



Colombia's 2026 Presidential Election

Updated May 19, 2026

On May 31, Colombia, a top U.S. security partner in Latin America, is scheduled to convene an election to replace President Gustavo Petro (2022-present), who is constitutionally barred from seeking reelection. U.S. officials and some Members of Congress have expressed concerns about the Petro government's counterdrug and security policies. The 119th Congress has reduced foreign assistance to Colombia and placed additional conditions on that assistance. Some [Members of Congress](#) also have [expressed concerns](#) about political violence in Colombia since the June 2025 assassination of a presidential hopeful and threats against other candidates.

The three main candidates are Iván Cepeda of Petro's leftist Historic Pact (PH) and two conservative rivals—Paloma Valencia of the Democratic Center (CD) and independent Abelardo De la Espriella. Members of Congress may examine these candidates' platforms and assess their possible implications for relations with the United States. If no candidate captures more than 50% of the vote, a runoff election is scheduled for June 21; the winner is to take office on August 7.

Domestic Context and Campaign

The legacy of outgoing President Petro, a polarizing figure whose popularity has [risen](#) since November, has influenced the elections. Supporters have praised Petro's focus on reducing inequality through labor reform and historic minimum wage increases despite his government's [corruption scandals](#). The Petro administration's deemphasis of coca eradication has coincided with record cocaine production. Also, the government's "total peace" negotiations involving ceasefires with illegally armed groups may have [bolstered](#) the power of such groups and fueled violence. Increased violence could [inhibit](#) voting in some regions as armed groups seek to [influence](#) the election results.

The results of Colombia's March 8 legislative elections illustrated a left-right division among voters regarding how best to address violence, corruption, and economic issues but also the continued relevance of traditional parties, including the Liberal and Conservative parties. PH captured the most Senate (25 of 103) and House of Representatives (43 of 183) seats, while CD garnered the second-largest number in both chambers (17 and 28, respectively). Four parties that aligned with the PH early in Petro's term despite ideological differences—but later broke with PH—together won 69 House seats and 38 Senate seats. The next president likely will need to form cross-party alliances.

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Candidates

Colombia began its presidential contest with hundreds of candidates. After three interparty primaries were held concurrently with legislative elections, Paloma Valencia, winner of the center-right primary, emerged as a leading candidate, alongside Cepeda and De la Espriella—neither of whom participated in a primary.



Iván Cepeda is a left-wing PH senator, human rights activist, and “total peace” negotiator. Cepeda has [pledged](#) to combat corruption, prioritize peace and armed conflict victims’ rights, enact a progressive tax reform, and bolster rural development. Cepeda [opposed](#) U.S. “intervention” in Venezuela and is skeptical of militarized drug policies.

Cepeda selected **Aida Quilcué**, a former senator and Indigenous activist, as his running mate, reinforcing PH’s support for underrepresented groups.



Abelardo De la Espriella is a right-wing criminal defense lawyer who has represented controversial figures including Alex Saab, a U.S.-indicted money launderer for former Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro. De la Espriella, a [political outsider](#) who also holds U.S. and Italian citizenship, rejected support from political parties. He has proposed aggressive security policies similar to those of Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele and [supports](#) military strikes on drug trafficking targets in Colombia and aerial fumigation of coca crops.

His running mate, **José Manuel Restrepo**, is an economist and former minister of finance.



Paloma Valencia, a conservative CD senator, is a lawyer backed by former President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010). Valencia has proposed a strong [security plan](#) to recapture territory from criminal groups and a counterdrug [alliance](#) with U.S. and European officials. She has pledged to streamline government and restart private investment in oil exploration and mining.

