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Elections in El Salvador

2019 Presidential Election

Frequently Asked Questions

Americas

International Foundation for Electoral Systems

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Frequently Asked Questions

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Disclosure:
These FAQs reflect decisions made by the Salvadoran election authorities as of January 28, 2019, to the best of our knowledge. This document does not represent any IFES policy or technical recommendations.

When is Election Day? Who are citizens voting for?

El Salvador will vote for its next president and vice president on February 3, 2019. If no candidate wins an absolute majority, a runoff between the top two candidates will be held on March 10, 2019.

The current president is not allowed to run for immediate reelection. The new president will take office on June 1, 2019.

How is El Salvador's political system structured?

El Salvador is a republic, with the president elected by majority every five years. The current president is Salvador Sánchez Cerén, a leader from the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) party, who won in the 2014 runoff by less than 0.25 percent of the vote. In addition to the president and vice president, the executive branch includes a Cabinet of ministers, vice ministers and secretaries appointed by the president.

The unicameral national Legislative Assembly has 84 seats, including multi-seat constituencies and a single nationwide constituency allotted proportionally. Each of El Salvador's 14 administrative divisions, called departments, is represented by between three and 24 deputies in the Legislative Assembly, depending on the size of the department's population. National legislators are elected to three-year terms, with the last such election held on March 4, 2018.

The judicial branch is led by a Supreme Court of Justice made up of 15 judges, who are appointed by the Legislative Assembly to nine-year terms. The magistrates of the Supreme Court are divided between four chambers: the Constitutional Chamber, which is led by the president of the Supreme Court; the Civil Chamber; the Criminal Chamber; and the Administrative Disputes Chamber.

El Salvador has an unusual system because presidential elections are held every five years, while legislative and municipal authority elections are held every three years. Therefore, the balance of political power in El Salvador is constantly changing.

What is the election management body?

The Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) is responsible for calling, organizing and managing all electoral processes in El Salvador. The TSE consists of 10 magistrates (five main and five alternate), elected by the legislature for five-year terms that coincide with Salvadoran presidential terms.

Who can vote in these elections? How do citizens register to vote?

Every citizen of El Salvador is eligible to vote after reaching 18 years of age, unless forbidden by law. Under the nation's electoral code, Article 7, the following citizens are prohibited from voting:

- Those who have received a formal prison sentence;
- Those with mental disabilities;
- Those under state guardianship;
- Those suspended for refusing to hold an office for which they were elected;

- Those who have notoriously vicious conduct;
- Those who have been convicted for criminal offenses; and
- Those who have been involved in vote buying or selling, attempts to restrict the freedom to vote, attempts to reelect the same president to a second term and other electoral fraud.

A total of 5,268,411 people are registered to vote in the upcoming presidential election, including 5,948 Salvadorans living abroad. Of the total, 46.67 percent are men, 53.33 percent are women and 28.3 percent are 18 to 29 years old. Voter registration for the 2019 election closed on August 6, 2018.

Will there be out-of-country voting?

Yes, El Salvador allows out-of-country voting, which is especially important because a significant number of Salvadorans live outside of the country. The Legislative Assembly passed a law allowing out-of-country voting for presidential elections in 2013, and a 2016 Supreme Court ruling extended this right to national legislative elections. Out-of-country voting is done by mail, at no cost to the voter. This year, 5,948 citizens abroad requested to be mailed ballots to their home addresses, of whom 5,704 live in the United States. The ballots were mailed by December 14, 2018. For votes from abroad to be counted, ballots need to have been returned to the Supreme Electoral Tribunal in El Salvador by January 13, 2019.

Registration to vote from abroad in this presidential election closed on September 26, 2018 but will open again for future elections. Citizens living abroad can register to vote out-of-country at <https://pere.tse.gob.sv/>.

How will voters cast their ballots?

Citizens will vote using paper ballots. No special voting technology will be used. Each voter will cast a ballot individually at their assigned polling station.

