

Colombia: Presidential Elections in 2022

June 16, 2022

On June 19, 2022, Colombia, long a close U.S. ally in Latin America, is scheduled to hold a presidential runoff vote. Whatever the outcome of the election, the new government may seek to [reshape](#) Colombia's relations with the United States; both candidates favor policies very different from those of previous administrations. Congress maintains a keen interest in several issues regarding Colombia, including narcotics, responses to neighboring Venezuela, trade, human rights, and the [ongoing peace process](#).

The Candidates and the Political Setting

[Gustavo Petro](#) (62), a leftist and current senator who has twice run for president, faces [Rodolfo Hernández](#) (77), a self-defined rightwing maverick. Neither candidate has links to Colombia's traditional center and center-right parties. Experts expected that Federico Gutiérrez, the center-right former mayor of Medellín who pledged continuity and an investor-friendly administration, would face Petro in a second round. Instead, in the May 29 [first round](#), Petro, who had led in the polls for months, received 40% of the vote, followed by Hernández, with 28.2%. Although Gutiérrez has urged his voters to support Hernández and reject Petro, several polls indicate the race is [too close to call](#).

[Petro](#) represents a coalition of leftist parties, the Historic Pact. Between stints in Colombia's Congress, Petro served as mayor of the capital Bogotá and, in his youth, was a member of a leftist guerrilla group, the [M-19](#). Petro last ran for president in the 2018 election, winning a historic number of votes for the political left in the runoff vote. If elected, Petro would be Colombia's first leftist president.

[Hernández](#) is an engineer by training who became a wealthy builder and served a term as mayor of the midsize city Bucaramanga. Founder of a political movement known as the Anticorruption League, [his campaign](#) has made corruption in politics its central concern. He has conducted his campaign largely over social media platforms, such as TikTok, and has avoided candidate debates.

Colombia's population reportedly is more [polarized and dissatisfied](#) than in past decades. Many Colombians, especially young people, reportedly express widespread frustration with the administrations of the traditional elite parties that, in their view, were unable to meet the country's steep challenges. In a recent [poll](#), some 85% of Colombians described the country as [moving](#) in the wrong direction.

President Iván Duque, who ends his term (2018-2022) in August, currently has approval ratings of around 25%. The candidates vying to replace Duque lack support in the 2022-2026 Colombian [Chamber of Representatives](#) and [Senate](#) elected on March 13, 2022, suggesting that either future president may face

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considerable [obstruction](#) from a fragmented congress. Two members of Hernández's Anticorruption League won seats, whereas Petro's Historic Pact gained the same number of seats as the traditional Conservative Party in both houses of the bicameral congress. Petro, if elected, has some allies in congress to support his agenda, though reportedly he [lacks skills](#) as a coalition-builder. His economic platform proposes structural changes such as moving to reduce dependence on hydrocarbon exports, increasing taxes on wealth, and potentially [updating free trade](#) agreements, including with the United States.

Petro and Hernández are characterized as "[antiestablishment](#)" populists, and each represents a [significant break](#) with the past. Despite being from opposite ends of the political spectrum, the two candidates agree on several policy ideas that are novel in Colombia: support for drug legalization (possibly to include cocaine), abortion rights, normalizing relations with Venezuela, and engaging in new peace talks with Colombia's now-largest leftist rebel group, the National Liberation Army (ELN).

U.S. -Colombia Relations and Outlook

Colombia has endured more than half a century of internal armed conflict. Since 2000, Plan Colombia, a joint U.S.-Colombian program focused initially on counternarcotics and later on counterterrorism, laid the foundation for an enduring security partnership with the United States. In 2016, the Colombian government signed a peace accord with Colombia's then-largest guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

Peace consolidation, which remains a major element of U.S. policy, has faced major challenges. Colombia's government failed to assert [control in rural](#) areas when the FARC demobilized, thus intensifying violence by armed groups. The government's implementation of the peace accord has lagged, according to the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame; the Institute is designated in the peace agreement as responsible for monitoring implementation. (For more, see the Kroc Institute's sixth report issued in June 2022.) Many critics [fault](#) the Duque Administration for lackluster peace accord progress. U.S. support for peace accord implementation has come primarily from the [U.S. Agency for International Development](#). Both Petro and Hernández have pledged their intention to fully implement the 2016 accord.

Among other challenges facing the next Colombian government, the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, with its health and social effects, has increased poverty and inequality. Colombia was a [top recipient](#) of U.S. vaccine and other assistance. Regionally, Colombia faces among the most significant challenges from a sharp rise in inflation. Another challenge is the ongoing burden stemming from Colombia's hosting of some 2 million Venezuelans fleeing their country. Under Duque, the Colombian government provided a decade of temporary protected status to [1.8 million](#) Venezuelan migrants, a humanitarian gesture [praised](#) by President Biden.

The prospect of policy changes under either of the two runoff candidates, and potential instability in the wake of a [contested election result](#), raises issues for possible congressional consideration. Congress may monitor changes in Colombia's security cooperation with the United States, especially in counternarcotics. Following two decades of close partnership, Members of Congress who have expressed support for further [deepening the relationship](#) may consider potential effects on cooperation in areas such as trade, response to climate change, and regional migration. In addition, Colombia is a strategic partner to the United States in promoting democratic governance and has worked to oppose the authoritarian government in Venezuela. Congress may monitor changes in Colombia-Venezuela relations under the next president and may consider whether—and, if so, how—such changes affect the potential for further U.S.-Colombian cooperation on these issues.

For more background, see CRS Report R43813, *Colombia: Background and U.S. Relations*.

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