



Costa Rica — Va-PoReg Country Report

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05/08/1894 Start Electoral Oligarchical Autocracy: Following its declaration of independence from Spain on 09/15/1821 and its subsequent independence from the Federal Republic of Central America on 11/15/1838 (Marshall 2018h), Costa Rica entered a period of heightened executive control. By 01/01/1900, the nation was governed as an electoral oligarchic autocracy under Rafael Yglesias Castro.

05/08/1902 End Electoral Oligarchical Autocracy /Start Electoral Oligarchy: On 09/15/1821 The 1901-1902 Costa Rican general election occurred under growing political tensions. The authoritarian government of Rafael Yglesias was in direct confrontation with the opposition and had re-elected himself as single candidate in the previous election by a questionable constitutional reform. The liberal Republican Party represented the staunchest opposition, and the country was on the edge of civil war. However, Yglesias managed to negotiate with the moderate branch of the Republicans for a peaceful power exchange.¹ The next general elections were held on 04/01/1906. During this period, elections in Costa Rica were conducted indirectly. Initially, only male citizens who met certain criteria, such as income and literacy, were eligible to vote, resulting in approximately 60% of the male population being able to participate. These first-round voters selected Electors who had additional requirements, including property ownership or higher education, indicating a predominantly middle to high-class composition. The Electors then elected the President, members of Congress, and municipal authorities. However, this system allowed for pressure to be exerted on Electors to change their intended candidate. In one instance, after the initial round of voting, Fernández and Soto endorsed Zuñiga as the preferred option against González. In response, Ibarra, citing reasons of „public order,“ implemented martial law and exiled Fernández, Soto, and Zuñiga, who found themselves in New York. Eventually, after González was declared the president, they were permitted to return, although Zuñiga retired from politics.² The 1910 Costa Rican general election was held during the presidency of Cleto González Víquez on 04/07. This was the last time that indirect elections were held in Costa Rica as for the next one in 1913 the direct vote was implemented. Liberal lawyer Ricardo Jiménez Oreámuno was elected for the first time (he will be re-elected two more times, the only person in Costa Rica's history who has been democratically elected three times). Jiménez was very popular in part because of his struggles against the United Fruit Company's abusive operations in the country. Jiménez was proclaimed candidate in the Teatro Variedades during the first Republican National Convention, Costa Rica's first primary election. Jiménez won easily over the other candidate, former president Rafael Yglesias who ruled an authoritarian, though short-lived, regime.³ Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. LIED classifies elections during this period as competitive. V-Dem's EF&FI and CEI score them as first being somewhat and then of ambiguous freedom and fairness and not really clean. Political liberties were coded as absent by LIED and can be interpreted as somewhat present by V-Dem's PCLI. According to Polity5, during this period, the executive was subordinate to or held equal power with other institutions, indicating executive parity or subordination. For the years 1901 and 1902, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating moderate constraints on the executive. For the rest of the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted 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 moderate.

05/08/1914 End Electoral Oligarchy/Start (Male) Electoral Hybrid Regime: On the 12/07/1913 general elections were held (women were not allowed to vote), the first elections since 1844.⁴ They were also the first elections to have universal male suffrage, after economic and educational requirements were eliminated.⁵ The congress selected Alfredo González as president.⁶ Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. LIED classifies elections during this period as competitive. V-Dem's EF&FI scores elections during this time as being of ambiguous freedom and fairness. Their CEI scores them as not really clean. Political liberties were absent according to LIED and somewhat present according to V-Dem's PCLI for this period. According to Polity5, during this period, the executive was subordinate to or held equal power with other institutions, indicating executive parity or subordination. For 1915 and 1916, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted 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 moderate. For the year 1917, V-Dem's JCE is classified 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 also moderate.

01/27/1917 End (Male) Electoral Hybrid Regime/Start Military Autocracy: The minister of war Federico Tinoco Granados organized with his brother the army commander José Joaquín Tinoco a military coup against González and took over power (McIlwraith 1917).⁷ He was ruling Costa Rica in a violent way; to legitimize himself, elections were held in which oppositional candidates could not be voted for (Marshall 2018h).⁸ On 08/12/1919, following the assassination of his brother, Tinoco sought refuge in exile, and an interim government organized elections that marked a significant shift towards the restoration of democracy (Lentz 1999: 108, Lehoucq/Molina Jiménez 2002: 89-90, Casey et al. 2020: 4). According to LIED, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during the specified period. According to Polity5, during this period, the executive encountered slight limitations on decision-making power imposed by other institutions. For the relevant 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 absent. V-Dem's PCLI indicates that political liberties were somewhat present, while LIED continues to classify them as absent.

12/07/1919 End Military Autocracy/Start (Male) Electoral Hybrid Regime: On this date, Costa Rica held general elections. Julio Acosta García from the Constitutional Party emerged as the winner in the presidential election, and his party secured a victory in the parliamentary election with 74.9% of the vote.⁹ General elections took place in 1923, 1928, 1932, 1936, 1940, 1944 and 1948. Although elections were held regularly suffrage was restricted. Women, Afro-descendants and illiterates obtained the right to vote only in 1948. After losing the popular election on 04/25/1948, candidate Rafael Ángel Calderón supporters sparked a constitutional crisis by refusing to validate the presidential election of Otilio Ulate Blanco. Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. LIED classifies elections during this period as competitive. V-Dem's EF&FI scores elections during this time as being of ambiguous freedom and fairness. Their CEI scores them as not really clean. Political liberties were absent according to LIED and somewhat present according to V-Dem's PCLI for this period. As per Polity5's classification, the executive's authority was significantly constrained by institutional checks during this time. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted 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 moderate until 1939 and in 1948, and robust during the remainder of this regime period.

