



El Salvador — Va-PoReg Country Report

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[formerly known as Salvador]

09/15/1821 Start Electoral Oligarchical Autocracy: On 09/15/1821, El Salvador became independent as a part of Central America. Criollos in Guatemala City composed the Act of Independence of Central America. On 01/05/1822, the government of Central America voted for the annexation of Central America and Central America became a province of the First Mexican Empire.¹ On 07/01/1823 the Congress of Central America declared independence from Mexico. On 02/02/1841 the Federal Republic of Central America dissolved, and El Salvador became an independent nation. In 1883 universal male suffrage was introduced. However, even with universal male suffrage, the elections held minimal political importance, with electoral competition confined to a small oligarchy (Krennerich 2005: 270). This oligarchy consisted of wealthy landowners, especially owners of coffee plantations. They are often referred to as Fourteen Families. The Coffee Growers Association has often been described as ‘invisible government’.² Therefore, the oligarchy’s dominant position remained unchallenged by government actions. The direct and indirect ties of the presidents during that time with influential families in the country also played a crucial role. In broad terms, the system persisted without modification, as it proved effective for the limited portion of Salvadorans who profited from it – specifically, the economic elite, high-ranking government officials, and the military High Command.³ The percentage of voters of the total population is according to Vanhanen between 3,0 and 5,0% (Vanhanen 2019). The combination of the quantitative and qualitative indicators justifies the classification of the regime as an electoral oligarchy, despite the universal male suffrage. Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. LIED categorizes elections during this time as not competitive. V-Dem’s EF&FI scores them as not really free or fair and their CEI scores them as not clean. In addition to that political liberties were absent according to LIED and considered as not really present by V-Dem’s PCLI. Based on Polity5’s assessment, the executive faced slight limitations on power during this period. For the relevant 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 absent.

12/02/1931 End Electoral Oligarchical Autocracy/Start Military Autocracy: A military coup by junior officers ousted the elected president Arturo Araujo. The military junta “Civic Directory” ruled from 12/02/1931 to 12/04/1931 before General Hernández Martínez, who had been vice president, defense Minister, and commander of the armed forces, assumed the presidency (White 1973:99, Haggerty 1990, Stanley 1996:48-50, 63-64, Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014b: 58).⁴ Presidential elections were held on 01/13-15/1935, with General Hernández Martínez as the only candidate. The legislative elections in 1932 were cancelled by the President, and the results of the elections in 1936 were never published.⁵ From 1933 to 1945, the National Party of the Fatherland (PNPP) was the sole legal party in El Salvador. While de forma El Salvador was a one-party autocracy, it was de facto a subtype of a military autocracy. The whole purpose of the party was to support the regime of General Hernández Martínez, who founded the party and was its leader.⁶ Women obtained suffrage in 1939 with restrictions requiring literacy and a higher age. According to LIED executive and legislative elections, which weren’t multiparty, were held until 1938, and from 1939 onward only legislative elections, which weren’t multiparty, were held. Moreover, for this regime period, both LIED and

V-Dem's PCLI coded political liberties as absent. Based on Polity5's assessment, during this period, the executive operated with unlimited authority, facing no institutional checks on power. During this regime period, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, whereas V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent.

05/09/1944 End Military Autocracy/Start Non-Electoral Transitional Regime: Following intense street protests, President General Hernandez Martinez resigned.⁷ On the same day, General Andrés Ignacio Menéndez assumed the role of the provisional president. He declared amnesty for everyone who was part of the unrest, and thus began a national transition to democracy. Since the regime did not start with a military coup it is classified as a non-electoral transitional regime and not as a military autocracy. As per Polity5's classification, the executive wielded unrestricted authority without any formal limitations during this time.

10/21/1944 End Non-Electoral Transitional Regime/Start Military Autocracy: Provisional President Andrés Ignacio Menéndez was overthrown by General Osmín Aguirre.⁸ In early 1945, Aguirre transferred power to Salvador Castaneda Castro, a military officer, from the Social Democratic Unification Party. In presidential elections on 01/14-16/1945 military officer Castaneda Castro was elected. However, the elections were not free and fair and no oppositional candidates took part in the election. They were namely boycotted by five candidates who withdrew after accusing Osmín Aguirre y Salinas of unfair practices to ensure victory for his favored candidate.⁹ Even so there were presidential elections in 1945 the period after is classified as a continuation of the military autocracy starting on 10/21/1944. According to LIED only legislative elections, which weren't multiparty, were held in 1944, from 1945 onward executive and legislative elections, which weren't multiparty were held. Following LIED political liberties were still coded as absent, while V-Dem's PCLI indicates that political liberties were not really present. According to Polity5, during this period, the executive held unlimited authority with no institutionalized constraints on decision-making power. For the relevant 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 absent.

