

# AmericasBarometer: Topical Brief – April 1, 2013

## Do Venezuelans Expect Unrest After Elections?

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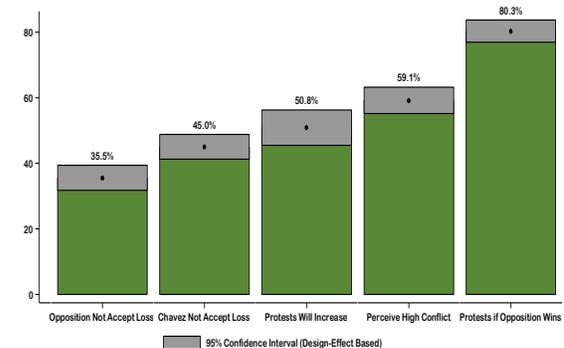
The death of Hugo Chávez on March 5, 2013 has initiated a crucial moment in Venezuelan politics. Elections to replace Chávez are scheduled to be held on April 14 and, given the strong feelings among the pro and anti-Chávez supporters, questions have been raised about prospects for electoral unrest. This *Insights Topical Brief* is the second in a series of reports focused on political attitudes in Venezuela. In this brief we examine Venezuelans' expectations of unrest in the context of elections. In our analysis we document the fact that Venezuelans harbor significant concerns about the degree of protest and strife they anticipate that could follow elections and, as well, we show that attitudes toward Chávez are important predictors of those concerns. This latter finding underscores the political polarization, and related distrust between political camps, that came to characterize Venezuelan politics under Hugo Chávez.

The most recent AmericasBarometer survey carried out by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) provides unique data that can help answer those questions<sup>1</sup>. During

<sup>1</sup> Funding for the 2010 round mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and Vanderbilt University. Prior issues in the *Insights* series can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights.php>. The data on which they are based can be found at

February and March of 2012, a nationally representative sample of 1,500 respondents was interviewed as part of a broader study conducted in 26 countries of the Americas. Five questions were asked to measure expectations of unrest depending on the results of the

Figure 1. Expectations of Unrest After Elections, 2012



October elections. Even though the questions refer to that election, the one in which Chávez soundly defeated the opposition candidate, we believe that they help to shed light on general concerns about the transition phase that will take place in the country over the next few months.

<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/survey-data.php>

Respondents were asked for their opinion on a) whether Chávez would accept an electoral loss; b) whether the opposition would accept a loss; c) if protests would increase as a result of electoral results; d) if there are high levels of conflict in the country; and e) if there would be protests in the streets if the opposition were to win the presidency. The proportion of respondents expressing high levels of concern in response to each of these questions is shown in Figure 1.<sup>2</sup>

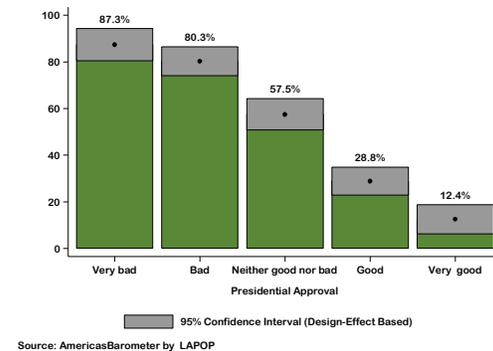
Figure 1 shows that sizeable numbers of Venezuelans worry that periods of electoral transition in Venezuela will lead to civil unrest. About 35% of survey respondents in 2012 said that the opposition would not accept a loss, while 45% believed that Chávez would not have accepted losing an election. About 51% of respondents believe that protests would increase, and 59% perceived high levels of conflict in the country. Finally, 80% said that they believed there would be protests in the streets if the opposition were to win election.

To what extent are these concerns based in individuals' support for or opposition to Chávez? During his 14 years in power, Venezuelan politics centered squarely around the personality and influence of Hugo Chávez. Even in the current transition period, Chávez's name is ubiquitous in politics and the campaigns. The deep animosity that has often characterized the pro- and anti-Chávez divide

<sup>2</sup> The question wordings are as follows, with the categories reported on in Figure 1 noted in *italics*: "VENVB11. If the opposition candidate in the next presidential elections were to lose, do you believe the opposition would accept the election results? Yes / No;" "VENVB12. And do you believe President Chávez would accept the results in case that he were to lose the next presidential election? Yes / No"; "VENPROT11. Do you believe that over the next few months social and political conflict will *increase*, stay the same, or *decrease*?"; "VENPROT10. Do you believe that the current level of social and political conflict in Venezuela is very low, low, neither low nor high, *high*, or *very high*?"; "VENVB15. If the opposition were to win the next election, do you think there will be public protests in the streets? Yes / No." Response options in italic were coded as 1, while the others were 0. Non-response rates were 20%, 18%, 10%, 5%, and 30%, respectively.

in Venezuela has left significant imprints on public opinion. Therefore, in the next set of analyses, we examine the extent to which the concerns expressed in Figure 1 are driven by political polarization. Figures 2 and 3 show how presidential approval influences individuals' assessments of the likelihood that the other side (Chavistas or the opposition) would accept an electoral loss.

**Figure 2. Percent that Believes Chavistas Would Not Accept Electoral Loss, by Presidential Approval**



**Figure 3. Percent that Believes Opposition Would Not Accept Electoral Loss, by Presidential Approval**

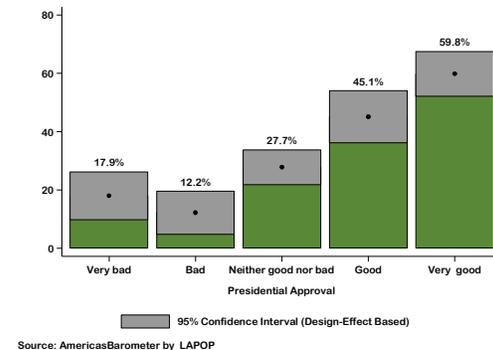


Figure 2 shows that presidential approval is strongly related to the likelihood that a respondent believes Chávez would not have accepted electoral defeat in the October 2012 election. That is, those who believe that Chávez is doing a very good job are far less likely to

believe that he would not accept defeat, while those who are highly critical of his rule strongly believe that he would not accept the defeat. Figure 3 shows that presidential approval also predicts the probability of a respondent saying that the opposition would not have accepted a defeat. In this case, those who highly approve of Chávez's job as president think the opposition would not accept the loss, while Chávez's detractors say they would have done so.

The strong evidence that one's political leanings influence expectations that Chávez supporters and opponents will accept unfavorable electoral results suggests deep levels of concern and mistrust among the electorate. At the same time, we see that individuals on each side express a belief in their own willingness to concede electoral defeat, and one could take this as a positive indicator for the prospects of a peaceful election this month.

The data discussed in this *Topical Brief* add perspective with to discussions of the future of democracy in Venezuela. Even though the Venezuelans are highly supportive of democracy in abstract, as shown by our previous *Topical Brief* on this topic, they express concerns about the possibilities of unrest during political transition periods. Moreover, these opinions are strongly influenced by attitudes pro and con toward Chávez, which reflects the high degree of political polarization in the country and the subsequent tendency for each side to mistrust the other's willingness to accept unfavorable electoral results. Our next *Insights Topical Brief* will investigate to what extent Venezuelans trust the electoral process and discuss how that trust might be important for acceptance of the electoral outcome.

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Full results of the 2012 AmericasBarometer - Venezuela survey and the AmericasBarometer 2012 comparative study can be consulted on-line at [www.LapopSurveys.org](http://www.LapopSurveys.org). The full data set is available for on-line analysis or download (in SPSS and Stata formats) at no cost.