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COLOMBIA'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

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TOPLINE POINTS

- ★ The Colombian people have voted and Abelardo de la Espriella and Iván Cepeda are headed to a runoff on June 21st, 2026, in what is shaping up to be a competitive contest between two candidates with sharply different visions for the country's future.
- ★ Despite months of attacks on electoral institutions and allegations of fraud, the first round was conducted efficiently and transparently, with no evidence of widespread irregularities capable of affecting the outcome.
- ★ Security, public order, and dissatisfaction with current political situation emerged as defining themes for voters, who are exceedingly concerned about rising violence, expanding criminal organizations, and record levels of coca cultivation.
- ★ The outcome of the runoff will have significant implications for U.S.-Colombia relations, including cooperation on counternarcotics, extraditions, regional security, and broader U.S. interests in the Western Hemisphere.

Election Day Results

Colombians voted on May 31, 2026, in the first round of the country's presidential election. No candidate secured the majority required to win outright, resulting in a runoff election scheduled for June 21, 2026. The next president will be inaugurated on August 7, 2026.

Abelardo de la Espriella and Senator Iván Cepeda advanced to the second round after finishing as the top two contenders ([Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil, 2026](#)). Early polling and first-round results suggest a competitive runoff campaign where both candidates will seek to consolidate support from both eliminated candidates and undecided voters.



While voting is voluntary in Colombia, voter turnout for this presidential election was relatively high by recent historical standards. According to Colombia's National Civil Registry, approximately 23.9 million Colombians went out to vote, representing 57.7% of registered voters ([Colombia.com, 2026](#)). This is one of the highest levels recorded in recent presidential elections, up from 54.98% in 2022. ([International Republican Institute, 2026](#))

The electoral process proceeded without major disruptions or irregularities. Despite concerns before election day, Colombian authorities and international observers reported no evidence of widespread fraud capable of affecting the outcome ([International Republican Institute, 2026](#)).

The preliminary results were released very quickly, with Colombia's vote-counting system demonstrating its capacity to deliver fast preliminary results. Colombia, like many other Latin American countries, still uses a nationwide paper-ballot system. Despite this, electoral authorities were able to report approximately 90% of the results only two hours after the polls closed.

Result Analysis

Abelardo de la Espriella finished first in the initial round of voting, receiving approximately 10.3 million votes, or 43.7% of the total vote ([Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil, 2026](#)). He defeated Iván Cepeda by roughly 665,000 votes, a narrow margin of approximately 2.8 percentage points. While significant, he fell short of the majority required to avoid a runoff election.

Iván Cepeda placed second with approximately 9.6 million votes, representing 40.9% of ballots cast ([Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil, 2026](#)). The result highlights the continued strength of the governing Pacto Histórico coalition despite growing public concerns over security, economic performance, and governance. The outcome also mirrors the coalition's performance in the March 2026 congressional elections, confirming that the Colombian Left retains a substantial national base of support.

The election also highlighted the limited appeal of centrist alternatives and candidates outside the two winning candidates. Paloma Valencia of the Centro Democrático came in third, receiving approximately 1.64 million votes, or 6.9% of the total. Despite significant name recognition and support from one of Colombia's most established opposition parties, her campaign failed to get enough momentum to make it to the runoff. Meanwhile, Sergio Fajardo secured approximately 1 million votes, or 4.2%, while Claudia López received roughly 224,000 votes, or 1% ([Colombia.com, 2026](#)).

These results show the weakness of Colombia's political center. Most voters did not support moderate alternatives and instead consolidated behind de la Espriella and Cepeda, two candidates at opposite ends of the political spectrum with very different visions for the country's future.

Regardless of who wins the runoff, neither de la Espriella nor Cepeda will enter office with a congressional majority, and, therefore, neither will be able to govern alone. Both candidates



will need to build coalitions with and secure support from traditional parties and regional blocs to advance their legislative agendas.