12/14/1948 End Military Autocracy/Start Military Autocracy: A coup orchestrated by junior officers compelled the retirement of all officers ranked above Lieutenant Colonel, effectively dismantling the Hernandez Martinez faction. This event led to the establishment of a Revolutionary Governing Council, selected by the remaining officer corps in its entirety (White 1973:105, Baloyra 1982:17, Stanley 1996:67). The regime following 1948 is distinguished from its predecessor by the shift in leadership ranks within the regime (Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014b: 58). A junta headed by Major Oscar Osorio was installed. In 1950 all restrictions were lifted allowing women to vote, but women obtained the right to stand for elections only in 1961.¹⁰ According to LIED no multiparty executive and legislative elections were held. For these two years, political liberties were absent according to LIED and can be interpreted as not really present following to V-Dem's PCLI. During this regime period, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, whereas V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent.

09/16/1950 End Military Autocracy/Start Electoral Autocracy: Under the terms of the constitution of 1950, which had emerged from the revolution of 1948, Osorio was elected president. He stood as candidate of the Revolutionary Party of Democratic Unification. The only opposition candidate was Colonel José Menéndez Ascencio.¹¹ Under Osoria some democratic improvements were made, but at the same time, he instituted regulations that placed the country under a suspension of both individual and collective rights, referred to as the Law on Defense of the Constitutional Order.¹² Based on it, he began to suppress labor leaders and students in 1952 until the end of his term.¹³ In 1952, 1954 and 1958 parliamentary elections were held. The Revolutionary Party of Democratic Unification was the only party to contest because the opposition claimed the elections were fraudulent. Presidential elections were held on 03/04/1956. Beforehand several opposition candidates had been barred from contesting, allowing their candidate José María Lemus to win with 95%.¹⁴

He held the presidency until 10/26/1960.¹⁵ Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. LIED categorizes elections during this time as not competitive. V-Dem's EF&FI scores them as not really free or fair and their CEI scores them as not clean. Due to the unfair conditions in electoral competition and process, the period is classified as an electoral autocracy. Additionally, LIED and V-Dem's PCLI scores concerning the political liberties remained absent and not really present. Based on Polity5's assessment, the executive faced slight limitations on power during this period. For the relevant 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 absent.

10/26/1960 End Electoral Autocracy/Start Military Autocracy: Lemus, facing student uprisings and political failures was overthrown by the military who feared a loss of stability and revolution. The ranking military representative was Lieutenant Colonel Julio Adalberto Rivera. Also, the civilian professor Castillo gained great influence.¹⁶ According to LIED no multiparty executive and legislative elections were held. As per Polity5's classification, the executive's authority was subject to minor institutional constraints during this time. LIED identifies political liberties as absent, while V-Dem's PCLI is classified by us as indicating that political liberties are not really present. During this regime period, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, whereas V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent.

01/25/1961 End Military Autocracy/Start Military (One-Party) Autocracy: The Junta of Government led by Castillo was overthrown by junior officers and sectors of the military who felt the regime was too far to the left. The Civic-Military Directory was established with Portillo as its head.¹⁷ Between 1962 and 1979, the National Conciliation Party (PCN), closely aligned with the Salvadoran military, governed the nation, effectively establishing a one-party state. While opposition parties did exist during this period, they had little practical influence or power.¹⁸ On 07/01/1962, Julio Adalberto Rivera Carballo, a military officer and member of the Civic-Military Directory, was elected president.¹⁹ 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 limited, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent. According to LIED only legislative elections, which weren't multiparty were held in 1961 and from 1962 to 1966 executive and legislative elections, which weren't multiparty, were held. For this regime period, LIED still classifies political liberties as absent. V-Dem's PCLI can be interpreted in the way that political liberties were not really present during this period.

03/05/1967 End Military (One-Party) Autocracy/Start Electoral Autocracy: On this date, presidential elections in El Salvador were held. Fidel Sánchez Hernández of the Party of National Conciliation won the election, securing 54.4% of the vote.²⁰ Legislative elections took place in El Salvador on 03/10/1968. The National Conciliation Party achieved victory, securing 27 out of 52 seats. Voter turnout was only 36.6%.²¹ According to Polity5, during this period, the executive encountered slight limitations on decision-making power imposed by other institutions. During this regime period, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, whereas V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent. LIED confirms that multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period. As per FH's classification for the regime period from 1972 to 1975, the country receives a score of 5 as free, which we categorize as rather free. In 1976 a score of 6 to 7 for the assessed regime period designates the country as partly free, which aligns with our interpretation of rather free. In 1977 it is partly free with a score of 8, which we interpret as rather not free. For the remaining regime period the country scores between 9 and 10 as not free, which we interpret as rather not free. Political liberties were absent during this period (LIED). V-Dem's PCLI classifies political liberties as not really present until 1971 and absent from 1972 onwards.

