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MEMORANDUM | [Western Hemisphere Initiative](#)

# AFPI STAFF OBSERVE AUGUST PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN BOLIVIA

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## Summary

On August 17, 2025, I had the opportunity to observe Bolivia’s general elections from the capital city of La Paz. Bolivians voted for president, vice president, and all seats in both houses of the legislature. As part of a program hosted by Transparencia Electoral—and in coordination with Fundación Jubileo—the experience included one day of training, a full day of election observation, and two days of high-level meetings surrounding election-day activities. The trip offered a valuable on-the-ground perspective on the integrity of the electoral process, public sentiment, and the political and security dynamics shaping the country.

## Election Outcome

For the first time in Bolivia’s modern history, the presidential race is heading to a runoff between two candidates: former President Jorge “Tuto” Quiroga and Senator Rodrigo Paz Pereira. Neither secured the necessary threshold of more than 50% of the vote or at least 40% with a 10-point advantage over the rest of the field to win outright, thus triggering a second round on October 19. The winner will take office on November 8.

The two presidential contenders advancing to a second round reflect a new political moment after nearly two decades of socialist rule. Rodrigo Paz, a senator and son of former President Jaime Paz Zamora, surprised many by rising unexpectedly to the top slot with almost 32% of the vote. Jorge Quiroga, a former president and vice president, came in second place with almost 27% of the vote.

## Political Landscape

This election marks a dramatic political shift for Bolivia, because it marked a clear break from two decades of authoritarian rule under MAS (Movimiento al Socialismo, or “Movement Toward Socialism”). The long-dominant MAS, which held power from 2006 until now, suffered a crushing defeat. MAS’s candidate, Eduardo del Castillo, barely passed the 3% threshold required for MAS to remain a party, and its legislative presence was nearly wiped out. For twenty years, MAS won elections outright in the first round, usually by overwhelming margins under Evo Morales and later Luis Arce. This year, however, MAS came into these elections divided and weak and left humiliated.



MAS lost much of its support after presiding over the country's worst economic crisis in decades, with inflation at a 40-year high, gas shortages, and no access to U.S. dollars—conditions close to where Venezuela stood in 2012. Bolivian voters didn't just reject MAS; they rejected a system that failed them. As an electoral observer on the ground, I witnessed firsthand a population tired of being lied to and desperate for real change.

Part of MAS's collapse is due to the absence of support from former President Evo Morales himself. Evo, Bolivia's first Indigenous president and longest-serving president (2006-2019), was barred from running in this election after a failed attempt to change the constitution to allow a fourth term in the last election. He is also increasingly isolated because he is currently holed up in Bolivia's jungle, evading an arrest warrant on charges related to impregnating a 15-year-old girl when he was president.

Due to these reasons, Morales has become openly hostile to the party he once led. He is angry that current President Arce, who is deeply unpopular and who chose not to seek re-election, selected a candidate not loyal to him, and he is resentful towards other former allies who launched their own presidential campaigns. Therefore, Morales did not back any candidate and instead encouraged his supporters to cast null or blank votes in protest, saying that if null votes outnumbered the top candidate's share, it would mean he had won. About 19.8% of Bolivians voted null and 2.50% voted blank, meaning Morales still has strong support among 1 in 5 Bolivians.

## Who Are the Candidates?

### Rodrigo Paz

Rodrigo Paz (Partido Democrático Cristiano) is a senator from Tarija, Bolivia's wine country, where he used to be mayor. Largely dismissed by pollsters, Paz shocked observers by surging from the bottom of an eight-candidate field to capture first place.

His unexpected rise may be explained by his ability to split the traditional MAS vote. In the last election, President Arce won 55% of the vote, but this time, MAS only managed to retain about 25% of the vote when you combine the estimated 19% of null votes (following Evo Morales's call to vote null), while 8% went to Andrónico Rodríguez, 3% for Arce's candidate Eduardo del Castillo, and a small 1.5% for Jhonny Fernández. This suggests that a significant portion of disaffected MAS voters, possibly around 20%, may have shifted their support to Paz.

This may be due to Paz's moderate tone and populist proposals, such as bonuses for mothers and better pensions for retirees, which resonated with many disillusioned MAS voters who want change without swinging too far right. He also heavily campaigned in indigenous and rural areas, places that were largely ignored by other candidates. These communities are often underrepresented in polling, which may explain the surprise result.