COLOMBIA'S POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Abelardo de la Espriella represents the “Salvacion Nacional and Defensores de la Patria” party. He emerged as the leading candidate in the first round despite having never previously held elected office. A prominent attorney and media personality, de la Espriella built his campaign around public security, economic growth, and opposition to several policies advanced by the Petro Administration. He frequently drew comparisons to El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele and emphasized a tough-on-crime approach aimed at combating criminal organizations, guerrilla groups, and narcotics trafficking networks. His candidacy benefited from widespread concern over deteriorating security conditions and dissatisfaction with the current administration's policies ([Correal, 2026](#)).

Iván Cepeda, the candidate of the ruling “Pacto Histórico” party, advanced to the runoff with the backing of President Gustavo Petro, who is ineligible to run for another term. A longtime senator and one of the Colombian Left's most recognizable political figures, Cepeda campaigned on preserving and expanding many of the administration's policy initiatives. His strong first-round performance demonstrated the continued strength of the governing party despite growing tensions over security, economic management, and institutional reform. The result also suggests that President Petro keeps a significant political base capable of mobilizing voters nationwide.

Paloma Valencia represented the “Centro Democrático” party and the political movement associated with former President Álvaro Uribe. She is well known as one of the party's leading figures and sought to position herself as a conservative alternative focused on the economy, institutional reform, and public security. Her campaign attempted to broaden its appeal beyond the party's traditional base while maintaining close ties to President Uribe. Despite her national profile and the historical prominence of Centro Democrático, Valencia's performance was ultimately viewed as a disappointment, highlighting the difficulties traditional center-right parties faced in competing against the two dominant campaigns. Despite this, her supporters will likely have a say in determining the outcome of the second round.

BACKGROUND

Colombia's current political landscape is marked by rising violence, growing criminal activity, and increasing territorial disputes among illegal armed groups, so many regions of the country entered the 2026 electoral cycle amid heightened security challenges due to narco-trafficking, organized crime, and the presence of armed actors, including the National Liberation Army (ELN), dissident factions of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and the Gulf Clan (*Clan del Golfo*). Competition among these groups for control of drug trafficking routes, illicit economies, and strategic territory has contributed to increased violence in several regions.

Security concerns moved to the forefront of people's attention following the assassination of presidential candidate Miguel Uribe Turbay during a campaign event on June 7, 2025 ([BBC, 2025](#)). Despite the deteriorating security environment in Colombia, the attack was the first



assassination of a Colombian presidential candidate in more than three decades ([Lewin, 2025](#)), renewing concerns about political violence in Colombia. The assassination, which was caught on video and quickly spread internationally, also underscored the risks faced by candidates, public officials, and voters in areas where criminal organizations and armed criminal groups have influence. Those concerns persisted throughout the campaign. In the final weeks before the election, Colombian authorities increased security measures after all three leading presidential candidates received death threats ([Lombo Delgado, 2026](#)).

Although Colombia had not witnessed the assassination of a presidential hopeful in decades, violence unfortunately remains deeply woven into Colombia's history. The 2026 race included figures whose families had already been marked by violence: Miguel Uribe Turbay's mother, journalist Diana Turbay, was killed in 1991 after being kidnapped by the Medellín cartel ([La Nación, 2025](#)), and Iván Cepeda's father, Senator Manuel Cepeda Vargas, was assassinated in 1994 in what was later determined to be a state crime ([Cueto, 2026](#)). Cepeda's running mate, Aída Quilcué, was also personally affected by Colombia's long history of political violence. Her husband, indigenous leader Edwin Legarda, was killed by members of the Colombian Army in 2008 ([Calderón, 2026](#)). Security concerns persisted for her during the electoral cycle as well. In February 2026, authorities launched a major operation after reports emerged that Quilcué had been kidnapped in the department of Cauca, showing the continued risks faced by politicians and community activists in regions affected by armed groups and criminal organizations ([Semana, 2026](#)).