10/25/1979 End Electoral Autocracy/Start Military Autocracy: Violence between right-wing death squads and left-wing revolutionaries reached a destabilizing level and a new military and civilian junta took over to defeat the insurgencies. The military established the Revolutionary Government Junta of El Salvador as the government.²² According to LIED no multiparty executive and legislative elections were held. Per FH's evaluation for this regime period, the country scores from 9 to 10 as not free, which we categorize as rather not free. LIED and V-Dem's PCLI indicate the absence of political liberties. For the relevant 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 absent.

03/28/1982 End Military Autocracy/Start Electoral Hybrid (Military) Regime: In 1982, military and economic elites agreed to the election of a constituent assembly, where the right-wing ARENA party was prominent. The major parties' negotiations led to the Apaneca Pact, forming a Political Commission to draft a new constitution in 1983. This constitution facilitated relatively free elections in 1984, won by moderate Christian Democrat Jose Napoleon Duarte (Haggard/Kaufman/Teo 2016: 26).²³ However, the left was excluded from the elections and a civilian president deemed satisfactory to both the military and Washington got to power. Even though the allowed opposition secured victory in the presidential election in 05/1984, Geddes, Wright, and Frantz categorize the 1982-94 regime as "indirect military rule" (Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014b: 58-59). However, as regional experts Scott Mainwaring and Aníbal Pérez-Liñán in their dataset for Latin American regimes code the regime period as a semidemocracy (Mainwaring/Pérez-Liñán 2013). However, the case is in our classification a borderline case between an electoral autocracy and electoral hybrid regime. According to LIED multiparty executive and legislative elections were held. Elections during this time are categorized as competitive by LIED, which seems in a comparative perspective a misjudgment. V-Dem's EF&FI scores electoral freedom and fairness as ambiguous. Their CEI scores the elections as not clean. Furthermore, political liberties were absent for the entire time per LIED. V-Dem's PCLI indicates several changes. According to FH, for 1982 and 1983, a score between 9 and 10 makes the country not free, which aligns with our interpretation of rather not free. In 1984 the country receives a score of 8, which we interpret as falling into the rather not free category. From 1985 onward a score of 6 to 7 for the assessed regime period designates the country as partly free, which aligns with our interpretation of rather free. Until 1989 no political liberties were present. The following two years they are classified as not really present. In 1992 the outcomes switched to an ambiguous level and to a somewhat present level in 1993. From 1984 to 1994, according to the Polity5 indicator, during this period, the executive faced substantial limitations on decision-making power. From 1983 to 1989, 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. For 1990-1991, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, and V-Dem's LCE is similarly interpreted as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also limited. For 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 limited.

03/20/1994 End Electoral Hybrid (Military) Regime/Start Electoral Democracy: The 1994 election marked the culmination of the democratic transition initiated by the 1992 Chapultepec Peace Accords, a negotiated settlement between the Salvadoran government and the leftist insurgent group FMLN.²⁴ On this date, the ruling faction permitted a genuinely competitive presidential election under universal suffrage, wherein leftist parties participated for the first time.²⁵ This marked a transition to democracy (Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014b: 59). In the 01/18/2009 legislative elections, ARENA suffered a setback, losing two seats and its overall advantage to the FMLN. However, a late arrangement with the PCN allowed ARENA to maintain control of the assembly's presidency. Meanwhile, the appointment of Rodrigo Ávila, a congressman and former national police chief, as the party's candidate in the March presidential election caused internal tensions, with certain members alleging campaign fraud (Lansford 2021: 507). Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. LIED

categorizes all elections during this time as competitive. From 1994 to 2013, V-Dem's EF&FI scores elections as somewhat free and fair and their CEI scores their electoral cleanliness as ambiguous. After 2013 they increase their rankings to scoring the elections as free, fair and somewhat clean. Per FH, for 1995 and 1996, the country scores between 6 and 7, categorized as partly free, which we interpret as rather free. For the period between 1997 and 2018 the country is rated as free with a score of 5, which we interpret as rather free in our framework. For the remaining period from 2019 onward the country is partly free with a score ranging from 6 to 7, which we place in the rather free category. Moreover, political liberties are classified as absent by LIED. Whereas V-Dem's PCLI confirms they are present until 2019 and somewhat present from 2020 onwards. Until 2008, according to the Polity5 indicator, the executive faced substantial limitations on decision-making power. Since then, 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 1995 to 2007, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating moderate constraints on the executive. For the years 2008 and 2009, 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. From 2010 to 2018, 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 2019 and 2020, 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 year 2021, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were absent, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were limited.

