

THE
CARTER CENTER



**Carter Center Election Expert Mission
Preliminary Statement
on the Colombia Presidential Runoff (June 21, 2026)**

June 23, 2026

Executive Summary

The Carter Center deployed an eleven-member Election Expert Mission (EEM) to Bogotá on May 12, 2026, in response to an invitation from the electoral authorities to observe the presidential election.¹ The Carter Center EEM focused on key aspects of the electoral process: the legal framework, work of the election management bodies, political party and candidate registration, electoral justice, the use of election technology, and voter education efforts. The Center assesses elections based on national law and international standards for democratic elections in accordance with the Declaration of Principles for Electoral Observation.² Team members visited polling centers in Bogotá during opening, voting, and closing processes. However, the mission did not comprehensively observe election day counting and tabulation. The Carter Center will release a final report on the elections, with recommendations related to those aspects of the process it observed.

According to civil society reports, election day was well-organized and proceeded without major incidents. Voter turnout, at 63.6%, set a new record in Colombia. A total of 41,421,973 voters were registered, including 1,414,661 Colombians living abroad. Voting was conducted in 122,016 polling stations situated in 13,742 voting centers nationwide and 253 voting centers in 67 countries abroad. According to the preliminary results, Abelardo de la Espriella won 49.66% of the vote and Iván Cepeda received 48.70%, with a difference of 249,901 votes. On election night, De la Espriella declared victory. Cepeda acknowledged the preliminary results but said his campaign would challenge the results from a quarter of polling stations. He added he would recognize the outcome of the completed tabulation process.

The runoff took place in a highly polarized political environment, characterized by intense electoral competition and frequent accusations between the candidates. Throughout the

¹ The Carter Center EEM consisted of nine international (Spain, Germany, Denmark, Brazil, and the U.S.) and two national experts accredited as observers.

² The Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation, launched at the United Nations in 2005 and endorsed by 54 intergovernmental and international organizations, establishes the foundation for professional and credible international election observation. <https://electionstandards.cartercenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/declaration-and-code-english-revised.pdf>

campaign, both candidates raised concerns regarding the integrity of the process, trust in institutions, and the acceptance of the results. These issues featured prominently in the public debate and often overshadowed discussions about policy proposals and public programs. Civil society organizations and public institutions also warned of an increase in disinformation, stigmatization, and hostile rhetoric in political discourse. Following the first round, President Gustavo Petro continued to raise allegations regarding the possibility of electoral fraud.

Security concerns remained a significant feature of the electoral environment. The government's *Plan Democracia* mobilized 408,000 security personnel nationwide to safeguard the electoral process. Throughout the campaign, allegations of vote buying, voter coercion and pressure exerted by illegal armed groups persisted. Both campaigns made allegations about unusual voting patterns in municipalities affected by violence and fueled public debate about possible undue influence on electoral participation. While no evidence emerged to suggest that these allegations affected the integrity of the electoral process, the resulting controversies contributed to increased distrust and political polarization. International focus on the campaign also gained prominence during the period between the two rounds, generating debate about the influence of foreign actors on the Colombian electoral process.

The *Registraduría* organized the runoff efficiently and transparently despite the limited time between the two rounds. It provided refresher training to staff and maintained measures to safeguard the secrecy of the vote. In response to persistent narratives questioning the integrity of the elections, the *Registraduría* maintained its outreach efforts to political stakeholders and the public. It publicly addressed allegations concerning the electoral process through statements, media appearances, and online communications, while maintaining weekly briefings on preparations for election day and providing documented responses to issues raised by political organizations. These measures contributed to transparency and confidence in the electoral process.

The National Electoral Council (CNE) continued to face difficulties in generating confidence among electoral stakeholders. Concerns persisted regarding its independence and effectiveness in addressing alleged irregularities, particularly those related to campaign activities, political finance, vote buying, and hate speech. These concerns contributed to electoral and campaign-related controversies being brought before judicial and congressional bodies rather than to ordinary mechanisms of electoral oversight.

Campaign and Media

The campaign took place in a highly polarized political environment. During the period between the two rounds, political alliances were reconfigured as both candidates sought to expand their support base. Political parties, former candidates, and public figures also attempted to influence the outcome of a highly competitive race. Both candidates intensified campaign activities through traditional media, digital platforms, and public events. Political controversies and accusations frequently dominated public discourse, often overshadowing discussion of policy proposals and government programs. No electoral debate took place during the runoff campaign, as the candidates were unable to reach an agreement on its organization.