Voting will be conducted in 9,568 polling stations within the 1,596 voting centers nationwide. Polls will be open on Election Day from 7:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and will be staffed by 78,752 poll workers.

How will votes be counted, tabulated and reported?

Votes will be counted at the voting center and the tally sheets will be transmitted electronically to a central data center in San Salvador. The tally sheets will then be validated and tabulated so preliminary results can be announced as quickly as possible.

The results will also be disseminated by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) through live transmission and the internet, where the preliminary results are posted for public viewing. After some technical difficulties during the legislative and municipal elections held in March 2018, the TSE increased its focus this year on improving and securing its results transmission system, which sends each voting center's results to be processed centrally. Final vote counting and tabulation is done by the TSE in San Salvador at the National Processing Center, according to Article 216 of the electoral code.

Who are the presidential and vice presidential candidates?

The current Salvadoran electoral system was established with the 1992 Peace Accords between the of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) rebel group and the Salvadoran government. Since then, the political system has been dominated by two parties, the right-wing Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) and the left-wing FMLN party. The public's decreased trust in established political parties and smaller parties' recent electoral successes have challenged the traditional two-party system. This year's presidential race may prove a further challenge to the political hegemony of ARENA and FMLN, as the current frontrunner is vying to become the first modern president from outside those groups.

Nayib Bukele is running outside the two main parties because the FMLN expelled the then-San Salvador mayor from the party in October 2017, rejecting his harsh criticism of the party and claiming that he was promoting internal divisions, in part through social media. Still determined to run for president, Bukele founded the New Ideas party and attempted to run under its banner, but the Supreme Electoral Tribunal did not approve the new party in time to participate in the 2019 election. Bukele then considered running as the candidate of the Democratic Change party, but the party's registration was cancelled for not reaching the minimum number of votes in the last elections. Bukele finally decided to run with the Grand Alliance for National Unity (GANU), though its history of corruption scandals and center-right politics are inconsistent with Bukele's previous platforms, because running under GANU was his only option to get on the 2019 ballot. His candidacy was challenged in court in late 2018, with charges of slander and sexist violence, but the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court dismissed the charges.

The four presidential candidates are the following:

Nayib Bukele, with running mate Félix Ulloa (party: GANU)

Bukele, the current frontrunner, served as mayor of San Salvador from 2015-18 as a member of FMLN. He is 37 years old, progressive and connected directly with his fans through a strong social media presence that includes nearly 1.4 million fans on Facebook. Bukele is the son of a prominent, wealthy businessman who supported the FMLN when it was a guerrilla group during the Salvadoran civil war from 1979-92.

Despite the ideological inconsistency and lack of major-party support, Bukele is currently polling as the frontrunner for the presidential election. He and Ulloa have refused to participate in televised national debates. Bukele takes a direct-to-the-voters approach on social media, preferring strategies such as Facebook Live videos to traditional interviews, which appeal in particular to young Salvadorans. The distance from establishment politics may turn out to be an advantage for Bukele on February 3, when he could become the first president from outside the two main parties since the current Salvadoran electoral system was founded in 1992.

Carlos Calleja, with running mate Carmen Aída Lazo (party: ARENA)

Calleja is a businessman who is running as the candidate for the major conservative party, ARENA. He received a bachelor's degree from Middlebury College in Vermont and a master's degree in business administration from New York University's Stern School of Business. He is the vice president of Calleja Group, a business conglomerate founded by his grandfather that includes supermarket retail, real estate and financial services. He is also president of the Calleja Foundation, which advances sustainable development in El Salvador, and a board member of the Salvadoran Foundation for Economic and Social Development. Calleja has united his candidacy with the backing of some small parties to form the Alliance for a New Country.

In his candidacy, Calleja has also centered the need for government to respond more to the people, as well as to improve relations with the United States. With support from civil society, he vows to change the course of El Salvador by working across all groups, drawing on his background as a businessman and philanthropist.

