



Colombia — Va-PoReg Country Report

Kailitz, Steffen, et al., 2026: Varieties of Political Regimes (Va-PoReg). Country Report Colombia, Dresden: Hannah Arendt Institute for Totalitarianism Studies.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/JYEL7U>

08/08/1886 Start Electoral Oligarchical Autocracy: On 07/20/1810 Colombia, the former Vice Royalty of New-Grenada, declared independence from Spain. On 12/17/1819 Colombia merged with Venezuela, Panama, and Ecuador into the Republic of Colombia. Simón Bolívar became the first President of Colombia. On 11/19/1831 Gran Colombia dissolved creating a pact of Colombia with Panama as the Republic of New Granada. The constitution of 1853 introduced universal, direct, and secret suffrage (Jaramillo Pérez/Franco-Cuervo 2005: 299). On 05/22/1858 the Republic of New Granada was replaced to the Granadine Confederation under the 1858 constitution. On 05/08/1863 the Granadine Confederation was replaced to the United States of Colombia under the constitutional change of 1864. On 08/08/1886 Colombia was established in the current form as a republic. In 1886 the constitution was reformed to allow universal suffrage for municipal councils and departmental assemblies only. However, states and provinces had a lot of leeway when it came to implementation. Therefore, it seems that many still had literacy requirements. For presidential elections the indirect census suffrage (literacy and socioeconomic restrictions) was reintroduced (Engerman/Sokoloff 2005: 913, Jaramillo Pérez/Franco-Cuervo 2005: 299). In 1904 Rafael Reyes was elected president. His policies embodied a paradoxical mix of political reconciliation and authoritarianism.¹ He incorporated Liberals in the government, while at the same time strengthening the executive and therefore, centralizing power.² On 06/15/1910 indirect presidential elections were held. The result was a victory for Carlos Eugenio Restrepo of the Republican Union.³ In 1936 universal male suffrage was introduced.⁴ While RoW classifies the regime before the elections of 1910 as a closed (non-electoral) autocracy and LIED as a one-party autocracy according to our classification the regime is an electoral oligarchy. While there were presidential elections most of the population had no voting rights. However, based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period. LIED considers the elections as not competitive. V-Dem's CEI indicates not really cleanliness from 1900 to 1904, 1914 to 1925 and 1930 to 1938. Between 1905 and 1909 and 1926 and 1929 no cleanliness was achieved. For the remaining four years ambiguous outcomes are stated. The overall election conditions were not really free and fair from 1900 to 1909 and 1926 to 1929. Between 1910 and 1914 somewhat freedom and fairness is provided while for the other years ambiguous election conditions are stated (V-Dem EF&FI). Political liberties were coded as absent for this time per LIED. Following V-Dem's PCLI they were at a not really present level until 1904 and at an ambiguous level until 1938. From 1900 to 1903, according to the Polity5 indicator, during this period, the executive faced substantial limitations on decision-making power. From 1904 to 1929, as per Polity5's classification, the executive wielded unrestricted authority without any formal limitations during this time. Since 1930, based on Polity5's assessment, the executive faced slight limitations on power during this period. From 1900 to 1903, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were moderate, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were robust. For the years 1904 and 1905, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were robust. From 1906 to 1909, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate. During the rest of the regime period,

V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were moderate, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were robust.

05/01/1938 End Electoral Oligarchical Autocracy/Start (Male) Electoral Hybrid Regime: The so-called Liberal Republic or Reformist Phase already started with the 1930s and as a result López Pumarejo (1934-1938) reintroduced universal male suffrage in 1936. The Conservative Period ended in 1930 with free elections and a peaceful takeover (Bushnell 1993: 181-182).⁵ The presidential elections on 05/01/1938 were therefore the first elections since the amendment of the 1886 constitution with universal male suffrage. Eduardo Santos of the Liberal Party stood uncontested in the elections. The Conservative Party boycotted the elections and claimed „that they could not count on a fair election” (Bushnell 1993: 192). But they were also unable to nominate a candidate. In the presidential election 1942 López Pumarejo was reelected for his second term. The Conservative participated in the elections (Bushnell 1993: 192-193). While the reintroduction of universal male suffrage in 1936 marked a significant expansion of participation, the direction of this regime change event is coded as unclear because other key indicators of democratic quality, such as electoral fairness and the protection of political liberties, showed no improvement or even deteriorated (V-Dem's CEI) during this period. Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. In addition, according to LIED no electoral competitiveness was present. V-Dem's CEI scores not really clean election until 1940. Since 1941 the elections are characterized with no cleanliness. V-Dem's EF&FI classifies the overall election conditions as ambiguous during this time. Political liberties were absent according to LIED and ambiguous according to V-Dem's PCLI, except in 1945 the outcomes increased to what we interpret as somewhat present. Based on Polity5's assessment, the executive faced slight limitations on power during this period. From 1939 to 1947, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were moderate, whereas V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were robust. For the year 1948, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were robust. For 1949, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent. Overall, the period was characterized by great social reforms, but also by economic crisis due to World War II and a split in the Liberal Party. In 1944 López survived an attempted coup, but his political power diminished. Therefore, he resigned in 1946. The interim president Lleras Camargo tried to form a national union by appointing a cabinet consisting of Liberals and Conservatives. The nomination of Gabriel Turbay (Liberal Party) as candidate for the 1946 presidential elections led Jorge Eliécer Gaitán to run as independent candidate, thus splitting the Liberal Party. Gaitán enjoyed widespread support and resembled a populist (Bushnell 1993: 196-199).⁶ Due to the split in the Liberal vote, Mariano Ospina Pérez a Conservative won the elections on 05/05/1946.⁷ With the assassination of Gaitán on 04/09/1948 prior to the 1949 presidential elections, which he had probably won, a ten-year civil war broke out.⁸

