

# WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2711

November 30, 2009

## U.S. Should Endorse Honduras Elections Results

*Ray Walser, Ph.D., James M. Roberts, and Israel Ortega*

On November 29, the people of Honduras took a step toward resolving the five-month political and diplomatic crisis that has divided and impoverished their nation. Voters selected a new president, legislators, and municipal councils through a constitutionally scheduled election process that was universally acknowledged by observers to be free, fair, and transparent. The U.S. should swiftly endorse the election results and work with the incoming Lobo team to rebuild U.S.–Honduran relations.

Former President Manuel Zelaya, a Central American version of Venezuela's populist authoritarian President Hugo Chavez, was the biggest loser at the polls. His 2005 opponent, conservative rancher Porfirio Lobo of the National Party, scored a resounding 15-plus-point victory amidst a heavy voter turnout of more than 60 percent.

On December 2, the Honduran Congress will decide if Zelaya should be restored to office to complete his term that ends on January 27. The chances the Congress will reject Zelaya's return appear substantial. Yet even a decision not to allow Zelaya's return does not violate the October 30 accord between Zelaya and the interim government of Roberto Micheletti. It will in fact remove the final impediment to restoring normal U.S. relations with Honduras.

**November 29: When the Myth of Populist Invincibility Began to Die.** As they have done consistently for the past five months, this past weekend the people of Honduras confounded the international media's dire expectations. Hondurans went to the polls in an orderly fashion and in num-

bers that will likely exceed those of the 2005 elections—despite a climate of uncertainty and endless rumors. These voters braved the not-so-veiled threats of reprisals by Zelaya “resistance” and acted as if November 29 were an ordinary election like any other.

Voting stations were accessible to all, adequately supplied with carefully controlled voting materials and fully staffed and supported by national observers from participating political parties. International observers witnessed no voter intimidation by any group, individual, or party. Other incidents reported to observers, such as late openings and locked voting stations, were quickly resolved and did not significantly disrupt the voting process. By going to the polls in large numbers, Hondurans proved that the widespread resistance threatened by Zelaya's supporters was mainly a campaign of disinformation.

A considerable number of Honduran voters shifted their support to the National Party and its leading candidate, the experienced politician Lobo. Voters are looking to Lobo to guide Honduras toward stability and reconciliation. When the final votes are tallied, President-elect Lobo will have received more votes than any previous Honduran presidential candidate. His considerable margin of victory over rival Liberal Party candidate Elvin San-

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/Research/LatinAmerica/wm2711.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/LatinAmerica/wm2711.cfm)

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison  
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400 • [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

tos also gives him a powerful national mandate to heal the country's deep divisions.

#### **Time to Normalize Relations with Honduras.**

Despite its serious mistakes in the aftermath of Zelaya's removal on June 28, the Obama Administration now recognizes that free and fair elections are the most effective method of resolving the Honduran crisis. As Assistant Secretary of State Arturo Valenzuela said on November 23 before the Organization of American States, "This was not an election invented by a de facto government in search of an exit strategy or as a means to whitewash a coup d'état. To the contrary, it is an election consonant with the constitutionally mandated renewal of congressional and presidential mandates permitting the Honduran people to exercise their sovereign will."

By electing new leadership, the Honduran people have repudiated the polarizing tactics promoted by Zelaya and his radical following. It is critical that the Obama Administration move to restore normal diplomatic, visa, and military-to-military relations with Honduras by the time the new president takes office on January 27.

**Recommendations.** The Obama Administration should move immediately to:

- **Recognize the legitimacy of the November 29 elections.** Through active diplomacy and contact with the incoming Lobo government, the Obama Administration should prepare for a full normalization of relations with the Lobo government when it takes office in January.
- **Lift punitive measures.** The U.S. should immediately lift all visa restrictions and restore revoked visas. It should drop travel warnings and advisories that have punished Hondurans for acts of violence that have not occurred. It should also resume military-to-military cooperation as well as counter-narcotics cooperation.

- **Convene a government-business summit for Honduras.** Getting Honduras on a growth track, creating jobs, and encouraging foreign investment will lessen internal divisions in Honduras and heal the U.S.–Honduran breach. The Administration needs to revitalize its ability to work with the private sector and strengthen trade ties within the Central American Free Trade Agreement framework.

- **End Honduran isolation.** Many governments will refuse to recognize the will of the voters and seek to punish Honduras for expelling Zelaya from the country last summer. The U.S. cannot remain passive and must use diplomacy and influence to end this divisive approach that only prolongs polarization in Honduras.

**A New Mandate.** The Honduran people believe that on November 29 their institutions and their votes prevailed over the promise of populist disorder and foreign intervention. They gave a mandate to a new president to move beyond the nightmare of the past few months. They also demonstrated a desire to improve relations with traditional friends like the U.S. and to strengthen not just the executive branch but all of Honduras's constitutional institutions.

—Ray Walser, Ph.D., is Senior Policy Analyst for Latin America in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, James M. Roberts is Research Fellow for Economic Freedom and Growth in the Center for International Trade and Economics, and Israel Ortega is a Senior Media Associate, at The Heritage Foundation.

At the invitation of the Honduran Government's Supreme Electoral Tribunal, all three authors served as International Election Observers during the November 29 Honduran elections.