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## VENEZUELA'S ELECTRONIC VOTING MACHINES

Ever since President Hugo Chávez's landslide victory in the August 2004 referendum, sectors of Venezuela's opposition and private media have sought to cast doubt upon the fairness and transparency of the country's electronic voting system. It has been suggested that the machines, which have been used in various Venezuelan elections since the year 2000, could be used to violate voter privacy and commit fraud. However, a careful look at how Venezuela's electoral system actually functions shows that these claims are without substance and that elections in Venezuela are now among the fairest and most secure in the world. Even some of the Venezuelan government's harshest critics have noted that the paper and electronic trail produced by the machines guarantees Venezuelans a greater degree of security in their electoral process than many citizens of the United States. For instance, Florida Senator Bill Nelson, in a recent hearing on Venezuela, remarked that "the State of Florida is not even doing that with a paper trail. So maybe Venezuela will teach Florida something."<sup>1</sup>

### WHY ELECTRONIC MACHINES?

Venezuela's 1998 Organic Law of Suffrage and Political Participation, passed before President Chavez took office, requires that elections be conducted with electronic voting machines. The law was part of a larger effort to reduce the possibility of fraud through ballot-box stuffing that was prevalent throughout generations of Venezuelan elections. The machines standardize the way Venezuelans vote around the country, and the electronic tallies provide a faster and more accurate vote count than manual methods. The touch-screen machines are easy to use, and have the potential to greatly reduce the time voters spend inside the voting center.

Since the year 2000 the National Electoral Council (or CNE by its Spanish acronym) has progressively perfected the electronic voting system by, for example, making it possible to fully audit the computer software that is used as well as each step of the electronic voting process. Thanks to these mechanisms, every aspect of the Venezuelan voting system has been thoroughly audited by electoral observers from Venezuela and from international organizations like the Organization of American States and the European Union.

### HOW THE MACHINES WORK

The SmartMatic technology utilizes a simple, touch-screen system. The voter selects his preferred candidate by touching the box with his candidate's name and the associated party logo. Once the selection is made, a screen will appear, again displaying the candidate's name and requesting the voter to confirm his selection. Once confirmed, the machine prints a paper receipt, which the voter may check for accuracy before depositing it in a locked ballot box. Under an agreement between the CNE and participating political parties, a full 55% of the paper receipts will be audited after the presidential vote to ensure that their numbers match the electronic vote tallied.

The electronic data is encrypted and sent to the National Counting Center for a nearly instantaneous vote tally. The official vote count is announced after the paper audit has taken place.

The process outlined above was utilized in the 2005 National Assembly elections, which were observed and approved by international observers from the Organization of American States (OAS) and the European

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<sup>1</sup> Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Hearing on Venezuela, June 24, 2004.

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Union. In its final report on the 2005 elections, the OAS noted that voter privacy was respected and that all Venezuelan's right to a secret ballot was upheld.<sup>2</sup>

### **PROTECTIONS AGAINST FRAUD**

Venezuelan elections authorities have invested in a unique technology to ensure that no party can manipulate the computers in order to affect the outcome of the vote. The source code necessary to access the machines is split into four equal parts, which are then divided among stakeholders, including a representative from the CNE, opposition parties, pro-government coalitions and international observers. In order for *any* change to the coding of the computers to be implemented, each of these parties must be present and access the machines simultaneously. For legitimate purposes, such as testing the machines and auditing the vote, each party will have access to the computers, but any unauthorized tampering is rendered impossible.

Just before the 2004 referendum, officials from the Carter Center received a full presentation of the Smartmatic machines, and stated that they were "very impressed with the presentation that we received, the security measures that were shown to us, and the functioning of the machine that we witnessed."<sup>3</sup>

### **THUMBPRINT MACHINES**

Venezuela has enlisted a separate technology to ensure that voters do not cast multiple ballots at different polling stations. Computers at the entrance of polling stations record the thumbprints of each voter as they enter. The thumbprints are stored in a centralized database, and observers are automatically notified if a voter has previously cast a ballot at another polling station. The thumbprint machines are separate from the electronic voting stations, so that the database records only *who* has participated in the election, not *how* an individual casts his vote.

### **OWNERSHIP OF SMARTMATIC**

The Boca Raton, Florida based SmartMatic Company designed and manufactured the machines used in Venezuela's elections. Over the last two years, opposition leaders have attempted to make the machines a source of controversy by claiming that the Venezuelan government may secretly control the company. But according to a recent investigation by the *Miami Herald*, the Venezuelan nationals who own SmartMatic, Antonio Mugica Rivero and Alfredo Anzola Jaumotte, have strong ties to Venezuela's opposition. As the *Herald* reports, "Anzola's father, Alfredo Anzola Mendez, was a prominent opposition member and a columnist in the anti-Chavez Caracas newspaper *Tal Cual*. 'I'm anti-Chavez by conviction,' he said in a 2004 interview at his home in an exclusive Caracas neighborhood."

### **CONCLUSION**

Venezuela's elections are among the most closely scrutinized in the world, and its electronic voting apparatus among the most sophisticated, accurate and transparent in any major democracy. As the December 3<sup>rd</sup> elections draw near and polls continue to show that a majority of Venezuelans intend to reelect President Chavez<sup>4</sup>, opposition voices have already begun reciting what the *Miami Herald* describes as "nursery rhyme accusations"<sup>5</sup> on the elections process. As world attention is drawn to Venezuela's elections, it is important to understand the basic facts regarding how the electronic voting machines function and note, like Senator Bill Nelson, that Florida and other parts of the world may have a an opportunity to learn from Venezuela's modern and transparent voting process.

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<sup>2</sup> The final *Report of the Electoral Observer Mission in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela's 2005 Parliamentary Elections*

<sup>3</sup> "Electronic Touch-Screens Tested For Venezuela Recall Vote," Associated Press, July 18, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> "Chávez Dominates Venezuelan Campaign," Angus Reid Global Scan: Polls & Research., July 16, 2006  
<http://www.angus-reid.com/polls/index.cfm/fuseaction/viewItem/itemID/12548>

<sup>5</sup> Gunson, Phil and Steven Dudley, "2 Million Voters, 1 Address? More Fraud claims Mar Venezuelan Election."  
*Miami Herald*, July 20, 2006 <http://www.miami.com/mld/miamiherald/news/world/americas/15078199.htm>