Hugo Martínez, with running mate Karina Sosa (party: FMLN)

Martínez is the FMLN's presidential candidate. He served as minister of foreign affairs under President Sánchez Cerén, also an FMLN member, from 2014 until announcing his presidential candidacy in 2018. An FMLN guerrilla fighter and student leader during the civil war, when FMLN was a guerrilla movement, Martínez is an agricultural engineer by training but became an FMLN politician in 1994. Martínez has previously served six years in the Legislative Assembly and was assistant secretary-general of the Central American Higher University as well as director of external cooperation at the University of El Salvador from 2000-09.

Drawing on his background, Martínez's "For a better country" platform includes education priorities, such as making higher education more decentralized and flexible, improving employment opportunities and countering gang violence.

Josué Alvarado, with running mate Roberto Ocampo (party: VAMOS)

Alvarado is the candidate for VAMOS, a new party established in 2017 by Salvadorans living in the U.S. that bills itself as "the only political party in El Salvador without a dark past." Alvarado runs a successful food business, Rio Grande Foods, in Maryland and one of his political goals is to improve El Salvador's relationship with the United States and build stronger connections with the Salvadoran diaspora.

Alvarado says that Salvadorans have been abandoned by the political class, and he seeks to change that by centering government on citizens' needs. He describes his party as responding to Salvadorans who feel unrepresented in the current system: "This project is not of messianic leaders or of small interest groups."

To what extent do women have access to equal political participation?

None of the presidential candidates running in the 2019 election are women, though two of the vice presidential candidates from the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) and Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) are women. El Salvador has never had a female president. Further, the most

recent Global Gender Gap Report from the World Economic Forum found that of all the gender parity indicators, El Salvador performed the worst on political empowerment of women, with a score below the global average due to the lack of women in leadership positions across the sectors of government. While political parties' candidate lists for the legislature must have at least 30 percent women by law, this number is not reflected in parties' internal structures or within the legislature.

Women have nonetheless made up a larger share of voters than men in the past four elections for which data are available: 2012 legislative, 2014 presidential (first and second rounds) and 2015 legislative. This gap is particularly large in the capital, San Salvador, where 56 percent of voters in the first round of the last presidential election were women.

How are electoral authorities promoting equal access to the electoral process for persons with disabilities?

On October 4, 2007, El Salvador became the eighth country to ratify the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which is now one of the most widely accepted United Nations conventions, with 177 ratifications and accessions. The CRPD promotes and protects the participation and inclusion of persons with disabilities in society. Article 29 of the CRPD states in part that:

States Parties shall guarantee to persons with disabilities political rights and the opportunity to enjoy them on an equal basis with others, and shall undertake:

a) To ensure that persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in political and public life on an equal basis with others, directly or through freely chosen representatives, including the right and opportunity for persons with disabilities to vote and be elected, inter alia, by:

i. Ensuring that voting procedures, facilities and materials are appropriate, accessible and easy to understand and use;

ii. Protecting the right of persons with disabilities to vote by secret ballot in elections and public referendums without intimidation, and to stand for elections, to effectively hold office and perform all public functions at all levels of government, facilitating the use of assistive and new technologies where appropriate;

iii. Guaranteeing the free expression of the will of persons with disabilities as electors and to this end, where necessary, at their request, allowing assistance in voting by a person of their own choice.

In keeping with CRPD, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) has mechanisms in place to help administer the vote to persons with disabilities.

Voters with disabilities are allowed to proceed to the front of the line to cast their ballots. If requested by the voter, a member of the polling station can also assist persons with physical disabilities to move around inside the polling station to reach the voting booth or to cast their ballot.

Braille ballots and voting guides are available at all polling stations to assist individuals who are blind or have low vision to vote independently. Alternatively, the voter may be assisted by another adult of their choice who has accompanied them to the polls. This companion must be identified and registered by poll workers. Alternatively, voters with disabilities may instead choose to be assisted by a poll worker.

