

## WORLD

## Eyes on Venezuela as voters decide Chávez's future

Election could oust president

Girish Gupta  
Special for USA TODAY

CARACAS, VENEZUELA Swigging a bottle of beer before midday in a grimy cobbler's shop where he works, Cesar Jimenez argues with a colleague on Venezuelan politics.

"If socialism were so good," he says, "then why isn't the whole world socialist?"

Jimenez, 40, lives and works in Petare, a huge barrio with a population of up to 3 million people overshadowing Caracas, and is a longtime supporter of President Hugo Chávez, the self-styled socialist who has led Venezuela for 13 years.

This Sunday, however, as Chávez faces his toughest presidential election yet, Jimenez will vote instead for his challenger, Henrique Capriles Radonski, a vibrant 40-year-old state governor.

"I've had enough," the cobbler says. "The insecurity, the broken promises."

Capriles' campaign represents the first time that Venezuela's various opposition parties have rallied behind one candidate who stands a chance against Chávez.

News polls have Chávez, 58, ahead — but not by much. And bastions of support for Chávez are now full of former supporters who complain the strongman — who claims to be one of the people — has abandoned them.

When Chávez burst into democratic politics in 1999 with speeches about socialism and anger at American "imperialism," he was swept into power with votes from Venezuela's dispossessed and middle class.

He vowed to seize Venezuela's vast oil deposits and spend the proceeds lavishly on the poor. For a time, many impoverished families received help they never had; small health clinics appeared, some public housing was built.

It was enough of a change for many rural poor to overlook increasing restrictions Chávez was placing on private economic activity and freedoms of expression and the press.

As a result, Chávez was elected twice more: in 2000 and 2006.

As Chávez has allied himself with regimes such as Iran and Cuba and hurled insults at the United States, poverty, inflation and food prices have steadily increased. Capriles alleges Chávez packed the oil industry with cronies making it inefficient and frightening away foreign investment that could boost production.

It may be crime that hurts Chávez the most.

Drug cartels fighting for turf have given Venezuela one of the highest murder rates in the world, comparable to war zones, according to the Venezuela Violence Observatory.

Capriles has capitalized on the poor outcomes of Chávez's socialist revolution, drawing support not exclusively from the traditional anti-Chávez strongholds of the business community and better-off urban dwellers. He has also managed to woo the country's poor who have always voted for Chávez.

Capriles won the opposition primaries in a landslide six months ago and threw himself into retail politicking nationwide.

He has ridden his motorbike into barrios, played basketball with teens



Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez delivers a speech from the top of a vehicle Thursday during a rally in Caracas, Venezuela.

RODRIGO ABD, AP



FERNANDO LLANO, AP

Opposition candidate Henrique Capriles waves to supporters.

and ingratiated himself with the poor exactly as Chávez did during his own presidential campaign 14 years ago.

Chávez's charisma, public relations skills and oratory are still with him despite many months of treatment for colon cancer. And he has unlimited access to Venezuela's oil profits, pouring cash into social projects for supporters.

Even so, some in the barrios feel it is time for a change. Bolivarian socialism, Chávez's brainchild, is not doing its job, they say.

Miguel Calanon, 42, who lives in a house given to him by the government in the city of Caribia, just outside Caracas, is sticking with Chávez.

"My life has changed," he says. "No other government has ever helped me."

Prior to Chávez, Venezuela was ruled for 40 years by two parties that colluded with each other to divvy up the country's spoils for their main supporters, leaving little for the poor. Chávez tapped into the disdain for

## Venezuelans head to La. for election

Rick Jervis  
USA TODAY

NEW ORLEANS Black and gold — symbols of the New Orleans Saints football team — are usually the colors splashed across this city each Sunday.

But this weekend they may be overrun by the yellow, blue and red of the Venezuelan flag, as thousands of Venezuelan citizens living in the U.S. descend on New Orleans to vote in their country's presidential election.

As foreign nationals, they're allowed to cast their votes through a U.S. based-consulate for their home country — and normally, they would be voting through the consulate in Miami, which has the largest community of Venezuelans in the U.S. They have to make the 860-mile journey to New Orleans, though, after the Venezuelan government in January closed the Miami consulate.

The consulate was shuttered after U.S. officials expelled a Venezuelan diplomat under suspicion of nefarious activities, Tulane University political science professor Eduardo Silva said. The Venezuelan government then assigned all expats voting

in Miami to vote in New Orleans.

