

Why I'd Rather Cast a Ballot in Venezuela than Canada or the USA

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Friday, December 07, 2007

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With Canada's 19th-century first past the post electoral system and the USA's rampant electoral fraud and conflicts of interest, voting in Venezuela seems like a tonic.

And in Venezuela's recent referendum on political change that failed by roughly the same infinitesimal vote as Quebec's referendum failed a decade or so ago, the North American media cabal is decrying it a triumphant victory for freedom fighters.

Despite that hyperbole, Venezuela's democracy receives most of my envy. Why?

Here's why:

Venezuela is Not Florida

By Mark Weisbrot

December 5, 2007, McClatchy Tribune Information Services

Last Monday, with less than 90 percent of the vote counted and the opposition leading by just 50.7 percent to 49.3 percent, President Chavez congratulated his opponents on their victory. They had defeated his proposed constitutional reforms, including the abolition of term limits for the presidency.

No one should have been surprised by Chavez's immediate concession: Venezuela is a constitutional democracy, and its government has stuck to the democratic rules of the game since he was first elected in 1998. Despite the non-renewal of the broadcast license for a major TV station in May – one that wouldn't have gotten a license in any democratic country – Venezuela still has the most oppositional media in the hemisphere. But the U.S. media has managed to convey the impression to most Americans that Venezuela is some sort of dictatorship or near-dictatorship.

Some of this disinformation takes place through mere repetition and association (e.g. "communist Cuba" appearing in thousands of news reports) -- just as 70 percent of Americans were convinced, prior to the Iraq war, that Saddam Hussein was responsible for the massacres of September 11. In that case, the major media didn't even believe the message, but somehow it got across and provided justification for the war.

In the case of Venezuela, the media is more pro-active, with lots of grossly exaggerated editorials and op-eds, news articles that sometimes read like editorials, and a general lack of balance in sources and subject matter.

But Venezuela is not Pakistan. In fact, it's not Florida or Ohio either. One reason that Chavez could be

confident of the vote count is that Venezuela has a very secure voting system. This is very different from the United States, where millions of citizens cast electronic votes with no paper record. Venezuelan voters mark their choice on a touch-screen machine, which then records the vote and prints out a paper receipt for the voter. The voter then deposits the vote in a ballot box. An extremely large random sample – about 54 percent – of the paper ballots are counted and compared with the electronic tally.

If the two counts match, then that is a pretty solid guarantee against electronic fraud. Any such fraud would have to rig the machines and stuff the ballot boxes to match them – a trick that strains the imagination.

In 2007, Venezuelans once again came in second for all of Latin America in the percentage of citizens who are satisfied or very satisfied with their democracy, according to the prestigious Chilean polling firm Latinobarometro – 59 percent, far above the Latin American average of 37 percent.

It is not only the secure elections that are responsible for this result – it is also that the government has delivered on its promises to share the nation's oil wealth with the poor and the majority. For most people – unlike the pundits here – voting for something and actually getting what you voted for are also an important part of democracy.

The Bush Administration has consistently sought regime change in Venezuela, even before Chavez began regularly denouncing "the Empire." According to the U.S. State Department, Washington funded leaders and organizations involved in the coup which briefly overthrew Chavez's democratically elected government in April 2002. The Washington Post reported this week that the Bush Administration has been funding unnamed student groups, presumably opposition, up to and including this year.

Venezuela must be seen as undemocratic, and Chavez as the aggressor against the United States, in order to justify the Bush Administration's objective of regime change. As in the run-up to the Iraq war, most of the major media are advancing the Administration's goals, regardless of the intentions of individual journalists.

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