

# Hugo Chávez's Failed Constitutional Referendum: An Interview with IR/PS Professor Richard Feinberg

**LANE H. JOST**  
University of California,  
San Diego  
School of International  
Relations and Pacific  
Studies

## ABSTRACT

On December 2, 2007 the citizens of Venezuela rejected a referendum proposed by President Hugo Chávez that would have granted sweeping new constitutional powers to the president. The bill included a total of 69 amendments, but three provisions—the abolishment of term limits, the ability to declare states of emergency for unlimited periods and the escalation of the state's role in the economy—proved to be among the most contentious. The Journal of International Policy Solutions spoke to Richard Feinberg, Professor of Political Economy at the School of International Relations and Pacific Studies at the University of California, San Diego (IR/PS), about the significance of Chávez's defeat and the fate of authoritarian populism in Latin America. Prior to joining the faculty at IR/PS, Feinberg served as Special Assistant to President Clinton for National Security Affairs and Senior Director, Office of Inter-American Affairs from 1993-1996.

**JIPS:** *The Venezuelan government reported that Hugo Chávez's referendum was defeated 49% to 51% but there have been reports that the margin may have been as wide as ten percentage points. Considering the election officials were comprised of Chávez supporters, how surprising was his defeat?*

**Richard Feinberg:** I think his defeat will very probably be seen to have been an absolutely stunning, historic milestone. Up until a few weeks before the referendum, the widely held assumption was that Chávez would glide to victory with the significant margins he had amassed in previous elections. Just the previous year he had won reelection by a very comfortable margin.

**JIPS:** *What does the failed referendum say about Chávez's power in Venezuela?*

**Richard Feinberg:** One thing we learned from the process was that Chávez does not have the absolute, comprehensive control over Venezuelan institutions that was widely assumed. Despite the fact that most of the senior officers had been appointed by Chávez, the Venezuelan military demonstrated that there were limits to its allegiance to him.

**JIPS:** *General Raul Isaias Baduel [the retired top commander of Venezuela's army] called the referendum "A constitutional coup" and made several other public statements against giving the president additional powers. How significant was Baduel's public split with Chávez?*

**Richard Feinberg:** Undoubtedly, the military feared that if there was an obvious fraud in the election, people would take to the streets and they might have to shoot fellow Venezuelans in large numbers. That seemed to define the limits of their support for Chávez; that they were not willing to engage in a bloodbath on his behalf; they were not prepared to tarnish their own reputations and the reputation of the military as an institution. People have long feared that at some point, should his popularity decline, Chávez would resort to strong-arm methods. But as we learned that fateful night, the military does not want to participate in a potentially very bloody maneuver.

**JIPS:** *What does the referendum do for the opposition,*

*especially when you consider the apparent limits of Chávez's power on Venezuelan government institutions?*

**Richard Feinberg:** Chavez's presidential term runs until 2012 and I certainly don't think his removal is imminent. In Latin America, there is this nay-saying about democracy; the proposition that Latin Americans aren't particularly wedded to the idea of democracy and that citizens are only concerned about food in their stomachs. You hear this derision of democracy in Latin America and among some Latin Americanists in the United States. Yet the trends we've been seeing in Latin America over the past few years contradict and unmask this ideological falsehood.

**JIPS:** *And do you think Chávez's loss in the referendum is a good example of this?*

**Richard Feinberg:** Yes. Of course there are always some economic factors, but if you care to capture the meaning of the referendum in a simple slogan: Venezuelans stood tall for democracy and Chávez's blatant power grab, his bold announcement of presidency for life, was rejected.

**JIPS:** *Since he does have five more years left in office, how do you think Chávez might recalibrate some of his economic policies to respond to his loss of political capital?*

**Richard Feinberg:** Chávez in his earlier years did show a tactical ability to adjust to circumstances. If he overshot his capacities, then he would backpedal and adjust. But in more recent years, he has become so full of himself, so messianic, that I am not sure he still has the capacity for that sort of tactical adjustment. He sees himself as a revolutionary, as a "change agent," and it will be very difficult for him to settle into the role of a normal politician forced to compromise with his opponents, forced to accept some uncomfortable realities. I would like to be proven wrong.

**JIPS:** *Is this failed referendum an opportunity for further engagement between the United States and Venezuela?*

**Richard Feinberg:** This administration has "engaged" with Chávez in the sense that they have been willing to work with him on secondary issues like drug-trafficking. And of course we continue to buy their petroleum products. To

that extent, the United States has offered to engage. But if by engage you mean that somehow we could have better relations with Chávez, if only we were more forthcoming or diplomatic, I just don't understand what people mean by that. Chavez embodies everything we oppose: dismembering institutions, autocratic rule, massively inefficient state-driven economic policies, going out of his way to befriend and embrace every other world leader we consider problematic and is an outspoken proponent of sky-high oil prices. He purposefully seeks a confrontational relationship with the United States – indeed confrontation is deeply rooted in his self-identity. Where are the grounds for compromise?

**JIPS:** *Has Chávez reached the zenith of his power in Venezuela?*

**Richard Feinberg:** Chávez has two close allies: Morales [President of Bolivia Evo Morales] and Ortega [President of Nicaragua Daniel Ortega]. In recent weeks, there has been a surge in domestic opposition in both of those countries. What has happened in all three cases—Chávez, Morales and Ortega—is that the strongman enters with powerful rhetoric and the domestic opposition is initially stunned and also hopeful that maybe the leader has good intentions and that democratic compromise is possible. Everyone certainly agrees that poverty must be addressed and in each case the leader had initially offered to work with the domestic opposition. However, with the passage of time, in each of these cases, it became increasingly clear that the leader was more interested in personal power than in the poor, and did not want to dialogue and collaborate with the opposition. In all three cases, it has taken some time for the opposition to rethink and recoup, but we're seeing that

now. In other words, we are seeing a mounting reaction in all three countries.

**JIPS:** *Given the apparent success the opposition has had in organizing against the Chávez referendum, can we say that the future of democracy as an institution in Venezuela appears strong? Where will Venezuelan democracy be post-Chávez? Is contemporary Latin America becoming more solidly democratic?*

**Richard Feinberg:** Chávez was incredibly lucky to have been in power when oil prices spiked. In terms of democracy, this resurgence of, let's call it authoritarian populism in Latin America, these political trends are always there in Latin America and they are very deeply rooted. The democratic openings, of course, have provided the political space for them to be articulated. They have a very ready, easy popular appeal and maybe it was necessary in some countries for people to relive the illusion one more time and hopefully to derive the right lessons from their inevitable disappointments. This time, there is a difference: in the past, when an authoritarian populist experiment failed, the proponents often rejected self-criticism but rather pointed the finger at the United States, sometimes with good reasons. Fidel Castro continues on this path 50 years later. For better or worse, the very low profile of the Bush administration has made it so there is no way for Chávez, Morales or Ortega to credibly blame their deepening economic and political problems on Washington. They [the economic and political difficulties] are very clearly self-induced. All of this is happening during a very favorable international environment—high commodity prices and global growth. It's ultimately the theater of the absurd for Chávez to be denouncing globalization when his entire regime is based on high oil prices and global commodity markets.