

## CRITICAL QUESTIONS

**Local Elections in Venezuela**

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**Q1: Local elections in Latin America don't usually draw much attention. Why are the elections in Venezuela important?**

**A1:** The state and municipal elections taking place on November 23 have significant national importance. At stake are 22 state governorships, mayors in 328 municipalities, including the key capital district of Caracas, and 233 seats on state legislative councils. Beyond these positions, however, the election will be a test of strength between President Hugo Chávez and the opposition, including hitherto pro-Chávez forces that have left the government fold. This is the first election since the stinging defeat suffered by Chávez in December 2007 when his constitutional reform package, which included a provision allowing him to remain in power past the expiration of his present term in 2012, was voted down. Chávez has portrayed the elections as an all-out struggle between his Bolivarian revolution and the “counterrevolutionaries” who oppose him. A strong showing by pro-government candidates on November 23 would encourage him to press ahead with his political agenda, including another attempt to change the constitution to allow for his further reelection. Should his opponents do well, it would constitute a serious setback for Chávez as well as injecting greater dynamism into what has hitherto been a divided and ineffective opposition.

**Q2: What results are expected? What would constitute a good outcome for Chávez? For the opposition?**

**A2:** The opposition currently holds two governorships, the key state of Zulia and Nueva Esparta, with former *chavistas*, who since moved into the opposition, in control of Aragua and Sucre. In essence, therefore, the opposition improves by moving beyond four governorships while Chávez gains ground if that number is reduced. Victory by the opposition appears feasible in as many as eight or nine states, although it could claim to have made substantial progress if it takes five or six, especially if among them are the key states of Carabobo, Zulia, and Miranda in the central urban core of Venezuela and either of the important Andean states of Táchira and Mérida. The state of Miranda, bordering the capital district of Caracas, is a key battleground, pitting an important Chávez ally, Diosdado Cabello, against a well-known *anti-chavista*, Henrique Capriles. The race for mayor of Caracas, where the opposition faces an uphill battle, is also important. Another key measurement in analyzing the outcome in this election will be trends in the popular vote, both by local jurisdiction and overall.

**Q3: What is the environment for the elections?**

**A3:** The preelection environment is highly charged. In recent weeks, Chávez has threatened opposition leaders with arrest and, regarding the election in one key state, claimed that he is willing to “call out the tanks to defend the revolutionary government” should the opposition win. He has also warned that he will cut off funding to states and municipalities that elect “counterrevolutionaries.” Such statements appear to have strengthened the opposition in Zulia while hurting the chances of opposition candidates in other states. Earlier this year, in a move widely criticized as a political maneuver, Chávez’s comptroller general ruled that several-hundred public figures, most of them in the opposition, were not eligible to run for office, alleging corruption or administrative irregularities. Among them were two particularly prominent opposition leaders expected to do very well as candidates for mayor of Caracas and governor of the state of Miranda.

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