01/05/2021 End Electoral Democracy/Start Electoral Hybrid Regime: The Bukele administration consistently disrupted the legislature's policymaking process until securing a supermajority in the legislative session that began on 05/2021. Since then, both the government and legislators from the ruling party regularly block opposition lawmakers from accessing crucial information, such as draft legislation, hindering substantial discussions on proposed laws.²⁶ Bukele dismissed several judges of the highest court as well as the attorney general who was leading corruption charges. Checks and balances through media are hardly present internally and reports on the state of affairs rely mostly on investigative international media sources according to the BTI.²⁷ On 03/27/2022, President Bukele's government declared an unconstitutional state of exception which led to the arbitrary arrest of civilians and limited the freedom of assembly rights.²⁸ Since 2021, Bukele has taken steps to limit the opposition's chances, including structural changes in municipalities that favor the ruling party and significantly reducing the number of elected offices.²⁹ In the February 2024 elections, President Bukele won another term despite exceeding the constitutional term limit. Before the election, he replaced all judges in the constitutional chamber of the Supreme Court and the attorney general with loyalists. Four months later, these newly appointed officials ruled that Bukele could seek re-election despite the term limit.³⁰ He won a sweeping 85% of the vote and his party secured a supermajority in congress with 54 out of 60 seats. Multiple irregularities and shortcomings were reported including ballot duplication and other issues in the hand-counted procedure. According to Reuters, observation organization noticed that Bukele's party took intimidating attitudes towards opposition while trying to hinder the press and observation missions.³¹ Events leading up to and after the election suggest an increasingly authoritarian trend. El Salvador became an electoral hybrid regime. Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. LIED categorizes elections during this time as competitive. V-Dem's EF&FI scores elections as somewhat free and fair and their CEI scores their electoral cleanliness as ambiguous. According to FH, a score of 6 to 7 designates the country in the years from 2021 and 2022 as partly free, which aligns with our interpretation of rather free. From 2023 onwards it is classified as partly free with scores from 8 to 9, which we place in the rather not free category in our framework. Regarding the political liberties they were still absent in 2021 (LIED). V-Dem's PCLI classifies them as ambiguous since 2021. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that

judicial constraints on the executive were absent, and V-Dem's LCE is similarly interpreted as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also absent.

Electoral Hybrid Regime as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Notes

- ¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_Republic_of_Central_America#Independence_1821%E2%80%931822;
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Central_America
- ² <https://countrystudies.us/el-salvador/6.htm>
- ³ <https://countrystudies.us/el-salvador/6.htm>
- ⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1931_Salvadoran_coup_d%27%C3%A9tat
- ⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elections_in_El_Salvador#1931_2
- ⁶ <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/el-salvadorans-bring-down-dictator-1944>
- ⁷ <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/el-salvadorans-bring-down-dictator-1944>
- ⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Osm%C3%ADn_Aguirre_y_Salinas#Presidency
- ⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1945_Salvadoran_presidential_election
- ¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_suffrage
- ¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%93scar_Osorio
- ¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%93scar_Osorio
- ¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%93scar_Osorio
- ¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revolutionary_Party_of_Democratic_Unification;
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1952_Salvadoran_legislative_election;
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1954_Salvadoran_legislative_election
- ¹⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jos%C3%A9_Mar%C3%ADa_Lemus
- ¹⁶ <https://www.onwar.com/data/elsalvador1960.html>
- ¹⁷ https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/An%C3%ADbal_Portillo
- ¹⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_dictatorship_in_El_Salvador
- ¹⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julio_Adalberto_Rivera_Carballo
- ²⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1967_Salvadoran_presidential_election
- ²¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1968_Salvadoran_legislative_election
- ²² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1979_Salvadoran_coup_d%27%C3%A9tat
- ²³ https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/El_Salvador_2014?lang=en
- ²⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_El_Salvador
- ²⁵ <https://www.ifes.org/publications/election-observation-el-salvador-march-20-april-24-1994>
- ²⁶ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/el-salvador/freedom-world/2022>
- ²⁷ <https://bti-project.org/de/reports/country-dashboard/SLV>
- ²⁸ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/el-salvador/freedom-world/2023>
- ²⁹ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/el-salvador/freedom-world/2024>
- ³⁰ <https://bti-project.org/de/reports/country-report/SLV>
- ³¹ <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/el-salvador-opposition-requests-repeat-election-congress-after-irregularities-2024-02-19/>

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