



Antigua and Barbuda — Va-PoReg Country Report

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01/01/1632 Start Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom]: Antigua was colonized by English settlers in 1632; the exact date is unknown. It belonged to the British Leeward Islands, which Britain concerned in 1671. Besides Antigua and Barbuda, the Leeward Islands included the British Virgin Islands, Dominica (until 1940), Montserrat and Saint Christopher-Nevis-Anguilla.¹ This division was also current at the time of our start date on 01/01/1900. Governance was conducted by British-appointed officials. A legislative council existed but was largely controlled by the colonial administration. Voting was restricted by property and income qualifications, disenfranchising most of the indigenous population. In addition, the parliament had minimal influence, serving more as an advisory body. LIED only starts to provide data for Antigua since 1951.

12/20/1951 End Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom, Electoral Oligarchy]/Start Indirect Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom, Electoral Oligarchy]: On this date, the first elections under universal adult – male and female – suffrage took place (LIED).² However, less than 20% of the population was registered to vote during the 1950s.³ Antigua and Barbuda boasts a rich legacy of conducting free and fair elections, with three instances culminating in the peaceful transition of governmental authority.⁴ On 01/03/1958, the colonial islands were absorbed into the Federation of the West Indies. The Federation was, however, short lived and disintegrated on 05/31/1962. The parliament gained more influence over internal affairs, and local political leaders emerged. While the colonial governor retained significant powers, the elected parliament played a meaningful role in governance, marking a shift toward indirect rule. The parliament was effective in shaping domestic policies, though foreign affairs and defense remained under British control. However, according to LIED political liberties were absent in this period and only multiparty legislative elections held.

02/27/1967 End Indirect Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom, Liberal Democracy]/Start (Monarchical) Electoral Democracy [semi-sovereign, external affairs under United Kingdom, Liberal Democracy]: On this date Antigua and Barbuda became a self-governing entity. However, democratic elections took place already on 11/29/1965.⁵ In 1969 Antigua joined the West Indies Associated States as an internally self-governing territory (Lansford 2021: 62). On 04/24/1980 general elections took place. They were won by the governing Antigua Labour Party. ALP leader Vere Bird was re-elected as Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda.⁶ Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. According to LIED the elections were competitive for the entire time. During the 1970s, Antigua witnessed the emergence of an independence movement led by Prime Minister George Walter. Walter advocated for complete independence for the islands and opposed the British plan of independence within a federation of islands. However, in the 1976 legislative elections, Walter was defeated by Vere Bird, who supported regional integration. In 1978, Antigua underwent a significant shift in its stance and announced its desire for independence. The negotiations for autonomy were complicated by Barbuda, which had long been dependent on Antigua but felt economically suppressed by the larger island and sought secession.⁷ Political liberties are classified as absent for this period by LIED. V-Dem doesn't list Antigua and Barbuda.

11/01/1981 Continuation (Monarchical) Electoral Democracy [as independent country]: On this date Antigua and Barbuda became independent, with Vere Bird as the first prime minister. However, it remained a commonwealth realm, with the British Crown as head of state. The first two decades of Antigua's independence were dominated politically by the Bird family and the ABLP, with Vere Bird ruling from 1981 to 1994, followed by his son Lester Bird from 1994 to 2004. The government was frequently accused of corruption, cronyism and financial malfeasance.⁸ In the election on 04/17/1984, the ALP swept all the Antiguan seats in the House of Representatives, with Bird forming a new government two days later (Lansford 2021:62). According to FH, the country was classified as free in 1982 with a score between 2 and 4 and subsequently falls under the free category in our analysis. From 1983 to 1990, the country is classified as free with a score of 5, falling under the rather free category in our framework. From 1991 onward, the country scores between 6 and 7 as partly free, and is categorized as rather free in our interpretation. Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Moreover, LIED considers the elections as not competitive during this time and regards political liberties as absent during this period. On 03/09/1989 the second elections of Antigua and Barbuda as an independent country were held, which were marred by serious irregularities and fraud (McColm 1992). Therefore, according to LIED electoral competitiveness was absent. Throughout this era, the monopolization of state media by the Bird family significantly obstructed the dissemination of opposition viewpoints and ideologies. Additionally, the ruling party's control over patronage restricted the ability of opposition parties to recruit new members and acquire financial backing. Although the judiciary maintained nominal independence, it faced significant manipulation by the ruling party. Nevertheless, civil liberties were upheld (House 2003). LIED classifies political liberties as absent for this period. HTW and LIED classified Antigua and Barbuda in the period 1981 to 1989 as a multiparty autocracy⁹ in the coding of this dataset, while CGV classified it as a democracy. On 03/23/2004 general elections were held which were won by the oppositional United Progressive Party (UPP) and a peaceful transfer of power took place.¹⁰ Antigua and Barbuda is a democracy that holds regular elections in a multi-party system with universal suffrage. The judiciary is independent from other branches of government¹¹ In the 2009 election, the UPP secured nine seats while the ALP secured seven seats. Before the election there were reports of irregularities in voter registration and calls for international election observers. Observers from Belize, Canada and Guyana were present for the election. Afterwards, a Judge of the High court nullified the elections of three UPP MPs on the terms of irregularities. This ruling was however overturned by the Supreme Court and the elections deemed correct.¹² In the following election of 2014, the ALP won back the majority with a landslide victory that saw them win 14 seats while the UPP only won three. The Barbudan-nationalist BDM did not win the seat of Barbuda that it had won previously.¹³ In the 2018 election, the ALP called 15 months early elections due to the proclaimed necessity of providing assurance to foreign investors. They improved their result, winning 15 out of 17 seats with the UPP and BDM winning one each. It was also the first election where there were more women elected than men (9/8).¹⁴ Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Since 2004, LIED scored constant competitiveness. The elections held in 2023 marked a resurgence of the UPP with the ALP winning only a slim majority of nine seats. The UPP won seven seats and the BDM one.¹⁵ This indicates that opposition to the ALP government is alive and well. Most regime datasets did not code Antigua and Barbuda due to its small size. In accordance with the findings of FH, Antigua and Barbuda was classified from 2004 on as free with a score between 2 and 4, and thus falls under the free category in our analysis. However, there is an exception between 2009 and 2011, where the country is classified as free with a score of 5 and falls under the rather free category in our interpretation.¹⁶ LIED classified political liberties as absent until 2020 and as present since 2021. Since 2004 the country is a borderline case between a defective and a liberal democracy.

(Monarchical) Electoral Democracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Additional sources (Hillebrands/Schwehm 2005a)

Notes

- ¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Leeward_Islands
- ² <http://www.caribbeanelections.com/ag/education/history.asp>
- ³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elections_in_Antigua_and_Barbuda
- ⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_of_Antigua_and_Barbuda
- ⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1965_Antiguan_general_election
- ⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1980_Antiguan_general_election
- ⁷ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Antigua-and-Barbuda>
- ⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1980_Antiguan_general_election;
https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Antigua_and_Barbuda_1981?lang=en
- ⁹ Coding rules are similar to the coding rules for an electoral autocracy in this dataset.
<https://ps.au.dk/en/research/research-projects/dedere/datasets>
- ¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2004_Antiguan_general_election
- ¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_of_Antigua_and_Barbuda
- ¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2009_Antiguan_general_election
- ¹³ <https://data.ipu.org/parliament/AG/AG-LC01/election/AG-LC01-E20140612/>
- ¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2018_Antiguan_general_election
- ¹⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2023_Antiguan_general_election
- ¹⁶ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/antigua-and-barbuda>

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