Though many consider him a "fresh face" in politics, Paz comes from a political dynasty. His father, Jaime Paz Zamora, was president in the early 1990s. He is known for surviving an assassination attempt—a helicopter crash that killed everyone else on board. His uncle, Víctor Paz



Estenssoro, was a four-term president and founding figure of Bolivia's modern political landscape, and his uncle Óscar "Motete" Zamora Medinaceli was an influential left-leaning leader who founded the Frente Revolucionario de Izquierda or the "Revolutionary Left Front" in Bolivia.

With support from rural and indigenous voters, Paz has managed to appeal across ideological and ethnic lines. Some observers believe his broad appeal could help keep the peace in a tense political climate by giving historically marginalized groups a stronger sense of representation.

His popularity was also boosted by his very popular pick for vice president, Edman Lara, a former police captain known for his outspoken stance against corruption. Lara is believed to have helped Paz appeal to voters angry at public-sector dysfunction and insecurity.

### **Jorge "Tuto" Quiroga**

Jorge "Tuto" Quiroga (Alianza Libre) is looking to be president again after 23 years, serving as president briefly from 2001–2002. He first served as Bolivia's youngest vice president under Hugo Bánzer and took over when Bánzer stepped down due to illness. Quiroga completed the term but chose not to run for reelection at that time.

Quiroga represents the clearest and most vocal anti-MAS sentiment in the race, which resonates with many, especially conservative and upper-middle-class voters, but such expression has made it difficult for him to attract moderates and disillusioned MAS voters looking for a more conciliatory figure.

Quiroga's economic plan focuses on cutting government spending, stabilizing the country's finances, and seeking an IMF rescue package. He's had a long history working with international organizations, and has stated that he would seek to restore close relations with the United States.

Interestingly, Quiroga served as finance minister back in 1992–1993 during the government of Jaime Paz Zamora, the father of his current presidential rival, Rodrigo Paz. That connection might make it harder for Quiroga to convince voters he represents real change.

### **A Question Circulating in Bolivia's Political Landscape**

One of the more widely discussed narratives following the election concerns Rodrigo Paz's sudden rise to the top on election day. Some people have theorized that his surge at the polls may not have been purely organic but rather part of a calculated Chavista-style operation designed to attract disillusioned MAS voters and preserve the movement's influence under a new face and party.

Skeptics of this theory argue that if MAS still had the kind of power and influence to execute such a coordinated strategy, it would have made more sense to consolidate support behind an official MAS candidate. Many also point out the fact that both Paz and his father have faced political persecution under MAS-led governments, which casts doubt on the idea of a covert alliance.



Whether true or not, this theory underscores the growing climate of mistrust in Bolivia and highlights just how divided and suspicious the country's political scene has become.

### **U.S. Interests for the Trump Administration**

The result of Bolivia's election, regardless of who wins the runoff in October, represents a strategic opening for the United States. Both candidates are U.S.-educated (Quiroga graduated from Texas A&M University and Paz from American University) and have both demonstrated their willingness to cooperate with the United States, a dramatic shift from Bolivia's current alignment with adversarial powers.

Under Evo Morales, Bolivia cut ties with the U.S., kicked out the DEA and U.S. ambassadors, and aligned itself with Russia, China, and Iran while supporting authoritarian regimes in Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. These alliances made Bolivia a hub for authoritarian influence, with Iran establishing one of its strongest foreign policy footprints in Latin America there. Beijing, meanwhile, invested over \$3 billion in strategic sectors like lithium and energy, giving China massive control over Bolivia's critical mineral resources.

This upcoming change in leadership offers a rare opportunity to reverse that trajectory. Both candidates have rejected Morales's foreign alignments. Quiroga has even pledged to distance Bolivia from Iran, withdraw recognition of Maduro's regime in Venezuela, and prioritize relations with the U.S. and international institutions like the IMF and World Bank.

What's happening in Bolivia is important because it is a nation rich in strategic resources, home to the world's largest lithium reserves and vast natural gas fields. These resources, which recently have been dominated by Chinese interests, are critical to global supply chains, energy security, and future economic development.

Restoring U.S. engagement by lifting punitive tariffs, renewing cooperation on narcotics, and appointing a Senate-confirmed ambassador to La Paz for the first time since 2008 could help strengthen democracy, reduce Chinese and Iranian influence, and support a more peaceful and prosperous hemisphere.