City officials are expecting 5,000 to 6,000 flag-waving expat Venezuelans to stream into the city — by charter bus, private planes or car rides with friends — to cast their vote for their country's next president.

"New Orleans is used to street parades and celebrating and showing a lot of passion," said Mark Romig of the city's tourism promotion agency. "We expect to see a lot of that."

The race in Venezuela has become an increasingly tight matchup between incumbent Hugo Chávez, who has been president for nearly 14 years, and the opposition candidate, Henrique Capriles.

New Orleans is prepping for the crush of enthusiasts. City tourist officials sent e-mails last month to hotels and restaurants alerting them of the coming crowds.

Election-day polling activities were moved from the small downtown Venezuelan consulate to the lobby of the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, and New Orleans police officers will handle crowd and traffic control.

Even the Archdiocese of New Orleans is getting into the welcoming spirit: St. Louis Cathedral in the

French Quarter on Sunday will host a Venezuelan priest to give a Spanish-language Mass to the visitors and pray for peaceful elections.

Nearly 20,000 Venezuelans are registered to vote in Miami, Silva said. But only around 3,500 of those are expected to reach New Orleans to vote.

Several hundred more from Arkansas, Alabama, Georgia, the Carolinas and Louisiana will also travel here to vote, he said.

Those voting in New Orleans represent less than 1% of the total number of registered voters in Venezuela and will likely not impact election results, Silva said. Still, it's a passionate issue for them, many of whom left the country because of Chávez's policies and are eager to vote for Capriles, he said.

Through her Miami-based group, Voto Donde Sea, or "I Vote Anywhere," Vanessa Duran, 22, organized a fleet of charter buses to bring more than 1,000 fellow Venezuelans to New Orleans at discounted rates.

"We want to prove that a Venezuelan can overcome obstacles," Duran said. "No matter what, we're going to vote."

the country's elites, and Capriles has worked hard to drop any links with that past despite a wealthy background. His father was a successful businessman.

A lawyer, Capriles first got involved in politics when he beat a Chávez ally in Baruta municipality to win the mayor's office and oversaw a sharp reduction in crime. He has said he admires the leadership of former Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who turned his country into a leader in emerging markets while maintaining social programs that lifted many out of poverty.

Both Chávez and Capriles have been darting all over Venezuela, from its borders with Brazil and Colombia through its jungles, plains and major cities, to get votes and show off their strength to the watching undecided sector of the electorate, which makes up roughly 15%, according to Luis Vicente Leon, head of Caracas-based polling firm Datanálisis.

During his career, Chávez has often been accused by opponents of heavy-handed election tactics, such as using thugs to break up the rallies of his opponents and denying them coverage on state-controlled television networks.

Three opposition activists were killed on Saturday by gunmen who, local media said, fired from a van branded with government logos.

Capriles has pointed the finger for the violence directly at Chávez, who denies involvement.

Still, Capriles has managed to build an enthusiastic following once enjoyed only by Chávez. Chávez still maintains his fervent following too.

"We have a duty as revolutionaries to defend our president," said Enrique Pinto, 53, at a Chávez rally in Charallave. "Another world is possible, without capitalism, just with socialism."



FERNANDO LLANO, AP

Supporters of opposition candidate Henrique Capriles cheer Thursday during his campaign rally in Barquisimeto, Venezuela.

## OTHERS DON'T STACK UP



EXPERIENCE FRONTGATE

**\$239** REG. \$299  
SET OF FOUR  
Item #43579  
Bronze Stacking Chairs

**FREE STANDARD SHIPPING SITEWIDE\***  
ENDS OCT. 9

Our lightweight, contoured stacking chairs don't sacrifice comfort for convenience. Stain- and fade-resistant synthetic wicker is double woven over a sturdy, powdercoated aluminum frame. Experience Frontgate quality yourself. If you're not completely satisfied, we'll refund the purchase price and all shipping charges.

To order, visit [frontgate.com](http://frontgate.com) and search **Stacking Chairs** or call 1-800-626-6488. Enter code **UCHK** at checkout to receive free shipping.

# FRONTGATE

OUTFITTING AMERICA'S FINEST HOMES SINCE 1991

\* Excludes Truck and In-home Delivery, expedited shipments, and oversize surcharges. This offer cannot be combined with any other promotion. Above item requires a \$35 overweight-delivery surcharge. Offer valid through October 9, 2012 at 11:59 p.m. EST within the contiguous U.S.