

VOTING ASSURANCES IN VENEZUELA

Voting assurances are closely related to the development and growth of voting in Venezuela over the past couple of decades. Since 2004, the National Electoral Council has been working on the Voting Assurances System (SGE), by affirming the exercise of voters' rights and giving assurances to candidates and political organizations.

A voting assurances system unique to the world has been built in Venezuela as an objective fact amenable to study, analysis and scientific verification. Based on the SGE, the CNE ensures the entire electoral system through transparent and reliable election results, as faithful expression of Venezuelans' sovereign will.

In spite of proven consistency and effectiveness of the SGE, coverage of elections on global media and social networks conjures up a vision of voting assurances lacking in Venezuela.

In every election, the CNE expands and reinforces assurances as per the requests from political organizations and candidates running in an election. The CNE admits, discusses and technically assesses all requests, welcoming all those which enrich and add confidence to the voting process.

In this construction, political organizations also have a stake with their technical teams by means of audits.

The Electoral Processes Organic Law of 2009 provides for verification of material, technology and data resources, as well as certification through audits, resulting in a transparent, reliable, safe and absolutely shielded electoral system.

Chain of trust

The SGE includes all voting stages -from the call to the polls up to the period ensuing delivery of results. This means review, validation and checkup of the good working order of the Venezuelan voting system. To that end, the SGE includes multiple audits of both automatic and manual aspects.

The SGE instills confidence in all stakeholders -political parties and organizations, candidates and voters-, thus ensuring the sovereign exercise of the right to vote under the principles of our participating and leading democracy.

The SGE boasts two fundamental constituent elements, inherent in organization, management and implementation of elections.

1. Assurances of a safe automatic voting system

Multiple audits include review of all components, software, voting data and even setup of voting machines and transmission systems. Political organizations running in an election check, audit and certify any and all factors and stages.

2. Assurances of transparent and trustworthy voting

The CNE makes every effort to inspire absolute confidence in all voters. Actions involve both automatic issues (e.g. audit of the programs set to select the members of balloting stations, state and municipal boards) and non-automatic issues (e.g. match of data recorded on voting rolls with the voter register).

The CNE makes decisions upon request of political organizations that become actions and are added to assurances. Take, for instance, the actions towards the faultless operation of polling stations.

1. Securing the automatic voting system

Assurances of an automatic voting system are manifest in checks and balances for good working order, transparency and security.

Audits are intended to show transparency of the Venezuelan voting system; attest to the proper and effective operation of components, programs, processes and equipment; ensure a sound vote, and demonstrate vote inviolability.

Audits are conducted of the software of voting machines, setup files of voting machines, voter data, tally software, technology infrastructure, and setup of voting machines. Mock election is run on a sample of voting machines one week in advance to the election. Audit of telecommunications is conducted before and after the election, in addition to citizen's verification.

The following stakeholders take part in audits:

- a. CNE experts
- b. Experts on behalf of interested political parties
- c. External auditors

Audits are transparent processes included in the CNE open-door policy. Highly qualified experts take part in audits to certify and check the operation of the voting system in accordance with the law and procedures.

Political parties help build the confidence chain insofar as they certify, for instance, that the voting machine software is complete, that it matches with the audited software, that it keeps same data after the election and that no component has been changed or altered.

In 2013, the CNE resolved to broadcast audits live, on internet -a significant decision as the audits can be witnessed by anybody in every last nook and cranny around the world. Moreover, such a decision adds further transparency and reliability to technical review.

Again, in 2013, the CNE resolved to engage domestic observers in audits, including NGO representatives.

Domestic observers join any foreign observers eventually invited by the CNE. In this connection, the technical support offered by the Latin American Council of Electoral Experts (CEELA), composed of former directors of electoral bodies, has been invaluable indeed, for they have ample experience in management and organization of elections in their countries of origin and, therefore, are fully cognizant of election matters. Their valuable feedback has been useful for the technical reinforcement of the Venezuelan SGE.

1.1. IT security

Login is among the major steps during audits of the voting system. Such security step refers to the audit of voting machine software, tally software, voter data base and means of delivery. The login password is separated and divided into political parties running for the election, external audits and the CNE.

