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Votes by El Salvador's diaspora surge, likely boosting President Bukele in elections

Голоси діаспори Сальвадору стрімко зростають, що, ймовірно, підвищить шанси президента Н. Букеле на виборах

Рекордна кількість жителів Сальвадору – 51 226 осіб, які проживають за кордоном, проголосували на майбутніх президентських виборах у Сальвадорі за перші три дні після того, як країна вперше відкрила за кордоном електронне голосування. Очікується, що голосування за кордоном допоможе президенту Найбу Букеле, чия адміністрація запустила систему голосування в Інтернеті. Н. Букеле, який на останніх виборах у 2019 році переміг із перевагою у понад 600 000 голосів, уже може розраховувати на перемогу. Він надзвичайно популярний серед сальвадорців після багаторічної боротьби з бандитським насильством, але лідери опозиції та спостерігачі звинуватили його в підриві демократії довільними арештами та поступовим усуненням конституційних стримувань і противаг.

<https://apnews.com/article/el-salvador-election-bukele-overseas-voting-54e0898ea2837a309fd2767356ad320a>



SAN SALVADOR (AP) — A record-breaking 51,226 Salvadorans living abroad voted in El Salvador's upcoming presidential election in the first three days after the country opened overseas electronic voting for the first time, two electoral officials confirmed to The Associated Press on Tuesday.

The overseas vote is expected to help President Nayib Bukele, whose administration launched the Internet voting system as he seeks re-election. Bukele, who won by a margin of over 600,000 in the last elections in 2019, was already expected to win.

He's overwhelmingly popular among Salvadorans after a years-long crackdown on gang violence, but opposition leaders and observers have accused him of undermining democracy with arbitrary arrests and slowly dissolving constitutional checks and balances.

The figure is twelve times the number of people who voted outside of the country in the entire 2019 presidential elections, when only 3,808 Salvadorans living abroad voted.

Approximately [one in four people from](#) the small Central American nation of 6.3 million live abroad, with most in the United States. Overseas voters still have nearly a month to cast ballots before the Feb. 4 election.

The surge in overseas voting underscores the increasing political importance of the Salvadoran diaspora to Bukele as he seeks to hold onto power in the upcoming elections on Feb. 4, despite a [constitutional ban against reelection](#).

As of Monday morning, 45,832 people abroad had cast votes for El Salvador's congress, according to the two election monitors. They requested anonymity because they were not authorized to speak on the subject.

Milena Mayorga, Salvadoran Ambassador to the United States, told the AP in an email Tuesday that the new voting system comes in response to years of requests by the country's diaspora, many of whom migrated to the U.S. fleeing gang violence and poverty.

"For President Bukele, all Salvadorans, regardless of where they are, are important. Even those who may disagree with him," Mayorga said.

She called the unprecedented jump in votes a reflection of Bukele's [success in his war against El Salvador's gangs](#).

"Indisputably, all Salvadorans see the change the country has gone through and they will likely vote for this change, this security that exists today," she said.

Bukele has enjoyed soaring [approval ratings](#) since he started his brutal war against El Salvador's gangs nearly two years ago, suspending constitutional rights and locking up tens of thousands of people with little access to due process. Souvenir shops have taken to selling Bukele hats, magnets and t-shirts calling for his re-election.

Abroad, a November 2021 poll conducted by the Center for Research, Social and Economic Studies of Central America (CIESCA) found overwhelming support among the Salvadoran diaspora for Bukele's reelection.

Meanwhile, critics and political opponents said the president is using his popularity among the diaspora as a "political tool" to legitimize him in face of international scrutiny, and raised concerns about transparency and security of the online voting system.

Few abroad have felt the consequences of the leader's crackdown on gangs and dissent, said Roberto Dubon, a communications strategist and congressional candidate for Bukele's former party, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front or FMLN.

"There are many Salvadorans outside the country that live in this bubble, where they haven't been living in the country for 20 or 30 years, and they feel proud so they vote for the president," Dubon said.

The president has been sharply criticized internationally for having "[systematically committed grave human rights violations](#)" in his gang crackdown.

Others warn that his bid for reelection – in defiance of a constitutional ban – poses a risk to the country's already delicate democracy. The Supreme Court, stacked with justices selected by

Bukele's allies in Congress, reinterpreted a provision that long banned presidents from seeking re-election to clear the way for a second term bid in a 2019 ruling.

Still, the resulting sharp drop in violence, combined with [an elaborate media machine that pumps out pro-government propaganda](#) has earned Bukele a strong base both within El Salvador and abroad.

César Pocasangre, a 42-year-old Salvadoran living in France, was among those to cast his vote for Bukele this week over the internet. He said many Salvadorans like him living outside the country support the president as they've watched their country's reputation change.

"We see through our families that people find better living conditions in El Salvador," he said. "There are people that agree and people who don't, but the president always follows through with his plans."

Pocasangre said it took him just two minutes to cast a ballot, and said the process was "intuitive, easy and seemed quite secure."

But observers like Ana María Méndez, Central America analyst for the Washington Office on Latin America, a human rights nonprofit, have expressed worries about the online voting system.

She joined watchdogs and members of the Salvadoran opposition in saying there is very little oversight or government transparency over the international voting system.

Bukele's administration has been accused of stacking the deck in elections in recent years with moves that include [routine harassment](#) of political opposition and watchdogs, and an electoral reform that further consolidated the leader's already strong grip on power.

Méndez said the new system potentially paves the way for vote manipulation, as there is "no way to verify or audit the vote." She added that overseas votes, which will all be counted in the capital district under Bukele's electoral reforms, are likely to have an outsized impact.

"We're very concerned about this lack of transparency and clear lack of norms and rules around this vote," she said "The lack of checks and balances and the concentration of power that Bukele has is worrisome for any democracy."

Bukele's government brushed off concerns, and said they haven't received any formal complaints about the system from other candidates or parties.

"We, as a government, are the ones most interested in ensuring that the process is carried out in complete peace and transparency," Mayorga said.

Janetsky reported from Mexico City.