Throughout the campaign, both candidates raised concerns regarding the integrity of the electoral process, leading to public speculation about whether they would accept the results. While multiple stakeholders warned of potential social unrest and postelection tensions, others emphasized the importance of respecting the electoral process and accepting the official results. Meanwhile, electoral authorities maintained communication efforts to explain aspects of the process and bolster public confidence in the administration of the elections.

Security concerns remained a significant feature of the electoral environment. *Plan Democracia* mobilized 408,000 security personnel nationwide to safeguard the electoral process. Allegations of vote buying, voter coercion, and other irregularities persisted, as did claims that illegal armed groups were pressuring voters. These allegations reinforced existing concerns about the conditions for electoral competition in historically vulnerable regions and contributed to public mistrust and political polarization.

The campaign was also characterized by a high degree of litigation and adjudication by courts. Several allegations concerning suspected electoral irregularities, including public officials participating in campaign activities, became the subject of judicial and congressional proceedings. This reflected a tendency to transfer the resolution of electoral disputes to institutions other than the electoral oversight mechanisms. Among the most visible cases was the controversy concerning the use of national symbols in campaign activities, including De la Espriella's use of the Colombian national soccer team jersey. Other cases involved restrictions on President Petro's campaign-related use of social media and two criminal complaints filed by Cepeda against De la Espriella's alleged links to paramilitary groups and involvement in corruption-related offenses.

Colombia's media landscape is marked by increasingly partisan editorial lines, the rise of political influencers, and hostility against journalists from both campaigns. Civil society organizations warned of rising levels of disinformation, personal attacks, and hate speech in both traditional and digital media. The Ombudsperson's Office highlighted increasing stigmatization, the dissemination of unverified information, and hate speech, which it considered detrimental to informed democratic debate.

The international focus on the campaign gained prominence during the period between rounds. Public statements and endorsements by foreign political leaders brought issues of sovereignty, non-interference and foreign influence to the forefront of public debate. President Donald Trump offered multiple endorsements of De la Espriella on Truth Social, including three days before the second round. Ecuadoran President Daniel Noboa made a virtual appearance with De la Espriella. These interventions prompted criticism from a range of domestic and international actors, who called for respect for Colombia's democratic process and electoral sovereignty. Article 19 of the Organization of American States Charter (1948) states "No State or group of States has the right to intervene, directly or indirectly, for any reason whatsoever, in the internal or external affairs of any other State." Furthermore, it prohibits not only armed force but also any other form of interference or attempted threat against the political, economic, and cultural elements of a State.

Election Administration

The *Registraduría* organized the second round in an efficient and transparent manner, successfully deploying materials both nationwide and abroad, despite the tight time frame. Following the announcement of the official first-round results on June 4, preparations for the

runoff, including the printing of ballots, were completed in little more than one week, demonstrating a significant logistical effort.

Polling staff selected for the first round were retained for the runoff, allowing the electoral authorities to build on their training and experience. The *Registraduría* updated its online courses, which were consulted by over 75,000 polling staff (*jurados*). Refresher training was provided in person to *delegados*, the hired staff deployed to support polling staff. The *Registraduría* also identified and provided additional guidance for polling stations that had submitted results forms with errors during the first round. As in the first round, each polling station received reference materials that outlined the key steps of each stage of the voting and counting process.

The *Registraduría* continued to prioritize measures to protect the secrecy of the vote, a key safeguard against undue influence and vote-buying practices. These included the use of redesigned voting booths and renewed emphasis on the prohibition of mobile phones and camera use in polling stations during voting hours to prevent documenting votes. This measure was reinforced by a joint decree issued by the Ministries of Interior and Defense. The *Registraduría* also maintained regular communication with political parties and the public throughout the runoff period. The *Registraduría* countered allegations regarding the first round through public statements, media interviews, and online communications while continuing to hold weekly briefings for political parties providing updates on preparations as well as documented responses to queries.

The *Registraduría* sought to maintain the same voting centers used in the first round, with only two relocated to nearby locations due to damage caused by heavy rains. As in previous stages of the 2026 election process, 36,980 biometric identification devices – either for fingerprints or facial recognition – were deployed to 1,882 voting centers, covering approximately one-third of polling stations. Deployment was based on electoral risk assessments prepared by the Office of the Ombudsperson and the Colombian *Misión de Observación Electoral* (MOE). The biometric identification remains a pilot project designed to deter voter impersonation.

Voting from abroad took place throughout the week before election day. Following the first round, the *Registraduría* made operational arrangements in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This included identifying public holidays in the 67 countries hosting elections and allocating additional materials where higher participation was anticipated. Almost all of the 3,670 polling stations abroad had accredited party representatives. The MOE also deployed 209 observers abroad.

