

[What Are Capriles' Chances of Defeating Chavez in October?](#)

TheDialogue.org

Feb. 27, 2012

FEATURED Q&A

What Are Capriles' Chances of Defeating Chávez in October?

Q Venezuelan opposition leader Henrique Capriles Radonski handily won the Feb. 12 primary with 62 percent of the vote and is set to face President Hugo Chávez in the country's Oct. 7 presidential elections. What are Capriles' chances of unseating Chávez, whose popularity rankings have been above 50 percent lately? What will be the most important issues of the race? Is the election likely to be free and fair? Would there be a peaceful transfer of power if Capriles wins?

A Daniel Hellinger, professor of political science at Webster University in St. Louis: "The primary turnout justifies some optimism on Capriles' part, but a post-primary poll by a respected company (IVAD) put Chávez way ahead, with 57 percent of respondents saying they would vote for him. Still, polls can be unreliable in polarized societies, and it's not clear how new doubts about Chávez's health will affect preferences. The National Electoral Council is highly professional; the balloting will be fairly conducted. The campaign is another matter. Most of the private media and Washington's 'democracy promotion' apparatus will fight for Capriles, while Chávez will use and abuse the resources of the state to sway the vote. If Chávez loses, I think he will respect the outcome because a coup or obvious fraud would delegitimize him at home and throughout Latin America. But that's the

beginning, not the end of the uncertainty. Capriles can channel Brazil's Lula in the campaign and promise a social democratic program, but as president he would have to face enormous pressure to dismantle the Bolivarian regime altogether. Consider, for example, Barrio Adentro, the popular health program. The Venezuelan medical establishment, and much of the professional class, will want to send Cuban health care workers home immediately. Can Capriles resist? If not, how would he respond to street protests led by Chávez

Continued on page 3



Europe Can Learn Lessons From Latin America: Calderón

Europe can learn lessons from Latin America's economic experience, Mexican President Felipe Calderón and other Mexican officials said over the weekend as the country hosted a summit of G-20 finance officials. See story on page 2.

File Photo: Mexican Government.

Featured Q&A

Continued from page 1

himself? If Chávez wins, how does the realization of impending mortality affect his decisions? The election is important, but the actual moment of reckoning is likely to come after the votes are tabulated and an oath of office administered."

A Jennifer McCoy, director the Carter Center's Americas Program and observer of the primary elections at the invitation of the opposition Coalition for Democratic Unity: "Along with Mexico and the United States, this will be the most exciting race to watch in 2012. I expect it will be extremely competitive, but the wildcard of President Chávez's health throws a high dose of uncertainty into the election. Confidence in the automated voting system and the National Electoral Council has recovered since 2004, reflected in the unexpectedly high primary turnout and in public opinion polls showing 70 percent confidence. The opposition has a new confidence, reflected both by voters I spoke with on Feb. 12, and by an unprecedented unity among the parties. Even more important, the primaries represent a learning process and maturation of Venezuela's opposition leaders that has been building since Manuel Rosales accepted his defeat in the 2006 presidential elections, which allowed the emergence of a new generation of politicians—a development that has long been resisted by Venezuelan political leaders. The victory of candidates promoting a message of reconciliation and continuity of progressive social programs over those with a message of confrontation, capitalism and even revenge (who together earned less than 5 percent of the vote) gives hope for

Venezuelans to find a way out of the devastating divisions of the last decade. Capriles' task will be to keep the opposition united and to reassure Chavista supporters that he will protect the gains of the revolution. Meanwhile, Chávez will try to buoy turn-out of his supporters with high public spending and promised benefits, and repress opposition turn-out with intimations of ungovernability should Capriles win."

A John Walsh, senior associate for Drug Policy and the Andes at the Washington Office on Latin America: "Fresh doubts about President Chávez's health highlight this campaign season's unpredictability. The incumbent's aura of invincibility is gone, suggesting a hard-fought race that either candidate can win. Should Chávez succumb to his ill-

“ Henrique Capriles Radonski is already the most formidable opponent Chávez has faced. ”

— *John Walsh*

ness or become incapacitated, the uncertainties would multiply. Henrique Capriles Radonski is already the most formidable opponent Chávez has faced. Based on his record as governor of Miranda and his avoidance of confrontational politics, Capriles was the front-runner going into the Feb. 12 primaries. He was boosted by his wide margin of

Continued on page 4

Featured Q&A

Continued from page 3

victory amidst higher-than-anticipated turnout. Most Venezuelans regard the primaries as a success, and most Venezuelans see Capriles as a plausible option for president. Confidence in Chávez is lower than in 2006, when he last won office, but still hovers around 50 percent. Bolstered by high oil prices, Chávez will have money to spend, and he will do his utmost to convince lower-income voters that Capriles is intent on turning back the clock on the gains achieved during his presidency. For his part, Capriles must persuade voters that he will improve rather than dismantle popular social programs and tackle problems that Chávez has not, including crime and violence. Capriles is under no illusion that he competes on a level playing field. But the opposition has learned that it can win elections. Venezuelans' strong belief in electoral democracy makes it highly unlikely that Chávez would risk his own legitimacy and legacy by acting to thwart Capriles from taking power should the challenger prevail on Oct. 7."

A **David Smilde, associate professor of sociology at the University of Georgia:** "The opposition will try to make crime and violence the main issue. This is a logical strategy since polls show it is citizens' number one concern by a wide margin. However, it has never been a successful issue in the past and won't be this time either. La inseguridad was already the number one concern before Hugo Chávez became president and people tend to blame it on 'the people' or the breakdown of the family. Put differently, for the average Venezuelan, crime and violence are not seen as issues of public policy in the same way as the economy and infrastructure. The election will most likely be decided on the economy and Chávez's health. The National Electoral Council (CNE) has proven that it can run a clean election day. They presided over the Chávez government's razor-thin loss

in the 2007 constitutional referendum as well as its unexpectedly poor showing in the 2010 legislative elections. However, it has not demonstrated the capacity to control the government during the cam-

“The election will most likely be decided on the economy and Chávez's health.”

— *David Smilde*

paign. The use of state institutions for campaign purposes often reaches grotesque levels. And the opposition frequently has trouble getting the CNE to approve its campaign ads in a timely fashion. Two elements will add pressure to the CNE this time around. First, the very continuity of the revolutionary process is at stake in a way it wasn't in the electoral losses of 2007 and 2010, and it is unclear that all pro-government sectors will be willing to relinquish power. But Chávez himself has shown a realist side before. It was he who called for an end to the coup attempt in 1992 when it was clear that it had failed. And he was willing to be arrested rather than cause bloodshed during the 2002 coup. Second, there are no plans to invite independent and expert international observation. This would be crucial to getting the opposition to recognize a Chávez win, especially if it is by a narrow margin. It was international observation that made the government's win in the 2004 referendum credible despite the opposition's claims of fraud."

The Advisor welcomes reactions to the Q&A above. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at gkuleta@thedialogue.org with comments.