

Elections in Haiti

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Haiti is in the midst of a national election cycle to fill all 119 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, 20 seats in the 30-seat Senate, and most municipal offices—and to elect a new president. The next round of elections is scheduled for October 25. A runoff date for some of the seats is scheduled for December 27, 2015. Elections in Haiti have generally increased political tension in the short term, and reduced them in the long term, and this election cycle is no exception to that trend. The United States is providing electoral assistance to Haiti and has encouraged Haiti to carry out the elections as scheduled.

Troubled Road to Elections. Haiti has endured an extended political crisis due to the government's failure to hold a series of elections for prolonged periods. These delays have hampered the government's ability to function, decreased the public's faith in public institutions, and led thousands of Haitians to take to the streets calling both for elections to be held and for President Martelly to resign.

After a devastating earthquake struck the nation in January 2010, political stability became especially uncertain due to the deaths of many government officials and massive damage to government infrastructure. After yet another controversial election cycle, candidate Michel Martelly, one of Haiti's most popular entertainers, was sworn in as Haiti's new president on May 14, 2011, for a five-year term. Also sworn in in April 2011 were the 99-member Chamber of Deputies and 11 of 30 Senate seats. President Martelly fired the members of the provisional electoral council (CEP), responsible for setting dates for and organizing new elections, in December 2011. He did not begin to form a new electoral council until June 2012, even though the terms of another one-third of the Senate seats had expired on May 8, 2012. Elections to replace those legislators should have taken place by January 2012. Since the Senate had only 20 members, none of which were from Martelly's party, it became more difficult to meet the 16-member quorum needed to conduct business, including naming its representatives to the CEP and passing necessary electoral laws. For the next three years, the political process became contentious, progressed in fits and starts, and contributed to heightened political tensions.

As Haiti entered 2015, the crisis escalated: street protests continued to grow, and the executive and legislative branches failed to reach a political compromise. When the terms for another third of the Senate and the entire 99-seat Chamber of Deputies expired on January 12, 2015, the legislature was immediately dissolved and President Martelly began ruling by decree. While the U.S. Congress and the donor community expressed growing concern about his commitment to the democratic process, they continued to support Martelly. Martelly's five-year term expires in May 2016, but he has [said he will leave office early, in February 2016](#), in accordance with the electoral calendar set out in the constitution. Martelly cannot run for reelection: the Haitian constitution limits presidents to two nonconsecutive terms.

2015 Elections. Haiti began to ease its long-term political crisis by holding the first round of legislative elections on August 9, 2015. According to some reports, over 2,000 candidates registered for the legislative elections, representing some 90 different political parties. The CEP rejected about 170 candidates. Polling in some areas was marred by delays, disorder, low turnout—only 18% of voters cast ballots—and sporadic violence. Organization of American States (OAS) electoral observers found that such irregularities were not sufficient to invalidate the results as a whole. Nonetheless, violence and technical irregularities were severe enough that the [CEP invalidated the vote in 13% of polling centers](#); these races will be re-held in the October elections. Local observer organizations said the problems were more widespread, [reporting fraud, irregularities, and violence in half of all voting centers](#). For the first time, according to the Head of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), Sandra Honoré, [Haiti had penalized instigators of electoral violence](#). Electoral officials disqualified 14 candidates for engaging in or inciting violence during the elections.

Some opposition parties and protesters expressed a lack of confidence in the CEP, citing election-day problems and inconsistent decisions on election outcomes. Some called for the cancellation of the August elections, the resignation of the head of the CEP, and the formation of an interim government. [Verite, a major party backed by former President Rene Preval, is boycotting the October elections](#) after the CEP barred its presidential candidate, despite reportedly admitting it had made an error. A [member of the CEP resigned in early October](#), expressing concerns about CEP's processes and the need for "inclusive and impartial elections."

Election plans are proceeding nonetheless. Runoff legislative elections for [18 of the 20 Senate seats and most of the 119 Chamber of Deputies seats](#) (increased from 99 by Martelly in March 2015) and first-round presidential elections are to be held simultaneously with elections for over 4,000 local and municipal posts on October 25. There are 54 presidential candidates, most representing parties organized around personalities more than platforms. Jude Celestin, who lost to Martelly in 2011, and Jovenel Moise, the candidate for Martelly's party, appeared to be leading in [recent polls](#), with former senator and outspoken government critic Moise Jean-Charles in third place. Polls are historically unreliable in Haiti, however. Maryse Narcysse is running for Fanmi Lavalas, a party founded by former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who recently made a rare public appearance to rally thousands of supporters to vote for Narcysse. If no presidential candidate receives an absolute majority, runoff elections are scheduled for December 27, 2015.

U.S. Policy and Congressional Concerns. The main priorities for U.S. policy regarding Haiti are to strengthen fragile democratic processes, continue to improve security, and promote economic development. Other issues include the cost and effectiveness of U.S. aid; protecting human rights; combating narcotics, arms, and human trafficking; and alleviating poverty. Congress shares these concerns. The FY2015 omnibus appropriations measure ([P.L. 113-235](#)) prohibits assistance to the central government of Haiti until the Secretary of State certifies that Haiti "is taking steps" to hold free and fair parliamentary elections and seat a new Haitian Parliament, respect judicial independence and select judges in a transparent manner, combat corruption, and improve governance and financial transparency.

Some Members of Congress have continued to press Haiti to complete its long overdue elections cycle and a peaceful transfer of power, while monitoring political tensions and their possible impact on development and stability. A bipartisan group of Members asked the State Department to underscore to the Haitian government the need to guarantee the security of voters and candidates. Secretary of State John Kerry traveled to Haiti on October 6. He emphasized to President Martelly that [elections needed to take place "without intimidation, without violence."](#)

For background information, see CRS Report R42559, [Haiti Under President Martelly: Current Conditions and Congressional Concerns](#), by Maureen Taft-Morales.