

# Argentine First Lady Holds Wide Lead on Eve of Presidential Vote

## Opposition Decries Inflation, Energy Cuts

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BUENOS AIRES, Oct. 27 -- If the latest polls are right, the only real suspense that remains in Sunday's election is whether Argentine first lady [Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner](#) will receive enough votes to win the presidency outright or be forced into a runoff next month.

The broadly held assumption of an inevitable victory for the 54-year-old wife of President [Nestor Kirchner](#) has resulted in an uncommonly low-key campaign. Fernandez de Kirchner preserved a commanding lead over 13 opposition candidates without participating in a debate or granting an interview to the national media, aside from a single radio interview a day before the campaign closed.

To avoid a second-round runoff, the leading candidate must get either 45 percent of the total vote, or 40 percent with at least a 10-point lead over the runner-up. Most polls are predicting that Fernandez de Kirchner will receive just over 40 percent of the total vote and defeat her nearest rival by as many as 25 points.

Though she is a three-term senator in her own right, her campaign has emphasized the successes of her husband's administration. Following the country's devastating economic collapse of 2001, his four-year term has witnessed annual economic growth of 8 percent.

Kirchner is one of [Latin America's](#) most popular presidents, but he decided to step aside so that his wife could run this year. Some speculate that the choice is a strategy designed to maximize the couple's chances of holding power for as many as four consecutive four-year terms.

The two leading opposition candidates -- former congresswoman Elisa Carrio and former economy minister Roberto Lavagna -- have tried to underscore the challenges that remain after four years with a Kirchner in office, particularly inflation, the perception of rising crime and an energy shortage that has led to occasional residential power cuts in recent years.

During a speech to businessmen in the waning days of the campaign, Lavagna said the Kirchners were steering the country toward a deep crisis.

They "have stopped governing for the general well-being because what predominates is their own interests and their continuity in power," Lavagna said.

If elected, Fernandez de Kirchner is expected to continue many of the policies that marked her husband's term, including a political alliance with Venezuelan President [Hugo Chavez](#), independence from international lending institutions such as the [International Monetary Fund](#) and the prosecution of officials from the country's 1976-83 military dictatorship on human rights charges.

One of her strengths, her supporters say, is a dedication to social justice that was formed when she was a student activist during [Argentina](#)'s military dictatorships.

"I'm going to vote for her because, of all the candidates, I think she's the one most concerned about the people who lack resources in this country, and there are a lot of those people," said Juan Herrera, 23, who operates a shop in [Buenos Aires](#).

Fernandez de Kirchner often emphasizes that message in her public speeches, and a government watchdog group has noted that her husband's government has helped her broadcast that message on a near-daily basis. The government-run television station, Channel 7, has regularly aired live coverage of her campaign events, sometimes for more than an hour at a time.

"They have cut the usual programming of the channel almost every day for the last two months to put her events on live," said Laura Alonso, executive director of Fundacion Poder Ciudadano, an organization based in Buenos Aires that is affiliated with the anti-corruption coalition [Transparency International](#).

A victory for Fernandez de Kirchner would make her [South America](#)'s second elected female president in the past two years. Last year, the victory of Michelle Bachelet in [Chile](#) was hailed as a cultural milestone in a socially conservative country, but gender has been much less of an issue in Fernandez de Kirchner's campaign. Argentina has a strong tradition of prominent female political figures, including [Eva Peron](#), the former first lady who remains a beloved icon here.

In her few interactions with the media during the campaign, Fernandez de Kirchner has played down comparisons with Peron -- even though some of her campaign materials have tried to emphasize the connection, imposing her picture in front of Evita's image.

She also has tried to discourage comparisons with another female political figure who shares her background as a lawyer, senator and former first lady.

"I don't want to be compared with [Hillary Clinton](#), nor with Evita Peron, nor with anybody," Fernandez de Kirchner said during her interview this week with La Red radio. "There's nothing better than being yourself."