Aside from historical memory and the immediate impact of political violence, other factors also contributed to a broader deterioration in security conditions. Coca cultivation and cocaine production remained near historically high levels, while several armed groups, such as the ELN, FARC dissidents, and the Gulf Clan, expanded their presence and influence in several regions of the country. Colombian security officials have also reported an increase in the use of drones and other advanced technologies by these criminal organizations ([Barber, 2026](#)), reflecting the evolving sophisticated tactics that are being used by non-state actors.

The security debate was further shaped by the Petro Administration's "Total Peace" strategy, which called for peaceful negotiations with armed groups. As a result, organizations such as the ELN, FARC dissident factions, and the Gulf Clan continued to operate across large parts of the country, while several major security crises during 2025 and 2026 kept people's attention focused on crime and violence. These included an ELN offensive in the Catatumbo region that left more than 80 people dead and displaced approximately 64,000 civilians ([McDermott, 2025](#)). Then, in April 2026, a wave of coordinated attacks in southwestern Colombia culminated in a bombing on the Pan-American Highway that killed 20 civilians and injured dozens more ([Associated Press, 2026](#)). These incidents, along with numerous attacks against security forces, local officials, and rural communities across the country, reinforced public concerns about the state's ability to contain armed groups and maintain public order. Together, these incidents and many like them reinforced concerns about the state's ability or even willingness to contain armed groups and keep citizens safe. At the same time, cooperation with the United States on counternarcotics efforts and extraditions declined, raising concerns about the future effectiveness of bilateral security cooperation.

This decrease in cooperation and the deterioration in U.S.-Colombia relations became even more pronounced in October 2025, when the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated President Gustavo Petro under counternarcotics-



related authorities ([U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2025](#)). The designation, which cited record levels of coca cultivation and cocaine production, marked an unprecedented development in bilateral relations and further intensified debate over the effectiveness of the Petro Administration's security and counternarcotics policies.

Despite the security challenges, however, Colombia's congressional elections in March 2026 proceeded with relatively few incidents, which eased fears that violence would disrupt the presidential elections. Nevertheless, the continued presence of armed groups in several regions meant that security remained a concern. In some areas, violence and insecurity continued to complicate election logistics, including voter transportation, polling operations, and the distribution of electoral materials.

ELECTORAL INSTITUTIONS AND PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN ELECTIONS

Public confidence in Colombia's electoral institutions came under increasing strain during the 2026 presidential campaign. The National Electoral Council (CNE) and the National Civil Registry (Registraduría) administer the electoral process in Colombia, and both institutions became the subject of scrutiny. President Gustavo Petro repeatedly criticized the electoral authorities, questioned the transparency of the 2026 election, and accused electoral institutions of bias after the CNE opened an investigation into alleged campaign finance irregularities related to his 2022 presidential campaign ([Radio Nacional de Colombia, 2025](#)). At the same time, opposition figures also raised concerns about other aspects of the electoral process, further contributing to public skepticism and political polarization.

These disputes unfolded against a broader backdrop of misinformation and distrust surrounding elections in Colombia. Claims about vote counting, ballot handling, and election administration in general have always circulated in Colombia, occasionally leading to protests and even attacks against electoral facilities. In October 2023, a Registraduría office in Gamarra was set on fire by an angry mob following the spread of false claims regarding local election procedures, resulting in the death of an election official and serious injuries to other employees in the office ([El Heraldo, 2025](#)).

Petro's conduct during the campaign also generated controversy. He has been accused of blurring the line between his role as head of state and partisan political activity by holding large political events during the electoral period and, on Election Day, publicly displaying his marked ballot to cameras ([El Universal, 2026](#)). While Colombia's electoral authorities successfully administered both the congressional and presidential elections, repeated attacks on the credibility of electoral institutions risk undermining public confidence in democratic processes regardless of the outcome.