11/09/1949 End (Male) Electoral Hybrid Regime/Start Electoral Autocracy: The incumbent Conservative president, elected into office, shuttered Congress shortly after a Liberal majority secured their seats. Declaring a state of siege, he imposed press censorship following a violent campaign that claimed the lives of numerous Liberal partisans. In retaliation, the Liberals opted to boycott the presidential election scheduled for 11/27/1949, resulting in the election of another Conservative president (Fluharty 1957, Henderson 1985: 138-140, Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 54). Laureano Gómez took office on 08/07/1950. He assumed extensive powers and restricted civil liberties in an effort to address the escalating violence and the potential return of power to the Liberals. Pro-labor laws enacted in the 1930s were nullified through executive decree, independent labor unions were dismantled, uncontested congressional elections were conducted, press censorship was enforced, executive control extended to the courts, and freedom of worship faced challenges as mobs targeted Protestant chapels. Gómez directed his repressive measures primarily against the Liberal opposition, labeling them as communist.⁹ In 1953 a neofascist constitution was drafted, which would have

enhanced the presidential powers even further.¹⁰ This regime change event is coded as a strategic autocratic restructuring instead of a self-coup because the incumbent president's actions, such as shutting down Congress, were aimed at securing the power of the Conservative Party elite as a whole, which was confirmed by the subsequent election of another president from the same party, rather than entrenching his own personal rule. Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. No competitive elections were held during this time (LIED). No cleanliness was scored (V-Dem CEI) and the overall election conditions were not really free and fair (V-Dem EF&FI). LIED classifies political liberties as absent in this period. V-Dem's PCLI scores political liberties as not really present for this period. According to Polity5, during this period, the executive held unlimited authority with no institutionalized constraints on decision-making power. For the year 1950, V-Dem's JCE indicates that judicial constraints on the executive are limited. At the same time, V-Dem's LCE shows no value, which, with appropriate caution, can be interpreted as an absence of legislative constraints on the executive. For the rest of the regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were robust.

06/13/1953 End Electoral Autocracy/Start Military Autocracy: On this date, a military coup led by General Rojas Pinilla toppled the conservative civilian government of Laureano Gómez. The reason was that the military was angry over the removal of several military officers. Pinilla established a government led by himself (Martz 1962:166-167, Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 54). In 1954 during the military autocracy of Pinilla women's suffrage was introduced.¹¹ According to LIED, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during the specified period. From 1953 to 1956, as per Polity5's classification, the executive wielded unrestricted authority without any formal limitations. LIED still codes political liberties as absent. V-Dem's PCLI fluctuates between what we interpret as not really present and as absent. In 1957 and 1958, based on Polity5's evaluation, the executive's power was limited to a degree between substantial constraints and parity with other institutions, fitting Intermediate Category 3. From 1954 to 1957, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate. For 1958, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were moderate, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were robust.

