

VENEZUELAN PRESIDENTIAL RACE WIDE OPEN

- **Chavez Faces Serious Challenge Next Sunday**
- **Massive rallies respond to calls from the opposition**

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Most independent polls show a tie or challenger Rosales ahead of incumbent Chavez

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A week ahead of Sunday's crucial Venezuelan Presidential election, many serious surveys – international and national– either show the race as being a tie or have opposition candidate Manuel Rosales ahead; these surveys report fiery President Hugo Chavez' support as waning and Rosales as surging quickly and starting to pull away from the incumbent President.

Enormous rallies all around the country in favour of Rosales seem to bear out this surprising scenario, unpredictable as little as three months ago. Three opposition rallies in Caracas just in the last month have drawn huge crowds, estimated in the hundreds of thousands, with last Saturday's estimated at just under a million people, despite numerous obstacles placed in the hours before the event on traffic travelling to Caracas on roads and highways. During that same period, and despite intense campaigning and constant forced appearances on national radio and TV, Mr. Chavez has been increasingly hard-pressed to draw similar crowds, and independent estimates put at 225,000 people last Sunday's closing event in Caracas, most of them bussed in from around the country.

Two weeks ago, respected American pollsters ***Penn Schoen & Berland*** reported Chavez with 48% of the electorate and Rosales with 42%, but with Chavez trending downward and Rosales surging, thus predicting a Rosales victory on December 3rd. In his presentation of the survey results, company President Douglas Schoen described that respondents were approached on the street and handed printed questionnaires which were filled in and returned in a way that guaranteed the person's anonymity. In explaining this system, Schoen described a "fear factor" that had appeared for the first time in Venezuela, and that could seriously distort results if not countered. Mr. Schoen asserts that this fear factor is not present in Chavez backers, but only in opposition voters.

Gaither International conducted a poll in the first half of November, showing Chavez at 52% and Rosales at 44.3%, but again with Chavez falling fast and Rosales surging. The company also reported that many voters considered they could be victims of government reprisals if their leaning towards Mr. Rosales were known.

The ***Hannah Arndt Observatory*** places the election at a dead heat, again emphasizing that their pollsters had to overcome an important fear factor in order to weed out an approximation to the truth of what Venezuelans citizens really are thinking.

Respected pollsters **Survey Fast** –whose main clients are within the Venezuelan banking community– have Mr. Chavez leading with 49%, followed closely by Mr. Rosales with 47.6%, with Chavez falling fast and Rosales surging, and predicts a Rosales victory five percentage points or more.

Highly respected pollster **AKSA Partners** reported at the beginning of this month that Hugo Chavez' support was down from 65% two months ago to 52%, with Rosales at 48% and rising. Mr. Chavez' hard-line support was down 9 points to 22% and falling, while Rosales' was 29% and growing, predicting that a Rosales victory on December 3rd was very possible.

CE.CA., another respected pollster, reported last week that their polls show Rosales ahead for the first time, at 45.8%, with Chavez trailing at 35.3%. Once again, as in all of the previous polls, fear has been found to be a major factor hindering the freedom of expression by Venezuelans.

Contrasting with these poll results are those of four polls recently unveiled which show Chavez with a surprisingly large lead, anywhere between 20 and 32 percentage points: **Zogby International**, **Evans-McDonough**, one reportedly authored by Madrid's **Complutense University**, and **AP-Ipsos**. All of these polls have been loudly celebrated by the Chavez campaign, but have become the focus of intense scrutiny and criticism for different reasons.

The poll by **Zogby International**, a firm run by John and James Zogby, is suspect because of partner James Zogby's high-profile political inclinations. He participated two years ago in a forum to discuss, among other areas, the "defense" of the Chavez regime, and the brothers have been identified usually with extreme issues: John Zogby signed a New York Times advertisement on March 13, 1988, calling for the end of aid to "Apartheid Israel", and proposing "*dismantling the apartheid state and replacing it with a democratic secular Palestine.*" Interestingly, Chavez recently retired his ambassador to Israel in protest for the recent war in southern Lebanon. To date, Zogby has not revealed who paid for the Venezuelan poll.

Evans-McDonough's pollsters did reveal who paid for their survey: **PDVSA**, Venezuela's state oil company, where last month its president gave an infamous speech warning his workers that the whole institution was pro-Chavez, that they were "red, red" (Chavez party colours) and that anybody who wasn't in agreement should leave or be literally kicked out.

Regarding these two polls, *Investors Business Daily* had this to say:

"...the Venezuelan government seems to be sponsoring pro-Chavez polls of dubious merit. One is from Zogby, which gave Chavez an odd double-digit lead over Rosales but refused to say who paid for it. Now there's a new one by a San Francisco pollster, Evans-McDonough, which claims Chavez is 22 points ahead of Rosales, countering other polls. ...Evans-McDonough has been in the pay of Venezuela's government in the past. The San Francisco Chronicle profiled it two years ago as a Chavez supporter."

Madrid's **Complutense University** distanced themselves from the survey that was supposedly theirs, saying only that one of their professors, **Carolina Bescansa**, was involved. Ms. Bescansa was recently hired by the Venezuelan government to do an investigation on "health and drugs". An investigation has turned up that the person who

ordered and paid for the survey is **Roberto Viciano-Pastor**, a member of the Spanish Communist Party who was under hire as a personal advisor to Mr. Chavez in the critical two-year period between 1999 and 2000, when the constitutional assembly forged and put into effect Venezuela's present constitution.

The **Associated Press-Ipsos** poll is the most curious one of all, presenting the race as a blow-out with Chavez at 59% and Rosales at a lowly 27%. William H. Klemme, in his article *Fear Factor Biases Associated Press Poll in Venezuela*, reports that the AP-IPSOS poll was based on face-to-face interviews in people's homes, differentiating it from the Penn, Schoen and Berland poll method. According to investigator Per Kurowski, once inside the person's home, Ipsos asked a very detailed and strange series of questions about Chavez government projects, asking which ones they knew, which ones had benefited them or their families or friends, and which they considered the most valuable. Immediately after, Ipsos asked who he would be voting for.

This line of questioning, within the person's own home, has put Ipsos under attack, because of the fear factor surrounding the elections. It becomes even more incomprehensible when one finds that according to that very same poll, 71% of those who answered responded that they were concerned about reprisals against their political inclinations.

While Chavez and his supporters point to favourable surveys as proof of the President's popularity, Rosales and his supporters point to the streets to prove that the other polls are the ones that truly reflect the political scenario around the country.

At the end of the day, in a country where the electoral system is highly suspect those men and women in the streets may actually turn out to be the key to the outcome.