In its capacity to “develop civic-political programs directed to all citizens to motivate their electoral and democratic participation” (Article 83 of the Electoral Code), the TSE has also conducted civic education such as pre-election trainings to help people with disabilities learn the specifics of how they can exercise their right to vote and know what to expect when they get to the polls.

Citizens with psychosocial disabilities may be prevented from voting by Article 7 of the Electoral Code, as described above.

What measures are in place to mitigate electoral violence?

Electoral violence is a major problem in El Salvador, which has one of the highest murder rates in the world.¹ Criminal gangs are able to exert their influence as political actors through electoral violence. In El Salvador, this gang-led electoral violence includes manipulation of homicide levels in different regions, which can affect citizens’ sense of security or insecurity and thus influence their votes; extortion payments from political actors; voter suppression such as stealing voters’ Unique Identity Documents; intimidation to keep people from the polls; and other forms of violence used to control how citizens vote.²

On November 15, 2018, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) gathered all seven political parties participating in the 2019 elections to sign the “Political Parties Pact for the Consolidation of Democracy and the Electoral System in El Salvador.” In this nonaggression agreement organized through the leadership of the TSE, parties agreed to nonviolence and respect for the electoral process, including the results. Specifically, the parties all made the following commitments:

1. Respecting the Constitution and laws, as well as the authority of the TSE;
2. Respecting the terms of the electoral campaign, as stated in Article 81 of the Constitution and Article 175 of the Electoral Code;
3. Conducting positive electoral campaigns that promote civic, democratic values and encourage all citizens’ participation;
4. Preventing and eradicating violence against women in politics, and avoiding using the image of children in political campaigns;
5. Respecting other parties’ rights and liberty to campaign without fear;
6. Holding a campaign that is respectful to the rights of all parties, voters and citizens, avoiding any type of violence (including physical and psychological), intimidation and violence in any space
7. Respecting liberty of the press and of information;

¹ <https://www.osac.gov/Pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=24052>

² <https://www.creativeassociatesinternational.com/stories/how-gang-electoral-violence-threatens-voters-in-el-salvador/>

8. Accepting and respecting electoral results, helping the government transition peacefully; and
9. Making these commitments clear to party activities and supporters as well.

How does the election management body use social media?

The Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) uses [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) to connect with voters and share information related to Salvadoran elections. It has nearly 166,800 followers on Facebook and 60,200 followers on Twitter, and these numbers have increased steadily throughout the 2019 electoral process. The TSE uses these platforms to encourage political participation, including to reach and register potential Salvadoran voters abroad, keep voters informed about TSE activities and call out any false information circulating on social media. Some recent TSE tweets even include screenshots of viral misinformation with “FALSO” (“FALSE”) printed over it in large letters, accompanied by an explanation of the related facts.

The TSE also publishes its “Micronoticias” (mini news articles) regularly across its platforms and on its website, including written, photo and video elements, and uses tools such as Facebook Live.

Is electoral observation allowed?

Electoral observation is allowed and regulated under the electoral code. El Salvador has both international and domestic observers accredited by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal after their individual or organizational request has been reviewed and authorized. Approximately 5,000 international observers are expected to monitor the February 3 election.

When will official results be announced?

According to the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, official results for the first round will be completed by March 6, 2019, and for the second round (if applicable) by April 9, 2019.

Resources

- [Electoral Code \(Spanish\)](#)
- [Constitution of El Salvador \(Spanish\)](#)
- [Law of Political Parties \(Spanish\)](#)
- [Out-of-country voting law \(Spanish\)](#)
- [Information on how to vote from abroad \(Spanish\)](#)
- [Candidate biographies \(Spanish\)](#)
- [Supreme Electoral Tribunal website on the 2019 elections \(Spanish\)](#)
- [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#)