For the United States, the changes happening in Bolivia present an opportunity. This moment is not unique to Bolivia but is part of a larger shift across our hemisphere. From Argentina to Ecuador and now Bolivia, with elections ahead in Chile, Honduras, Costa Rica, Colombia, Brazil, and beyond, people are turning away from the false promises of socialism and authoritarianism and are demanding real sovereignty, accountability, and change. We have yet to see what happens in the runoff, but the direction is clear, and the United States should seize this moment. Advancing America First goals in the hemisphere means supporting countries and leaders who reject authoritarianism, defend national sovereignty, and counter the growing influence of the People's Republic of China and Iran.



## Key Observations

- ★ **Mandatory Voting:** Voting is established in Bolivia's Constitution and electoral law and required for citizens aged 18–70. Therefore, turnout was robust at 86.95%.
- ★ **Proof of Voting:** A certificado de sufragio (voting certificate) is required to access essential services including banking, wages, notarial transactions, and air travel for up to 90 days. Failing to vote leads to administrative hurdles, though not criminal sanctions.
  - Even foreign residents feel the effects of this requirement. One foreign diplomat shared that, despite not holding Bolivian citizenship, he is routinely asked to show a voting certificate for everyday tasks. In some cases, presenting his foreign passport is not enough, and additional documentation is required to prove he's not a dual citizen. This is how deeply embedded civic participation is in Bolivia's bureaucracy!
- ★ **Alcohol Ban:** Bolivia enforces a "Ley Seca" (no alcohol sales or consumption) for 48 hours before the election to help ensure voter turnout.
- ★ **Cities Shut Down:** On election day, the government orders a full shutdown of all commercial activity, so that no citizen has an excuse not to vote. Many businesses resent the closures because it means they lose an entire day of revenue. Meanwhile, street vendors seize the opportunity and set up right outside polling stations, turning those spaces into informal markets.
- ★ **Transportation Freeze:** On election day, vehicle traffic is banned nationwide, and people must walk or bike to vote. Even the teleférico (cable cars) in La Paz did not operate on election day. The restriction is said to protect ballot transport from potential interference and to ensure that people can only vote in one place. Permits are issued for some essential workers such as emergency personnel, and people who do not comply are fined.
- ★ **Sundays Only:** Elections are always held on Sundays. Having elections on a Sunday has transformed voting into a family affair, and I observed many families walking together to the polls.
- ★ **Voting from Abroad:** Bolivians living in 33 select countries are eligible to vote from abroad, with large communities participating in Argentina, Spain, Brazil, and the U.S. However, due to budget constraints this year, the government was unable to rent external voting centers as in previous elections, so voting was limited to consulates and embassies.
- ★ **Prisoner Voting:** Bolivia allows incarcerated individuals to vote. In this election, political prisoners were among those who cast ballots, including former President Jeanine Áñez, a painful reminder of how deeply Bolivia's justice system has been distorted by politics.



- ★ **Ballots Feature Party Symbols:** To help voters with low literacy, ballots include party logos and photos of candidates.
- ★ **Weak Enforcement in Voting Booths:** Although the use of cameras or phones inside voting booths is supposedly prohibited, with violators subject to fines, this rule is rarely enforced. In practice, voting is far from private, and it's common for people to photograph their ballots without consequence.
- ★ **Allegations of Coercion:** Public sector employees have reported facing political pressure to vote for the ruling party. One person shared that her daughter, who works for Impuestos Nacionales (Bolivia's tax authority), was required to take a photo of her ballot and gather pictures from family members' ballots to show that they had all voted for MAS—under threat of being fired.
- ★ **Heavy Police Presence:** There was a significant presence of armed police with visible rifles throughout the country, including entrances and interiors of polling places. In Bolivia, there is no public trust in the police. According to a 2020 survey, half of Bolivians believe that “all or almost all” officers are involved in corruption. In other countries, police are often kept away from polling stations to avoid intimidating voters, but Bolivia takes the opposite approach.
- ★ **Electoral Oversight by the TSE:** The Tribunal Supremo Electoral or “Supreme Electoral Tribunal” (TSE) is not only responsible for administering elections, but they also define who can run, enforce the law, and certify results, thus wielding immense influence over Bolivia's democratic process.
- ★ **Voters with Disabilities:** Most voting stations in Bolivia are not physically accessible for citizens who use wheelchairs or have mobility limitations. When a voter with a disability arrives and requests assistance, election officials are required to temporarily close the entire table and carry the ánfora (ballot box) outside to them. The table remains closed until the person has cast their vote in private. Although election officials make accommodations for the elderly and disabled at the site, getting to the polling place remains a major barrier. I observed people navigating steep hills, cracked sidewalks, and buildings without ramps or elevators. Changing one's voting address is also bureaucratically difficult, forcing some to travel long distances to reach their voting stations.
- ★ **Election Administration:**
  - **Randomly Selected Poll Workers:** Citizens are chosen by lottery to serve as jurados electorales (poll workers) in a method like U.S. jury duty. Compensation is minimal, about the equivalent of \$10. Tables did not open unless at least half of workers were present. Otherwise, early voters were mandated to step in as poll workers.
  - **Voting Centers:** Polling stations, primarily located in schools, operated smoothly across neighborhoods of all income levels. Facilities ranged from four to five voting tables, to as many as 51 in the largest venues. Although official hours are 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., tables stayed open past closing if lines remained, ensuring everyone can vote.