THE U.S.-COLOMBIA RELATIONSHIP

The United States and Colombia have long maintained one of the closest partnerships in the Western Hemisphere. The United States is Colombia's largest trading partner ([U.S. Department of State, n.d](#)) and has invested billions of dollars in security, counternarcotics, and institutional strengthening efforts over the past two decades. Cooperation between the two countries has traditionally



centered on combating transnational crime, reducing narcotics production, promoting regional stability, and expanding economic ties.

However, the relationship became increasingly tense during the Petro Administration. Tensions escalated in January 2025 after President Gustavo Petro initially refused to allow U.S. military aircraft carrying deported Colombian nationals to land in Colombia, prompting President Donald Trump to threaten tariffs, visa restrictions, and other punitive measures before the dispute was ultimately resolved ([St. Vincent Times, 2025](#)). The two leaders continued to exchange public criticism throughout much of 2025, reflecting broader disagreements over migration, counternarcotics policy, and regional security. Despite these tensions, Trump and Petro met at the White House on February 3, 2026. Even with months of public criticism between them, the meeting was cordial, with Trump describing Petro as a "great" leader and both sides emphasizing the importance of continued cooperation on trade and security issues ([Correal et al., 2026](#)).

The election could have significant implications for the future of U.S.-Colombia relations. Following the first round of voting, President Trump publicly endorsed Abelardo de la Espriella, describing him as a strong leader and expressing his "full support" for his candidacy ([Suárez, 2026](#)). The endorsement highlighted the growing international attention surrounding the runoff and shows the degree to which Colombia's election is being viewed through the lens of regional security and counternarcotics cooperation.

From a U.S. perspective, Colombia is one of the most important strategic partners in the Western Hemisphere. The United States has invested heavily in Colombia's security, economic development, and institutional capacity over the past two decades, helping transform the country into a key regional ally. Cooperation between the two countries remains critical to counternarcotics efforts, regional stability, migration management, and the fight against transnational criminal organizations.

As mentioned, however, Colombia faces a number of serious security challenges. Coca cultivation and cocaine production have remained near historic highs; armed groups have expanded their presence in several regions; and violence linked to narco-trafficking continues to affect communities across the country. These concerns have contributed to growing scrutiny in Washington regarding Colombia's direction. In 2025, the Trump Administration decertified Colombia as a counternarcotics partner ([Pannell, 2025](#)), a major policy decision that shocked the international community, given the close security partnership that has defined the U.S.-Colombia relationship for decades.

FRAUD ALLEGATIONS AND ELECTORAL INTEGRITY

There is no evidence that irregularities in the first round were significant enough to affect the election's outcome. Preliminary results were released on schedule, accepted by the candidates advancing to the runoff, and broadly recognized by domestic and international observers ([International Republican Institute, 2026](#)). While isolated anomalies and administrative complaints are likely to be reviewed through Colombia's established legal and electoral procedures, they do not appear meaningful enough to cast any doubt on the validity of the vote.



The first round also demonstrated the capacity of Colombia's electoral institutions to administer a nationwide election efficiently. Voting took place without major disruptions, and electoral authorities transmitted preliminary results less than two hours after the close of polls. The orderly conduct of the election reinforced confidence in the vote-counting process despite months of political attacks against electoral institutions.

Nevertheless, accusations over electoral integrity will likely remain part of the political environment heading into the runoff. President Gustavo Petro repeatedly questioned the transparency of the 2026 election before the first round ([Radio Nacional de Colombia, 2025](#)), and, after election day, refused to accept the results, claiming he had evidence of fraud ([Alsema, 2026](#)).

In response to allegations questioning the election results, the Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil published a message on its social media accounts urging Colombians to accept the outcome of the vote. It read “If the system works when you win, it also works when you lose” ([Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil, 2026](#)). It is likely, however, that allegations of irregularities will continue to emerge ahead of the runoff, even though the first-round results provided little to no evidence of fraud.