03/12/1948 End Electoral Hybrid Regime/Start No Central Authority: On this date a civil war ensued, which removed Picado from effective power, although technically he completed his term abroad.¹⁰

04/24/1948 End No Central Authority/Start Non-Electoral Transitional Regime: On this date the civil war ended. Picado and former president Calderon went into exile. Figueres and the military junta, called the Founding Council, took control after the term of the appointed transitional president Santos León Herrera's

expired on 05/08/1948¹¹ and the various factions of the civil war had been defeated or capitulated (Mauceri 1989: 205-206). The constitution of 11/07/1949 granted women the right to vote.¹² The direction of this regime change event is coded as a liberalization because the ruling military junta, known as the Founding Junta of the Second Republic, ended the civil war and restored state authority. Despite its autocratic nature, the junta immediately initiated fundamental democratic and progressive reforms, most notably overseeing the drafting of the 1949 Constitution, which abolished the army and granted women the right to vote.¹³ Based on Polity5's assessment, during this period, the executive encountered substantial institutional limitations on power. For the relevant regime period, 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 moderate. According to LIED, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during the specified period. LIED outcomes for political liberties still codes them as absent and V-Dem's PCLI as what we interpret as somewhat present

11/08/1949 End Non-Electoral Transitional Regime/Start Electoral Oligarchy (Patriarchal): On this date, Figueres, who had assumed the role of interim president, transferred authority to Ulate, who had been elected in February 1948 but had not been acknowledged as the victor by the sitting president at the time (Cerdas 1990: 390, Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 56). This handover is coded as a return to a patriarchal electoral oligarchy. V-Dem's CEI and EF&FI classify elections as somewhat clean, free and fair between 1949 and 1953. According to LIED, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period. According to LIED political liberties were absent in this period. V-Dem's PCLI codes political liberties as somewhat present in 1949 and as present from 1950 onward. 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. During this regime period, V-Dem's JCE is classified 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 also comprehensive.

07/26/1953 End Electoral Oligarchy (Patriarchal)/Start Electoral Democracy: The elections on 07/26/1953 were the first in which women could vote.¹⁴ However, in the elections of 1953 the losing sides in the civil war, mostly the Republicans (Calderón supporters) and the Communists, were unable to participate as the Republicans' party was disbanded and the Communist Party was constitutionally outlawed. For these reasons the regime is classified as an electoral democracy. Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. LIED continues to classify the countries elections as competitive. V-Dem's CEI and EF&FI classify them as clean, free and fair since 1953. 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. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating comprehensive constraints on the executive.

02/02/1958 End Electoral Democracy/Start Liberal Democracy: On this date free and fair general elections took place.¹⁵ Since then, Costa Rica has a long-standing record of stable democracy, with a multi-party structure and frequent changes of power through trustworthy elections. Freedom of expression and association are well-protected, and the rule of law is generally upheld, despite occasional corruption scandals implicating presidents. Civil society as described as alive and vibrant with constitutional protections in place for civil liberties. Human as well as civil rights are guaranteed, access to information and the internet is provided.¹⁶ However, the country continues to struggle with certain issues such as discrimination against Indigenous people, as well as land disputes involving Indigenous communities.¹⁷ FH classifies Costa Rica for the whole regime period as free.¹⁸ In April 2022 free and fair elections were held in which Rodrigo Chaves of the Social Democratic Progress Party (PPSD)¹⁹ He has been criticized by media advocacy groups for vilifying journalists and restricting access to government information selectively. Nonetheless, freedom of press is generally maintained.²⁰ The scores of LIED, as well as V-Dem's EF&FI and CEI stay the same. As per FH's classification for this regime period, the country is considered free with a score ranging from 2 to 4, which we

also interpret as free in our framework. Furthermore, since 1958 both LIED and V-Dem's PCLI indicate full political liberties. According to Polity5, during this period, the executive was subordinate to or held equal power with other institutions, indicating executive parity or subordination. During this regime period, V-Dem's JCE is classified 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 also comprehensive.

Liberal Democracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Additional sources (Peeler 1985, Schultz 2000, Seligson/Muller 1987, Zovatto 2005)

Notes

- ¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1901%E2%80%931902_Costa_Rican_general_election
- ² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1906_Costa_Rican_general_election
- ³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1909%E2%80%931910_Costa_Rican_general_election
- ⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfredo_Gonz%C3%A1lez_Flores
- ⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1913_Costa_Rican_general_election
- ⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1913_Costa_Rican_general_election#cite_note-2
- ⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1917_Costa_Rican_coup_d%27%C3%A9tat
- ⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dictatorship_of_the_Tinoco_brothers
- ⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1919_Costa_Rican_general_election
- ¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Costa_Rican_civil_war
- ¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Costa_Rican_civil_war
- ¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bernarda_V%C3%A1squez_M%C3%A9ndez
- ¹³ <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/costa-rica-second-republic;>
<https://ticotimes.net/2024/07/31/the-legacy-of-womens-suffrage-in-costa-rica-74-years-on>
- ¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1953_Costa_Rican_general_election;
<https://ticotimes.net/2023/03/07/when-women-won-the-right-to-vote>
- ¹⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1958_Costa_Rican_general_election
- ¹⁶ <https://www.icnl.org/resources/civic-freedom-monitor/costa-rica>
- ¹⁷ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/costa-rica/freedom-world/2022;>
https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Costa_Rica_2020?lang=en
- ¹⁸ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/costa-rica/freedom-world/2024>
- ¹⁹ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/costa-rica/freedom-world/2023>
- ²⁰ <https://rsf.org/en/country/costa-rica>

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