05/10/1958 End Military Autocracy/Start Electoral Autocracy: Following the coup, the two main parties, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Party came on 05/10/1958 to an agreement on holding office for alternating periods of four years. We code this regime change event as a negotiated transition. The agreement, known as the National Front, was approved in a 1957 referendum¹² (Martz 1962:267, Hartlyn 1988: 60-65, Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 54). Presidential elections were held in Colombia on 05/04/1958. They were the first presidential elections since 1949. The 1970 elections raised allegations of electoral fraud from supporters of former dictator Rojas, who ran as a third-party candidate (Lansford 2021: 339-340). The National Front restricted electoral participation to the Conservative Party and the Liberal Party, with each party allocated 50% of the seats in both houses, whilst the Presidency alternated between the two parties.¹³ As a result, the main contest in parliamentary elections was between factions within each party and only Conservative candidates ran for the presidency.¹⁴ Despite the formal preservation of civil liberties, the National Front period in Colombia must be classified as an electoral autocracy. Political rights of association, expression, and participation existed de jure, but they were politically neutralized by the constitutional exclusion of all actors outside the Liberal-Conservative cartel. The guaranteed alternation of the presidency and fixed legislative seat allocation eliminated electoral uncertainty and foreclosed genuine competition ex ante. Emergency powers and executive dominance further limited the effective scope of political contestation. Elections therefore functioned as instruments of regime legitimation rather than mechanisms of open democratic authorization, justifying classification as electoral autocracy. Throughout this period multiparty executive and legislative elections were held (see also LIED), however, they are classified by Va-PoReg as non-competitive.

04/21/1974 End Electoral Autocracy/Start Electoral Democracy: On this date, the first general elections Colombia to elect the President, Senate and Chamber of Representatives after the end of the National Front agreement were held.¹⁵ Since then, elections are classified by Va-PoReg as competitive. V-Dem's EF&FI classifies them as somewhat free and fair while their CEI scores their cleanliness as ambiguous. Corruption remained a substantial problem. The 'parapolitics' scandal, which linked many politicians to illegal paramilitary groups, resulted in the investigation, arrest, or conviction of more than 90 legislators by the close of the 2006-10 Congress. The 2014 legislative elections were defined by accusations of fraud, vote buying, and connections with criminals. Concerns of vote buying and other violations in both the first and second rounds also emerged in the 2018 elections.¹⁶ The most recent parliamentary elections were held on 03/13/2022. The elections were described as generally peaceful and calm, however, candidates have raised concerns about voting irregularities during the legislative elections in March. However, officials attribute these issues to clerical errors and assert that there is no possibility of electoral fraud.¹⁷ During the elections in June 2022, Gustavo Petro, an opposition candidate and former left-wing guerrilla member, emerged victorious, assuming the presidency. He went on to form a government characterized by a broad left-wing coalition, marking the inauguration of Colombia's first leftist administration since the reinstatement of competitive democracy.¹⁸ Colombia for the whole regime period as free.¹⁹ However, despite the Colombian constitution guaranteeing a broad array of civil liberties and political rights, the state faces challenges in enforcing them due to widespread organized crime and politically motivated violence, which at times lead to significant human rights abuses (McColm 1990). As per FH's classification for the period from 1972 to 1974, the country is considered free with a score ranging from 2 to 4, which we also interpret as free in our framework. Between 1975 and 1988, the country receives a score of 5 as free, which we categorize as rather free. For the period from 1989 to 1994 a score of 6 to 7 designates the country as partly free, which aligns with our interpretation of rather free. Per FH's scoring for the period between 1995 and 1997, Colombia is classified as partly free with a score of 8, which we categorize as rather not free. In 1998 a score of 6 to 7 designates the country as partly free, which aligns with our interpretation of rather free. From 1999 to 2004 it receives a score of 8, which we interpret as falling into the rather not free category. As classified by FH from 2005 to 2021, the country is partly free with a score ranging from 6 to 7, which we place in the rather free category. From 2022 onwards, it has been rated as free with a score of 5, which we interpret as rather free in our framework. LIED classifies political liberties as absent for this entire period. V-Dem's PCLI'S classification fluctuates between ambiguous and somewhat present from 1953 to 2008. From 2009 onward V-Dem's PCLI classifies political liberties as present with the exception of 2020 and 2021, during which political liberties are coded as somewhat present. From 1958 to 1990, as per Polity5's categorization, the executive's authority was significantly constrained, nearing parity with other branches, placing it in the third intermediate category. From 1991 to 1994, based on Polity5's assessment, during this period, the executive was either equal to or subordinate to other institutions, demonstrating strong constraints on decision-making authority. Since 1995, based on Polity5's evaluation, during this period, the executive's power was limited to a degree between substantial constraints and parity with other institutions, fitting Intermediate Category 3. From 1959 to 1974, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were moderate, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were robust. For 1975-1978, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating robust constraints on the executive. For the years 1979 to 1981, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were moderate, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were robust. Between 1982 and 1990, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also robust. For the year 1991, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were robust. Since 1992, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating comprehensive constraints on the executive. Left-wing guerrillas and right-paramilitary groups challenge the state's monopoly on violence, often impeding

the freedom, independence, and effectiveness of the press and judiciary (Puddington et al. 2012). Nonetheless, Colombia has a history of multiple changes in government and peaceful transitions of power, although the particularly violent and tumultuous period between the 1990s and the early 2010s places it as a borderline case between a semi-democracy and democracy (Puddington et al. 2012).²⁰