The CNE, as the institution responsible for overseeing the integrity of the electoral process, continued to face significant challenges in building public confidence. The Congress appoints its members in accordance with political party membership. Concerns were frequently expressed regarding its independence and its effectiveness in addressing alleged electoral irregularities, particularly those related to campaign activities, campaign finance, vote-buying allegations, and the participation of public officials in political campaigning. Several interlocutors also noted the limited public visibility of the institution during key campaign controversies. These perceptions affected confidence in the institution's capacity to fulfil its oversight responsibilities.

Election Day

The Carter Center EEM visited polling centers in metropolitan Bogotá during opening, voting, and closing, but did not comprehensively observe election day processes.

Voting was conducted in 122,016 polling stations within 13,742 voting centers. According to the *Registraduría* and the *Misión de Observación Electoral*, which deployed 2,638 observers across the country, voting was conducted in a calm and orderly manner, highlighting effective coordination among state institutions and the deployment of security forces to ensure the timely opening of polling stations.

More than 260,000 party representatives (*testigos*) were accredited, and electoral authorities reported they were present in 96% of polling stations. Cepeda accredited some 140,000 representatives and De la Espriella almost 125,000, providing extensive coverage. The 2026 presidential runoff saw a record number of national election observers: 15,483 were accredited, even higher than in the first round. In addition, the European Union, Organization of American States, and International Republican Institute (IRI), organizations that have also committed to the Declaration of Principles for International Electoral Observation, once again deployed missions to the country.

The Inspector General's Office (*Procuraduría*) implemented its Electoral Peace (*Paz Electoral*) oversight strategy, deploying 10,228 officials from the *Ministerio Público*, including 3,479 from the *Procuraduría*, 4,400 from municipal, and 2,349 from the Ombudsperson's office. The deployment focused on preventive electoral oversight, monitoring polling and scrutiny processes, supervising consolidation commissions, and receiving and processing reports of potential electoral irregularities. The Ombudsperson's Office (*Defensoría*) maintained a nationwide deployment with a presence in 338 municipalities, including 37 prison voting centers. *Defensoría* also participated in the *Mesas de Justicia* at polling locations, facilitating the prompt resolution of electoral incidents, voter complaints, and rights-related concerns.

Electoral authorities and oversight institutions maintained active monitoring throughout election day. The Ministry of Interior coordinated national monitoring through the "URIEL" platform, which receives, channels, and follows up on complaints related to electoral offenses and irregularities, reported 2,921 complaints during the presidential election process. Of these, 949 concerned alleged voter coercion, the most frequently reported offence. Most complaints originated from Bogotá, followed by Antioquia, Cundinamarca, and Valle del Cauca. Other allegations included vote buying and possible manipulation of results. The MOE received 309 reports of possible irregularities mainly related to vote buying and voter coercion, prohibited political campaigning, and operational inconsistencies. The MOE also noted increasing polarization and fraud narratives on social media.

Results processing and publication

According to preliminary results, voter turnout reached 63.6%, a record in Colombia. De la Espriella won 49.66% of the vote and Cepeda received 48.70%, with a difference of 249,901 votes, an unprecedentedly close result. On election night, De la Espriella declared victory. Cepeda acknowledged the preliminary results but said his campaign would challenge the results from a quarter of polling stations. He added he would recognize the outcome of the official tabulation process.

The results management system has proved to be reliable, transparent, and ensures full traceability of results. Preliminary results were communicated by electoral staff to phone centers and reached 95% within an hour of the close of voting. Results forms were uploaded swiftly and published online, and political parties were able to monitor the results consolidation process in real time through dedicated digital platforms.

On election night, the consolidation commissions (*comisiones escrutadoras*) began their work under the authority of judges and notaries, verifying and entering data from results forms in the presence of candidate representatives. A dedicated platform for political parties enables them to download, in real time, incremental consolidations in machine-readable format (MMS and MMV) from any of the 3,000 consolidation commissions and submit challenges. This platform also provides a record of reviews and recounts. The *Registraduría* publishes results online for the public in formats that enable public scrutiny and full traceability of results.

A not-for-profit, nongovernmental organization, The Carter Center has helped to improve life for people in over 90 countries by resolving conflicts; advancing democracy, human rights, and economic opportunity; preventing diseases; and improving mental health care. The Carter Center was founded in 1982 by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and former First Lady Rosalynn Carter, in partnership with Emory University, to advance peace and health worldwide.