

MISSION IDENTITY: CITIZENSHIP RIGHTS FOR ALL VENEZUELANS

Historically, governments in Venezuela have failed to represent the interests of the majority of citizens. This problem began at the ballot box, for poor and marginalized communities were rarely empowered to vote. In the last decade, under President Chavez, new government initiatives emphasizing participatory democracy have led to profound changes that have opened up the political system and expanded citizenship rights.



Mission Identity is a government program initiated in 2003 to ensure universal access to national identification cards that allow Venezuelans to register to vote. This campaign for political inclusion has already made great strides in democratizing citizenship.

THE NEED FOR VOTER EMPOWERMENT AND REFORM

In 1998, less than half of all eligible Venezuelans were registered to vote. This was due to the poor representative capacity of the Venezuelan government during the previous forty years, in which two political parties dominated the political scene through a power-sharing agreement. Under this system, leaders were rarely compelled to take measures that were favorable for country's poor majority.¹ Sadly, the full exercise of citizenship rights was treated as a privilege largely left to Venezuela's middle- and upper classes.

For the majority of the population, voting was as an inaccessible privilege rather than an inalienable right. First of all, Venezuelans in low-income communities did not possess the national identification cards, a prerequisite for registering to vote. Government officials rarely provided birth certificates to poor Venezuelans who were not born in hospitals or private clinics, making it more difficult for them to receive official documentation later in life. Second, urban voting centers were primarily located in middle- and upper class neighborhoods, while in rural areas they were inaccessible to those without transportation. In both instances, the inhabitants of poor communities, frequently comprised of citizens of Indigenous and Afro-Venezuelan descent, were discouraged from voting due to the sheer difficulty and cost of doing so.

TIME FOR A CHANGE

In the late 1980s and early '90s, the misery and disenfranchisement felt by Venezuela's impoverished majority reached a boiling point. Government policies were met with frequent and widespread protests, leaders declared martial law twice. During this period, the dominant political parties were forced to make some limited reforms to the electoral system.² However, it was not until not until Hugo Chavez was elected in 1998 that significant measures were taken to guarantee access to voting among all sectors of Venezuelan society.

With the landslide electoral victory of President Chavez in 1998, Venezuela began a new political era. Among the first major issues that the new administration promised to address were the past problems of electoral fraud and popular exclusion from the political system. When Chavez began his first term in office in 1999, the new administration and the National Assembly moved quickly to strengthen earlier reforms and initiate new ones that focused on voting rights, access to the ballot, electoral security, and transparency.

MISSION IDENTITY

One of the first and most successful initiatives to date has been Mission Identity (known as *Misión Identidad* in Spanish). Established in October 2003 and carried out with the help of the National Office of Identification and Immigration (ONIDEX), Mission Identity aims to implement Article 56 of the 1999 Constitution of Venezuela, which states:

*All persons have the right to be registered free of charge with the Civil Registry Office after birth, and to obtain public documents constituting evidence of their biological identity, in accordance with law.*³



Mission Identity is essentially a massive citizenship and voter registration campaign rolled into one. It has already issued national ID cards to millions of Venezuelans who for the first time can count on full citizenship rights. This grassroots campaign has been carried out through the use of 84 regional ONIDEX offices and 7 mobile units that allow officials to reach remote areas.⁴ Additionally, the National Electoral Council has created a website that shows citizens the location of each ID center and provides information about the services available. Once granted an ID card, citizens may view their personal voter registration information online by entering their ID number.⁵

During the first phase of the program, from October 2003 through December 2004, over 8 million people received new or updated ID cards. Between 2005 and the first half of 2006, Mission Identity served an additional 10 million Venezuelans. In this period, more than 5.5 million Venezuelans registered to vote for the first time in their lives.⁶

Mission Identity has concentrated its efforts on populations that have historically been overlooked, including immigrant workers, residents of rural areas, and Indigenous and Afro-Venezuelan communities. According to official figures provided by the Mission, during the second phase of the campaign, between October 31, 2005 and July 17, 2006 over 430,000 qualified immigrants were

naturalized and almost 274,000 Indigenous people were issued ID cards guaranteeing them their rights as equal members of society.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Since the inception of the campaign in 2003, electoral participation in presidential elections has grown tremendously.

In the 2000 elections, 11 million Venezuelans were registered to vote but only a little over half (about 6 million) actually did so. However, in the 2004 referendum, just one year after the project was launched, 14 million Venezuelans were registered to vote and 9 million exercised their right to do so. The abstention rate effectively dropped from 43.6% in 2000 to 30.1% in 2004.⁷



Thanks to this ongoing effort, as of May 2006, more than half of Venezuela's 26 million citizens were registered to vote and many millions more had become officially recognized citizens.⁸

¹ McCoy, Jennifer "Chavez and the End of "Partyarchy" in Venezuela," *Journal of Democracy* 10: 3, July 1999, pp. 64-77.

² Ibid.

³ Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Article 56.

⁴ "Cedulacion: Identificar a Todos Los Venezolanos", Misión Identidad web page, <http://www.misionvenezuela.gov.ve/11Identidad/11Cedulacion.htm>

⁵ Venezuelan National Electoral Council web page, <http://cne.gob.ve/>

⁶ Misión Venezuela web page, <http://www.misionvenezuela.gov.ve/11Identidad/11Derechoexistir.htm>

⁷ Venezuelan National Electoral Council web page, <http://cne.gob.ve/>

⁸ Electoral Registry Audit, August 2006 http://cne.gob.ve/documentos/auditoria_definitiva.pdf