Electoral Democracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Additional sources (Archer/Shugart 1997, Bejarano/Pizarro 2005, Cepeda Ulloa 2008, Fluharty 1957, Hartlyn 1988, Henderson 1985, Martz 1962, Peeler 1985, Whitehead 2001, Wilde 1978)

Notes

¹ <https://countrystudies.us/colombia/18.htm>

² <https://countrystudies.us/colombia/18.htm>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1910_Colombian_presidential_election

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_suffrage#cite_note-centralasiainstitute.org-37

⁵ <https://countrystudies.us/colombia/20.htm>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_suffrage

⁶ <https://countrystudies.us/colombia/20.htm>

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1946_Colombian_presidential_election;
<https://www.britannica.com/place/Colombia/La-Violencia-dictatorship-and-democratic-restoration>

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Violencia

⁹ <https://countrystudies.us/colombia/22.htm>

¹⁰ <https://countrystudies.us/colombia/22.htm>

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_suffrage_in_Colombia

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1958_Colombian_presidential_election

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1958_Colombian_presidential_election

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1970_Colombian_general_election

¹⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1974_Colombian_general_election

¹⁶ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/colombia/freedom-world/2022>

¹⁷ <https://www.dw.com/en/colombia-heads-to-the-polls-in-historic-election/a-61966789>

¹⁸ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/colombia>

¹⁹ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/colombia/freedom-world/2024>

²⁰ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_presidents_of_Colombia#Republic_of_Colombia_\(1886%E2%80%93present\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_presidents_of_Colombia#Republic_of_Colombia_(1886%E2%80%93present))

References

Archer, Ronald P./Shugart, Matthew S. (1997): The Unrealized Potential of Presidential Dominance in Colombia, in: Mainwaring, Scott & Shugart, Matthew S. (Hrsg.), *Presidentialism and Democracy in Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 110-159.

Bejarano, Ana M. /Pizarro, Eduardo (2005): From "Restricted" to "Besieged": The Changing Nature of the Limits to Democracy in Colombia, in: Hagopian, Frances & Mainwaring, Scott (Hrsg.), *The Third Wave of Democratization in Latin America: Advances and Setbacks*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 235-260.

Bushnell, David (1993): *The Making of Modern Colombia: A Nation in Spite of Itself*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Cepeda Ulloa, Fernando (2008): Colombia: Democratic Security and Political Reform, in: Domínguez, Jorge I. & Shifter, Michael (Hrsg.), *Constructing Democratic Governance in Latin America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 209-241.

Engerman, Stanley L./Sokoloff, Kenneth L. (2005): The Evolution of Suffrage Institutions in the New World, in: *The Journal of Economic History* 65, 891-921.

Fluharty, Vernon L. (1957): *Dance of the Millions: Military Rule and the Social Revolution in Colombia, 1930-1956*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Geddes, Barbara/Wright, Joseph/Frantz, Erica (2014): *Autocratic Regimes Code Book*. Version 1.2. Los Angeles, University Park, Bridgewater: UCLA, Pennsylvania State University, Bridgewater State University.

Hartlyn, Jonathan (1988): *The Politics of Coalition Rule in Colombia*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Henderson, James D. (1985): *When Colombia Bled: A History of the Violence in Tolima*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

- Lansford, Tom (2021): *Political Handbook of the World 2020-2021*. Thousand Oaks: CQ Press.
- Martz, John (1962): *Colombia: A Contemporary Political Survey*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Mccolm, R. Bruce (Hrsg.) (1990): *Freedom in the World: Political Rights & Civil Liberties 1989-1990*. New York: Freedom House.
- Peeler, John A. (1985): *Latin American Democracies: Colombia, Costa Rica, Venezuela*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Puddington, Arch/Piano, Aili/Dunham, Jennifer, et al. (Hrsg.) (2012): *Freedom in the World 2012: The Annual Survey of Political Rights & Civil Liberties*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Whitehead, Laurence (2001): *Reforms: Mexico and Colombia*, in: Garretón M., Manuel A. & Newman, Edward (Hrsg.), *Democracy in Latin America: (Re)Constructing Political Society*. Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 66-98.
- Wilde, Alexander (1978): *Conversations Among Gentlemen: Oligarchical Democracy in Colombia*, in: Linz, Juan & Stepan, Alfred (Hrsg.), *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Latin America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 28-81.