While allegations of fraud largely focused on vote counting and election administration, some opposition figures argued that the more significant concerns arose before Election Day. Former President Álvaro Uribe took to X on election day to say that international observers may not notice anything unusual on Election Day because most of the abuses had already happened during the campaign period. He accused the Petro Administration of using public events, government resources, and political pressure to influence the campaign in favor of Iván Cepeda ([Uribe Vélez, 2026](#)).

POST-ELECTION REACTIONS AND RHETORIC

The three leading candidates addressed the country shortly after the results were announced. Abelardo de la Espriella delivered remarks claiming victory. Paloma Valencia accepted the results and endorsed de la Espriella, a significant development given her support among center-right voters and the influence of the Centro Democrático party ([Freixes, 2026](#)). Former President Álvaro Uribe, who had endorsed Valencia during the first round, also announced his support for de la Espriella and encouraged his supporters to unite behind his candidacy in the second round ([Uribe Vélez, 2026](#)).

Regardless of who wins the presidency, Colombia's fragmented Congress will require coalition-building and legislative negotiation; thus, Paloma's support is significant because Abelardo needs it not only to win but also to govern. The “Centro Democrático” party remains one of the country's most influential political parties and controls a substantial bloc in Congress, the second-largest congressional bloc after Petro's coalition, making its support valuable both electorally and legislatively.

The response from the governing coalition was very different. President Gustavo Petro rejected the results, raised concerns about the integrity of the electoral process, and alleged irregularities despite the absence of evidence that any reported anomalies were sufficient to affect the outcome ([Petro, 2026](#)). Iván Cepeda remained silent at first but later accepted the results.



BARRIERS

Several of the factors that made the first round difficult to predict will remain in place ahead of the runoff. Public polling remains limited and often inconsistent, while misinformation continues to circulate widely across social media and political networks. Colombia's highly polarized political environment further complicates efforts to assess voter preferences, particularly among undecided and infrequent voters. In addition, the active involvement of President Gustavo Petro and other government officials in the political debate is likely to keep the campaign environment unusually controversial during the final weeks before the vote.

POLLING LAW

Colombia's current electoral environment is now also being affected by Law 2424 of 2025, also known as the “Ley de Encuestas” (Polling Law). The legislation regulates the production, publication, and dissemination of electoral polling data with the goal of guaranteeing equal access to information and more transparency in public opinion research ([Congreso de Colombia, 2025](#)). While supporters of the law say that it improves the quality and reliability of polling, critics believe that the restrictions have reduced the volume of publicly available surveys and made it more difficult to reliably gauge voter sentiment. As a result, the limited availability of polling data contributed to uncertainty surrounding the first round and may continue to complicate efforts to predict the runoff results.

OUTLOOK FOR THE RUNOFF

With only two candidates remaining, both Abelardo de la Espriella and Iván Cepeda will need to expand beyond their current supporters and appeal to voters who supported other candidates or did not participate in the first round. While endorsements from political leaders and parties may influence some voters, turnout will likely be one of the decisive factors on June 21, 2026. Public confidence in the electoral process is therefore especially important, but it is possible that allegations of fraud and attacks on electoral institutions might discourage participation by convincing some voters that their vote will not matter or that the outcome has already been predetermined.

The campaign is expected to become more polarized as both sides try to frame the election as a choice between two fundamentally different visions for Colombia's future. Security, economic conditions, democratic institutions, and the country's relationship with the United States will likely remain central themes.

Regardless of who wins the runoff, allegations regarding election integrity will likely continue. The combination of a close race, more polarization, and months of public attacks on electoral institutions increases the likelihood that the losing candidate will question the process or question the legitimacy of the result.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The first round of Colombia's presidential election showed that security, public order, and economic opportunity remain among the country's most important political issues. Regardless



of the outcome of the runoff, the United States should reaffirm that Colombia remains one of its most important strategic partners in the Western Hemisphere. U.S. policy should focus on strengthening democratic institutions, restoring counternarcotics cooperation, combating transnational criminal organizations—many of which the U.S. now considers foreign terrorist organizations—and preventing further deterioration of regional security.