This step is of utmost technical importance. Once a specific component is audited, a change can be made only if all the stakeholders log in at the same time. Thus, all stakeholders can rest assured that no component is to be altered after the audit or at any other moment, except for the involvement of all of them.

1.2. Safe and trustworthy data transmission

In spite of the fullest assurances given by any election system, dissemination of inaccurate facts, pseudo-technical or biased assessment and even misinformation about elections have been business as usual.

In 2010, a negative perception was formed concerning the delivery of results. Rumor and unconfirmed news were irresponsibly spread by several means about a wire directly connecting balloting stations to the CNE tally room, with the intention of manipulating and altering the election results.

From that year on, the CNE would spearhead the audit of transmission means. In this way, the CNE just cashed in on the smear campaign to move ahead with a new certification step.

Since then, political parties also take part in the audit to confirm that voting data transmission is technically appropriate and absolutely clean the day before and the day after the polls. Since its implementation, the day-after audit of transmission means has never indicated any glitches at all. This is reassuring, on the understanding that the election results are consistent with the transmitted data.

1.3 Citizen-initiated audit

Major contributions of the Venezuelan SGE includes citizen-initiated audit. Implemented in 2004, it deals with physical review of vote receipts to check the good working order of voting machines and consistency of the results counted in the voting machines. Citizen-initiated audit covers 54% of all polling stations. It includes poll workers, witnesses on behalf of political parties, voters, domestic observers and foreign aides.

No such assurances exist anywhere in the world. In some countries, it is even impossible to think about an audit of transmission means because transmission takes place via telephone call. Vote tally cannot be audited because votes are not counted, but the data recorded in vote logs. In some cases, bulletins rely not on vote count, but on exit polls or scanned records. Even in some cases, official results are provided one month after the election or later.

Based on the experience, as proven time after time in over 23 elections, the CNE takes pride in affirming that no voting system is as secure as the Venezuelan voting system.

2. Assurances of transparent and trustworthy voting

Quite a few components and procedures offer transparency and trust in every election.

Some years ago, political organizations requested the CNE to print in the count records of each polling station information on the voting closing time. The request emerged in the middle of intense political debate in the country. The CNE admitted the request. Today, it forms an integral part of the SGE.

Unplugging voting machines from transmission means during voting was among the initial requests from the CNE, made in 2004. Since then, voting machines are connected only to forward the results to the tally room, after printing out and delivering the count records to the witnesses of accredited political organizations.

Although not included in the operation of the automatic voting system, some audits form an integral part of voting, namely the audits of the voter register, voting rolls, data base and software for randomization of the members of state and municipal boards and poll workers.

Furthermore, additional steps have been taken for further assurances, including, but not limited to, the following:

- Express prohibition against taking photos of the vote in order to safeguard vote secrecy.
- Delivery to political organizations of the final voter register.
- Surveillance of the election campaign by electoral monitors deployed nationwide.
- Designation of the tasks of military troops cooperating with voting.
- Outline of the tasks of polling station coordinators.
- Setup of a hotline only for political parties in order to settle any dispute on the election day.
- Presence of witnesses acting on behalf of political parties on all the sites established by law.
- Steps to prevent misuse of assisted vote.
- Appropriate education in polling stations on voting measures and regulations for voters to know, abide by and enforce them.

Over 15 assurances not associated to automatic voting offer voters every condition to exercise their sovereign right and reaffirm the principles of the Venezuelan electoral system: security, trust and transparency.

Electing –an underwritten right in Venezuela

Democracy is widespread and tremendously enjoyed in Venezuela. For Venezuelans, living in democracy means discussing and work on their own destiny. Voting is among the grand moments in daily political participation.

In Venezuela, the right to elect and be elected is regarded as an essential human right and the State is responsible for ensuring and dovetailing it.

The CNE, a body established under the Constitution of 1999, is the voting governing body and one of the Venezuelan branches of government.

As such, and in keeping with the constitutional mandate, the CNE has set up a unique voting system, sponsored by the most complete assurances system in the world. As a result, elections have turned out to be a secure, transparent and reliable expression of Venezuelans' will and full expression as well of a vibrant, participating and leading democracy.