

Nov 04, 2016 by **Pamela Starr**

# **Lessons from the Venezuelan Plebiscite: A Democratic Image Makes for Good Public Diplomacy Strategy** <sup>[1]</sup>

It is by now well known that President Hugo Chavez failed to garner a majority vote in the December 1st plebiscite called to authorize 69 changes to the Venezuelan constitution. This surprising defeat, the first for Chavez since his 1998 election to the presidency, will undoubtedly force a bit of soul-searching in government circles and energize the opposition, even if it is unlikely to produce significant change in the country. It also raises questions about the source of this defeat and, most interestingly, about Chavez' decision not only to accept defeat but to spin it into a victory for Venezuelan democracy.

There are at least four reasons why Sunday's vote does not portend significant change in Venezuela. First, the constitutional reforms would have formalized a series of policies already in operation (eliminating Central Bank autonomy and promoting socialism in education, for example). These policies will persist regardless of the vote. Second, Chavez can use his power to rule by decree through mid-2008 or his party's dominance in the national legislature to implement many of the proposed changes. Third, Chavez is still Chavez. He is determined to transform Venezuela into what he calls a "Bolivarian Socialist" society and is unlikely to be deterred by this setback. To the contrary, following this electoral defeat he stated that "there will be no steps back; no retreat." Fourth, the opposition to Chavez is sharply divided and without clear leadership or direction. The victory of the "no" vote is not an insignificant achievement, but it is very different from uniting a coalition of actors whose only shared interest is their opposition to Chavez into a winning electoral coalition.

In the days following the election, the comments of journalists, pundits and political analysts identified the most likely causes of this outcome. The defeat seems to reflect a series of problems that have impacted Venezuela's poor, one of Chavez' core constituencies, particularly hard—strikingly high crime rates, annual inflation approaching 25%, and shortages of basic food products such as chicken, milk, and beans. One of the key pieces of evidence for this line of argument is the fact that the "no" vote won the day in three Caracas slums that have been bastions of support for President Chavez. Some have also pointed to the fact that Chavez himself was not on the ballot. Venezuelans, who are increasingly disappointed with the socio-economic conditions of their daily life yet continue to support Hugo Chavez and the dream of his "Bolivarian Revolution," are much more likely to express their discontent by voting against a proposal than voting against the man. Hence, Chavez easily won reelection to the Presidency a year ago yet his constitutional reforms narrowly went down to defeat on Sunday.

Absent from the coverage of the December 1st election, however, is an analysis of why Chavez not only accepted his defeat but used it to counter international accusations that his government is increasingly anti-democratic and that approval of the proposed constitutional reforms would have completed the transition to an authoritarian regime. The Chavez government and its international allies spoke with one voice the day after the election: the defeat proves that Venezuela continues to be a democracy. In Chavez' words, "now Venezuelans should trust our [democratic] institutions." In the words of a Chavez biographer, "dictators do not accept defeats."

This post-election spin control reflects the continuing popularity of democracy in the Americas. Despite evident and growing disappointment with the performance of democratic government throughout the hemisphere, support for democracy as a system of government remains overwhelming. In the most recent Latin Barometer poll, 72% of Latin Americans—and 83% of Venezuelans—agreed that democracy is better than any other system of government. Appearing to be a democrat is thus good politics for Chavez, both at home and abroad. It is not surprising, therefore, that Chavez' opposition tried to undermine this spin strategy by arguing that Chavez honored the election results only under pressure from the military. Nor is it surprising that Chavez has repeatedly accused the U.S. government of trying to overthrow his democratically-elected government and of using the "promotion of democracy" as a cover to overthrow other unfriendly governments. This week's events in Venezuela are thus a potent reminder of the continuing utility of a credible democratic image as the foundation for effective public diplomacy in the Americas.

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