group of MPs, House of Commons. He adds more as well, and the Independent published it. It’s unlike major US broadsheets that cover Chavez one way – with venomous inaccuracy and very rare exceptions that hardly draw notice.

The Venezuela Information Office reviewed the election in detail, and it’s summarized below as follows:

- for a regional election, voter turnout was unprecedented at over 65%;
- independent observers judged the process open, free, fair and efficient and according to OAS secretary general Insulza “peaceful and exemplary;”
- PSUV candidates won impressive victories, far exceeding the opposition;
- pro-government candidates gained a large majority of offices throughout the country – for governors, mayors and other posts;
- like for the past decade, most Venezuelans will continue to live under pro-Chavez regional and local leaders because they want them;
- the PSUV scored important victories in strategic areas of the country, but not all of them;
- pro-government candidates won by wide margins affirming Venezuelans faith in Bolivarianism;
- although the metropolitan Caracas mayoralty went to the opposition, residents of the largest city municipality voted for the PSUV;
- even in states won by the opposition, key municipalities went to the PSUV; and
- Venezuela’s Electoral Authority (CNE) handled the record voter turnout impressively.

The Wall Street Journal, New York Times and other publications falsely reported that a majority of the population is under opposition control. Official statistics show otherwise but were ignored.

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