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Elections in Venezuela

October 7 Presidential Elections

Frequently Asked Questions

Latin America and the Caribbean

International Foundation for Electoral Systems

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When are elections in Venezuela?

As established in the 1999 Constitution of Venezuela, presidential elections are to be held every six years. As approved in 2009, the incumbent president is not term limited.

This year, elections in Venezuela will be held on October 7; subsequently, the incumbent can be re-elected an unlimited number of times. Previously, the 1961 constitution limited presidential tenure to five-year terms and barred consecutive terms in office.

Who will Venezuelans elect in the 2012 Elections?

On October 7, Venezuelans who are eligible to vote will go to the polls to elect the next president. The president will be elected by a single majority vote.

When does the electoral process begin?

The National Electoral Council (*Consejo Nacional Electoral*, CNE) sets the date for the election with a public announcement called a *convocatoria*, or summons. This process is in accordance with the constitutional terms set by law. This year's *convocatoria* took place on March 29.

How is Venezuela organized politically?

Venezuela is a federal republic with five branches of government: the executive, legislative, judicial, citizen and electoral branches.

The executive branch is represented by the president, who is both the head of state and government. He or she is elected by simple plurality, or first-past-the-post vote, by direct and universal suffrage.

The legislative body, the General Assembly, or *Asamblea Nacional*, was originally a bicameral body under the 1961 constitution. It became a unicameral body of 165 members with the ratification of the 1999 constitution. Members are elected by popular vote, according to proportional representation, to serve five-year terms; three seats are reserved for indigenous persons.

The judiciary branch is headed by the Supreme Tribunal of Justice, or *Tribunal Supremo de Justicia*, which replaced the Supreme Court of Justice in 1999 after that year's constitutional referendum. The 32 magistrates who make up the judiciary are each elected by the National Assembly for a single, 12-year term.

The citizen branch is comprised of the Moral Republican Council, or *Consejo Moral Republicano*, which is made up of the comptroller general, the public defender (or ombudsman) and the attorney general.

The electoral branch, the National Electoral Council, or *Consejo Nacional Electoral*, is responsible for elections at all levels. It organizes and supervises everything related to the election of public officials through universal, direct and secret vote. Its members are elected to seven-year terms by the National Assembly.

What are the main political parties?

Venezuela has 10 main political parties:

1. United Socialist Party of Venezuela (*Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela*, PSUV)
2. Partido Primero Justice (*Justice First*, PJ)
3. Social Christian Party (*Partido Social Cristiano*, COPEI)
4. Democratic Action (*Acción Democrática*, AD)
5. Partido un Nuevo Tiempo, (*A New Time*, UNT)
6. Homeland for All (*Patria por Todos*, PPT)
7. Communist Party of Venezuela (*Partido Comunista de Venezuela*, PCV)
8. For Social Democracy (*Por la Democracia Social*, Podemos)
9. Movement Toward Socialism (*Movimiento al Socialismo*, MAS)
10. Project Venezuela (*Proyecto Venezuela*, PROVEN)

Justice First (*Primero Justicia*, PJ), through the opposition coalition *Mesa de Unidad* (MUD), has put forth the main contender to incumbent President Chávez's hopes for reelection, Governor Henrique Capriles Radonski.

Who is running for president?

The two main candidates for the presidency of Venezuela are:

Hugo Rafael Chávez Frias (Incumbent, 58): Representing the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (*Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela*, PSUV), Chávez first came onto the national stage after leading a failed 1992 coup d'état. He then ran for president in 1998 as an alternative to the established ruling parties, Democratic Action (AD) and the Social Christian Party (COPEI), which both supported Henrique Salas Romer, his opponent.

By espousing an agenda of radical change that appealed to the marginalized sectors of society, and offering a way out of the economic stagnation and insular politics of the times, Chávez won over Salas Romer. Since then, however, his tenure has been characterized by continuous reform, internal strife and the contentious growth of governmental control over the economy, media and civil society. Despite this, President Chávez has managed to hold on to power and survive referendums, a short-lived coup d'état, general labor strikes and resilient, albeit splintered, domestic and foreign opposition.

Henrique Capriles Radonski (39): Representing Justice First (*Primero Justicia*, PJ), a center-right party, Capriles Radonski represents a stark contrast to Chávez. He has been a chairman of the lower house of congress, mayor of the Baruta municipality of Caracas and governor of Miranda, one of the most densely populated states in Venezuela.

A moderate, Capriles Radonski is running a campaign focused on uniting the Venezuelan people and denouncing the president's so-called divisive politics, while criticizing the Chávez administration for high crime rates, food shortages, corruption, failure to deliver on promises and the president's control over most of government and civic life. As a candidate, Capriles Radonski has managed to bring the opposition together. His campaign aims to beat Chávez's political machine, which — funded by oil revenues and reveling in support from a large swath of the general population — remains strong. Despite Chávez's popularity, Capriles Radonski's perceived dynamism and youth have attracted many undecided voters, especially in view of the president's failing health.

Five more presidential candidates from other minor parties are also running.

How is election administration structured in Venezuela?

The 1999 constitution established the CNE as one of five branches of government and made it responsible for the oversight and authority of the country's electoral process. The constitution also granted the CNE administrative and financial autonomy from the other branches.

The CNE's main duties include drafting electoral laws; developing directives for campaign finance and publicity; doling out sanctions, as needed; nullifying elections or declaring them invalid; maintaining the civil registry; administering and organizing all acts pertaining to elections; and carrying out other duties as the law dictates.

The CNE is made up of five representatives said to be unaffiliated with any political entity. Three of them are nominated by civil society; one is nominated by the law and political science faculties at national universities; and one is nominated by the citizen branch. The final two representatives are elected by the National Assembly for seven-year terms.

Who will vote?

According to the electoral registry, 19,119,809 Venezuelans registered to vote in the October 7 election. Of that total, 99,478 are registered to vote abroad, with over 40,000 registered to vote in the Miami area and in Spain.

In order to register, voters must be citizens of Venezuela who are at least 18 years of age.

Can Venezuelans who reside abroad vote in the elections?

Yes. Venezuelans who have documentation proving legal residence outside the country, as well as personnel attached to embassies or consulates, have the right to vote abroad.

Is electoral observation allowed and regulated?

National electoral observation is allowed and regulated by Venezuelan electoral law. The Network for Electoral Observation, or *La Red de Observación Electoral*, is a non-profit organization made up of a group of independent professionals, academics and students that are observing the 2012 electoral process.

Official international observation missions are not allowed; however, electoral law does allow international accompaniment missions. Accompaniment missions can attend the electoral event either by invitation of the CNE or by requesting an invitation to the CNE. The Union of South American Nations and the Carter Center were the only international organizations invited to accompany the electoral process on October 7.

When will preliminary election results be released? When will the election results be final?

Citizen verification, or the official counting and auditing of the votes, takes place on Election Day, October 7. In past elections, preliminary, unofficial results were released on election night. The CNE then has 48 hours to announce a winner. According to the presidential election schedule (*Cronograma Elección Presidencial*) published by the CNE during this year's *convocatoria*, final results will be announced between October 7 and 8.