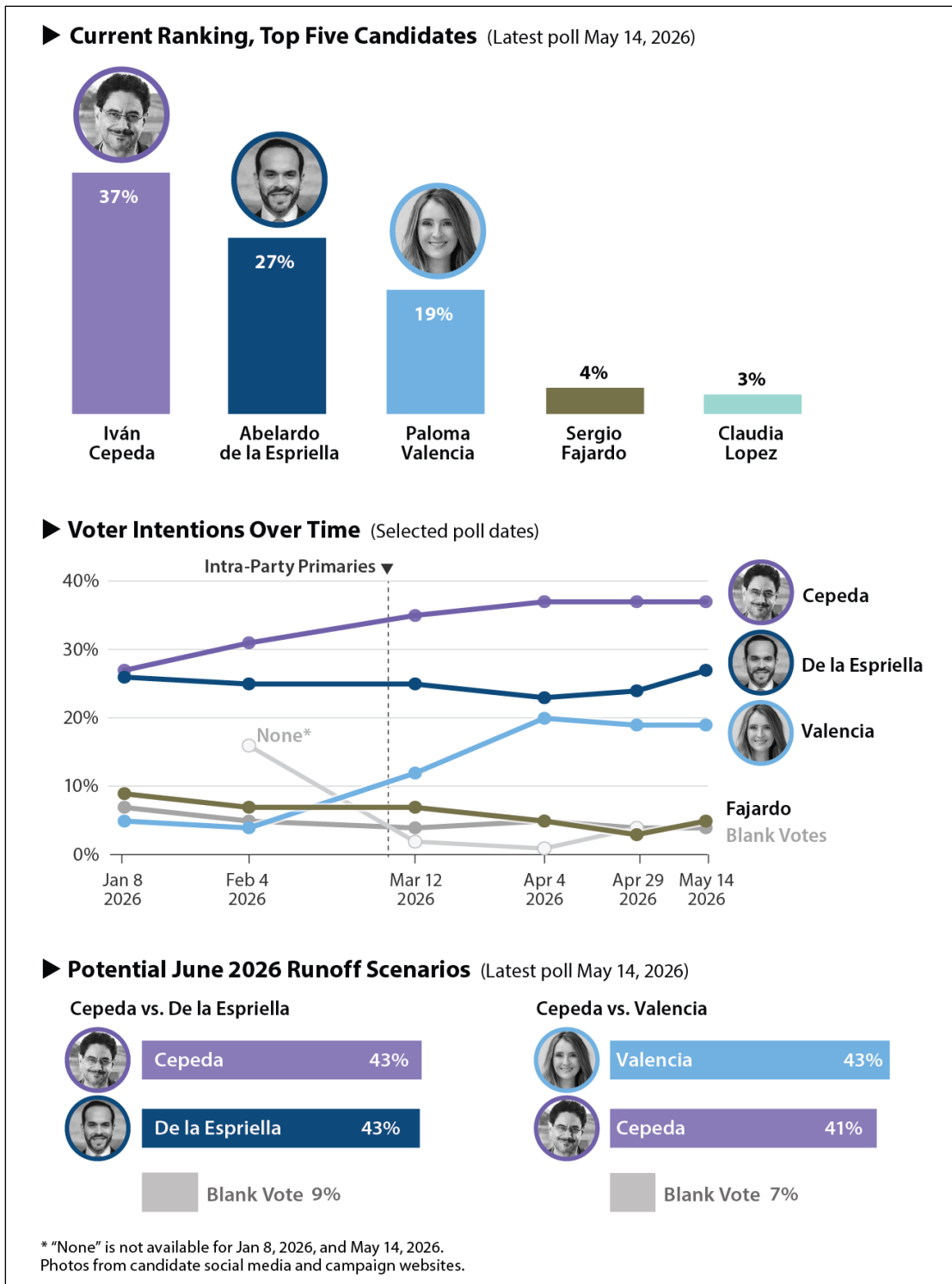
Valencia chose **Juan Carlos Oviedo**, a moderate economist who directed the national statistics agency, to join her ticket.

Other contenders include **Sergio Fajardo**, a former mayor of Medellín, and **Claudia Lopez**, a former mayor of Bogotá, both of whom are centrists.

Polls

Since January 2026, Cepeda has led in the polls but [remained short](#) of an absolute majority. A weighted average of [recent polls](#) suggests that Cepeda could narrowly lose to Valencia and tie De la Espriella in a runoff (see [Figure 1](#)).

Figure I. Voter Intentions



Source: CRS, using data from a weighted average of polls as published by Colombia's *La Silla Vacía*, <https://www.lasillavacia.com/silla-nacional/ponderador-de-encuestas-cepeda-pierde-la-ventaja-en-segunda-vuelta/>.

Implications for U.S. Policy and Issues for Congress

[U.S.-Colombian relations](#) have been strained under the second Trump Administration amid the Administration's differences with President Petro. Drug policy changes, U.S. foreign assistance cuts and tariffs, and Colombia's decision to sign a cooperation plan with the People's Republic of China on the Belt and Road Initiative have contributed to strained relations. In September 2025, President Trump [determined](#) that Colombia had failed to meet its counternarcotics commitments, the State Department [revoked](#) Petro's visa, and the Department of the Treasury [sanctioned](#) Petro under counternarcotics authorities. Those sanctions remain in place despite a reportedly [cordial](#) February 2026 White House meeting.

Colombia's next president may seek a positive relationship with the U.S. government, as the United States remains Colombia's top economic partner and a source of security and humanitarian support. Cepeda is regarded as [less polarizing](#) than President Petro and supports human rights programming and initiatives for Afro-Colombians and Indigenous peoples such as those [funded](#) in the FY2026 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 119-75). Nevertheless, his backing of Petro's security policies could strain relations. Valencia and De la Espriella have vowed to join President Trump's [Americas Counter Cartel](#) initiative. Valencia has proposed a modernized [Plan Colombia](#) bilateral security initiative. De la Espriella has endorsed security policies such as El Salvador's "state of exception" policy, which has [raised](#) some human rights concerns in Congress. Cepeda could maintain Petro's high corporate taxes and frequent regulatory changes, which have created [uncertainty](#) among investors, while his opponents reportedly could [seek](#) to attract U.S. businesses by rolling back investment restrictions and limiting regulations.

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