- **Transparent Vote Counting:** Although the process of casting a vote is private, ballot counting was public and transparent. Ballot boxes were opened in view of all; votes were read aloud and signed actas (tally sheets) were certified on the spot.
- **Real-Time Results with SIREPRE:** We spent the evening at the TSE's SIREPRE (Sistema de Resultados Preliminares or Preliminary Results System) command center, where we got to witness the real-time vote-tracking system in action. This platform, which is informational only and not legally binding, transmits vote counts via secure mobile app uploads. On election night, poll workers take photographs of each voting station's acta (tally) and upload them into a mobile application. The image and the data are transmitted through encrypted channels to a centralized processing center and then displayed live. This formal, legally sanctioned process that counts the full tally of ballots may take multiple days, so this is a great way for people to get preliminary results.

### Other Observations:

- **Election Anxiety:** People approach elections as if preparing for a crisis. Since the risk of post-election crisis is high, in the days leading up to the election, supermarkets were packed and extremely long lines formed at gas stations.
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- **Concerns in Rural Areas:** In MAS-aligned rural regions, there were serious concerns about voter coercion and lack of ballot secrecy. I was warned that in some communities, union leaders pre-mark ballots and then have voters sign them in front of them—undermining the principle of free and fair elections.
- **No Trust in the Electoral System:** Memories of the 2019 PREP controversy (when vote counts were paused at 83% and later resumed with a sudden and suspicious shift in results) still haunt Bolivians. Though the TSE has been restructured, skepticism remains deeply rooted.
- **International Observation:** I joined over 500 international observers monitoring Bolivia's elections, alongside more than 600 national observers just from Fundación Jubileo, the organization I accompanied in La Paz. While some voters thanked us for being there, others looked on with curiosity or mistook us for electoral officials, often approaching us with questions about the process.



## Predictions for Round Two

Rodrigo Paz appears to be the frontrunner heading into the October runoff, barring any major mistakes or missteps in the campaign. The MAS vote is fractured, and a portion of its former base is expected to continue migrating toward Paz. His strategy appears to prioritize building alliances across different political and social groups, including the indigenous population—a key factor for governance in Bolivia’s complex landscape.

The next president will inherit a bankrupt country with a severe dollar shortage, which limits its ability to import essential goods. Urgent challenges will include renegotiating foreign debt, attracting foreign investment, and introducing austerity measures. These measures will be deeply unpopular, and there is a real risk that they will provoke protests and social unrest. Meanwhile, remnants of MAS may seek to leverage Bolivia’s longstanding deep social divisions to fan the flames. Governing Bolivia is very difficult, and many presidents have failed to complete their terms amid ongoing instability. The incoming administration will likely face similar risks.

Despite Evo’s loss of formal power, his political influence remains strong. Some of his supporters have already threatened disruptive protests and even a coup if a right-leaning candidate wins. Evo himself has made it clear that he will do everything in his power to destabilize the next president, with supporters threatening protests and blockades, including airports, until that leader steps down. The next administration will face a tough road ahead.

Given this volatile political landscape, whoever wins the presidency may find it necessary to negotiate or engage with Evo in some form. Historically, nearly all recent Bolivian leaders have had to strike deals with Evo or his political base because governing otherwise was impossible amid rising violence. It remains to be seen whether either Rodrigo Paz or Tuto Quiroga will be able to adopt a different approach.

