

MIRAFLORES PRESS OFFICE/AP



**SHOWDOWN:** Venezuela's president, Hugo Chávez, greeted supporters in Ciudad Bolívar, Venezuela, Feb. 15. Below: His opponent this fall is Henrique Capriles.

same administration after Chávez's lengthy tenure. Amid high inflation, soaring crime rates, and a sense that government officials, family, and friends surrounding Chávez are corrupt, many are now looking for a change.

In the traditionally Chavista barrio, or neighborhood, of 23 de Enero, Simon Moreno sits on a bench beside a mural of Che Guevara and a bust of Simón Bolívar. Mr. Moreno says he agrees with Chávez's ideology but thinks it's time for a change.

"Chavez, as a leader, is acceptable. But he's got too many friends around him," Moreno says, referring to what he sees as corruption.

This shift, combined with a unified opposition, gives the opposition its best chance to take control from Chávez, some say. During the February opposition primary, 3 million Venezuelans voted — a turnout that was far larger than expected.

**BUT VENEZUELA'S INDEPENDENTS** face a stark choice, says Briceño-Leon. Voters must ponder a radically different vision of the future when deciding whom to elect, he says.

"There's a sector of society that doesn't support Chávez's projects but still hasn't found a political space from where they can support an alternative," says Tulio Hernández, a Venezuelan sociologist and columnist for the Caracas-based daily *El Nacional*.

Mr. Capriles has tried hard to portray himself as a candidate who bridges Venezuela's extremes, maintaining social welfare for the poor while forging a new, economically sound path. But for some, voting for the opposition represents voting for a

time when many of the nation's poor were excluded. If Capriles is going to win, he will have to overcome those reservations.

"The reality is that ... for lots of folks, [he] represents the past in terms of his policies, his upbringing, his extraordinarily elite ties," says George Ciccariello-Maher, an assistant professor of politics at Drexel University in

Philadelphia.

It is unclear how the energy behind the primary will play out in the presidential race. Take Jesenia Zambrano, a housekeeper who commutes from one of the city's poor barrios to work in the homes of middle-class residents. At the moment, she says, she's planning to spoil her ballot, a practice where voters express antipathy with the political system by intentionally making their vote ineligible, sometimes by defacing the ballot or voting for multiple candidates.

"I'm tired of Chávez. He's had 13 years here. Chávez has helped workers here, but he always talks about Fidel [Castro] and about the US. Why?" But disliking Chávez isn't enough motivation to automatically vote for the opposition, she says. "I don't support Capriles.... If I vote, I'm going to spoil the paper. I'm not going to vote for either." ■

## Stark choice in Venezuela

**NONALIGNED VOTERS** will play a key role in the most competitive presidential election in a decade.

BY GIRISH GUPTA / CORRESPONDENT  
AND SARA MILLER LLANA / STAFF WRITER

CARACAS, VENEZUELA; AND MEXICO CITY

Moderate is not a common word in Venezuelan politics. Opponents aren't rivals but enemies, and colorful oratory skills match that tone. President Hugo Chávez's critics call him a monkey, while he recently dubbed his presidential challenger a "low-life pig."

But the volley of insults and polarization that has come to characterize Venezuela's political rhetoric is not resonating with a key share of the popula-

### WHY IT MATTERS

The opposition challenge to President Hugo Chávez introduces a new vision for Venezuela. But will it be viewed as a retreat from the poor?

tion. More than a third of the populace is considered "nonaligned," neither pro-Chávez nor part of the opposition.

These citizens aren't necessarily like swing voters in the United States, who are political consumers shopping between policies. Instead, they tend to be disillusioned and apolitical. Many of them don't vote. But now that the presidential candidates for the Oct. 7 election are set, nonaligned voters are getting fresh attention because of their potential to sway Venezuela's most competitive

election in more than a decade.

Venezuela is often painted as a nation divided between two camps: the rich, who loathe Mr. Chávez, and the poor, who consider him a savior. But it's more complex: Today, nearly 36 percent of all Venezuelans are nonaligned and undecided, says Vicente Leon, director of the polling firm *Datanalisis*.

Roberto Briceño-Leon, a professor at the Central University of Venezuela in Caracas and a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C., says he sees these independents as a third, distinct electoral group, spanning all social sectors. Among the poor, who traditionally have supported Chávez, non-aligned voters outnumber either Chávez or opposition supporters, his survey found.

"I think that whoever gets the support of the nonaligned will win the election," Mr. Briceño-Leon says. "But many [might] not vote in the election. One of the big challenges for both the opposition and government is to attract them to vote."

**CHÁVEZ IS STILL WIDELY POPULAR** and currently leads his opponent, Henrique Capriles, by a solid 20 points, despite recent health concerns, according to surveys. But undecided voters are more critical to winning this election than in the past.

Many nonaligned voters are former backers of the president. Chávez came to power in 1999 by wresting control from the elite and shepherding in an era of social welfare and state control.

Still, some Venezuelans say they're tired of the



CARLOS GARCIA RAWLINS/REUTERS

Stark choice in Venezuela