First, the Trump Administration should place security cooperation at the center of the bilateral relationship. Washington should expand intelligence sharing, support the targeting of senior criminal leaders, strengthen maritime and border interdiction efforts, and condition portions of future assistance on measurable progress against coca cultivation, cocaine production, and the activities of the ELN, FARC dissident groups, and the Gulf Clan. The administration should also make clear that cooperation on extraditions and counternarcotics enforcement will remain a priority in the relationship. These groups pose a direct challenge not only to Colombia's stability but also to U.S. security, migration flows, and regional stability.

Second, the United States should make extradition cooperation a central benchmark of the U.S.-Colombia relationship. Colombia has historically been one of Washington's most important extradition partners, and the credible threat of extradition to the United States has long served as one of the most effective deterrents against criminal and terrorist organizations. Washington should oppose any efforts to weaken, suspend, or condition extraditions for senior members of the ELN, FARC dissident groups, the Gulf Clan, or other transnational criminal organizations. The administration should also make clear that continued security assistance and counternarcotics cooperation will depend in part on Colombia's willingness to extradite high-value criminal actors wanted by U.S. authorities.

Third, the United States should begin exploring a modernized security partnership modeled on the principles that made Plan Colombia successful while adapting it to today's challenges ([Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, 2001](#)). This kind of initiative should expand intelligence sharing, strengthen aerial and maritime surveillance capabilities, support the targeting of high-value criminals, improve border security, and increase cooperation against narco trafficking, illegal mining, money laundering, and arms trafficking networks. It should also help Colombian authorities counter the growing use of drones and other emerging technologies by criminal organizations. Beyond simple security aid, a modernized partnership should include support for judicial institutions, anti-corruption efforts, and state presence in regions of Colombia where armed groups continue to operate with impunity. By combining security cooperation with the strengthening of institutions, the United States can help Colombia regain control of territory currently contested by criminal terrorist organizations while reinforcing long-term stability for the Western Hemisphere.

Finally, the Trump Administration should reassert U.S. leadership in the Western Hemisphere by making clear that democratic governance, economic freedom, and security cooperation remain the foundation of America's regional partnerships. Colombia's election has demonstrated that many Latin Americans remain deeply concerned about crime, economic stagnation, weak institutions, and the growing influence of authoritarian actors in the hemisphere. The United States should respond by pursuing a more active regional strategy that rewards partners committed to security



cooperation, the rule of law, and free-market reforms. This includes expanding economic engagement, encouraging near-shoring and U.S. investment in the region, and providing legitimate and sustainable alternatives to Chinese infrastructure, telecommunications, and strategic investments. A secure, prosperous, and democratic Colombia serves as an anchor of stability in Latin America and is critical to U.S. efforts to counter authoritarian influence, strengthen regional security, and expand economic opportunity throughout the Americas.

Conclusion

The stakes of the runoff extend well beyond Colombia itself. The first round on May 31, 2026, revealed a country that is deeply concerned about security, public order, economic opportunity, and the future direction of the state. The Trump Administration has already signaled its interest in the outcome through President Trump's endorsement of Abelardo de la Espriella ([Correal, 2026](#)). In the weeks ahead, the Trump Administration should continue to speak clearly about the principles and priorities that underpin the U.S.-Colombia partnership: strong counternarcotics cooperation, support for extraditions, the dismantling of transnational criminal organizations, respect for democratic institutions, and a commitment to economic freedom and the rule of law.

Colombia's future will inevitably have direct consequences for regional security, migration, narcotics trafficking, and American interests throughout the Western Hemisphere. At a time when many Colombians are debating the country's future, the United States should leave no doubt about the type of partnership it seeks and the values it intends to support. The United States is strongest when its neighbors are secure, prosperous, and aligned with democratic principles. Colombia's runoff will be a consequential test of the future of security, stability, and democratic governance in the Western Hemisphere.



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