



Liberia — Va-PoReg Country Report

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

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

07/26/1847 Start Electoral Oligarchical Autocracy: Originally established as a colony of the USA, Liberia became an independent state when settlers issued a Declaration of Independence on 07/26/1847.¹ It was a presidential system and a bicameral legislature modeled after the US constitution, with the president who serves as the head of state and head of government elected by popular vote for a four-year term (since 1907) (Basedau 1999). Liberia was founded as a haven for Black people seeking freedom and redemption. Its constitution was crafted to protect Liberians from non-Black influence by limiting citizenship. In essence, Liberia offered Black people a chance for citizenship, which was denied to them in the United States. But the division of power dynamics was complex, and power was concentrated among Americo-Liberians that held significant political influence. The Americo-Liberians made up only about 3 to 5 percent of the population but dominated and ruled the country until 1980. Until 1947 indigenous male and female Liberians, about 16 ethnic groups were disenfranchised (Ludwig 2016: 86-90, Schmidt 1981: 243-248).² Elections were regularly held, but the percentage of the population which participated ranged according to Vanhanen between 1.0 and 5.0 (Vanhanen 2019). From 1879 to 1980, the nation was effectively administered as a one-party state under the True Whig Party (TWP), although opposition parties were never outlawed.³ The 1923 general elections stands out in regard to electoral manipulation: The candidate of the TWP Charles D. B. King was re-elected receiving 45.000 votes, although only 6.000 Liberians had been eligible to cast a vote.⁴ Initially, the ideology was strongly influenced by that of the United States Whig Party (from which it took its name).⁵ On 01/01/1944 the formal and informal rules governing Liberian politics changed after Tubman's inauguration as president. Tubman granted citizenship to all Liberians and incrementally extended political participation to indigenous Liberians. In May 1945 new suffrage laws extended the vote to all male and female citizens who owned property and paid the hut tax.⁶ Tubman changed the formal rules about who could influence policy by extending suffrage, but also changed the informal rules of political decision making, reducing the influence of traditional True Whig Party institutions and procedures and personalizing decision making within his own family and patronage network, which extended into the indigenous hinterland (Lowenkopf 1972: 94-108). Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. During the entire period, LIED categorizes elections as not competitive. V-Dem's EF&FI scores them consistently as not really free or fair. Their CEI scores them either not really or ambiguously clean at various points in time. Besides, political liberties were constantly absent (LIED). V-Dem's PCLI indicates an ambiguous state regarding political liberties until 1943 and for the period since 1944 that they were not really given. From 1900 to 1908, as per Polity5's classification, the executive experienced moderate limitations on authority, placing it in the second intermediate category. Since 1909, as per Polity5's classification, the executive's authority was subject to minor institutional constraints 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 moderate until 1943 and limited until 1950, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate.

05/01/1951 End Electoral Oligarchical Autocracy/Start Electoral Autocracy: On this date the first general elections with universal male and female suffrage were held. The percentage of the population which participated in the elections rose from 5.0 in 1943 to 20.0 percent in 1951 and increased with every election up

to over 50 percent (Basedau 1999, Vanhanen 2019). The governance, formerly organized based on familial ties among Americo-Liberians, underwent substantial changes because of the personalized approach adopted by Tubman's administration. This was facilitated by a substantial rise in foreign investment, resulting in increased government revenues under the president's control (Lowenkopf 1972: 99-100, Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 74-75). But Tubman also strengthened the presidency over time so much that the legislature and judiciary became mere followers of his decisions. This personal control prevented the development of civil institutions that could uphold the rule of law and peacefully resolve conflicts (Frempong 2000-2001: 126). Following Tubman's death in 1971, his successor, President William R. Tolbert, attempted to uphold these policies. However, his inability to address widespread governance issues and corruption led to domestic unrest. The rule of the True Whig Party continued until 1980 and portrayed a de-facto single party rule. Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. During this time, LIED classifies elections as not competitive. V-Dem's EF&FI and CEI score election as neither free, fair nor clean. Even though various parties participated in several elections during that time, none posed a threat to the TWP's presidential candidates or managed to secure seats in Congress. Thus, the unquestioned dominance of the Americo-Liberians came to an end with the overthrow of the Tolbert government in a coup d'état in 1980. (Basedau 1999). As classified by FH since 1972, the country is scored from 11 to 14 as not free, which corresponds to our interpretation of not free. Between 1974 and 1977 the country scores from 9 to 10 as not free, which we categorize as rather not free. From 1978 onward the country is scored from 11 to 14 as not free, which corresponds to our interpretation of not free. Additionally, political liberties remained absent (LIED). V-Dem's PCLI outcomes varies between not and not really present for this 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 limited, and V-Dem's LCE is interpreted as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate. AF, HTW and MCM classify the period as a single-party rule. LIED encodes alternating phases between one-party autocracy and multiparty autocracy and GWF classifies the regime as party personal. We classify the period between 1951 and 1980 as an electoral autocracy, because opposition parties were not forbidden and opposition candidates contested some elections (1951, 1955, 1959). In the 1963, 1967, 1971 and 1975 general elections the candidate of the TWP was elected uncontested. However, the case clearly represents a borderline case between a one-party autocracy and an electoral autocracy.

04/12/1980 End Electoral Autocracy/Start Military Autocracy: On this date, a military coup by a group of officers led by Sergeant Samuel Doe declaring themselves „ethnic Liberians” overthrew Toulbert. Doe took power as the chair of the military junta (Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 75).⁷ He rose to become Liberia's inaugural indigenous President. Supported by his ethnic group, the Krahn, Doe's oppressive and destructive regime intensified the political turmoil. Despite attempts to validate his authority through a new constitution in 1984 (ratified by referendum) and general elections in 1985 (under questionable circumstances), ethnic tensions persisted, leading to overt violence (Basedau 1999). Based on our observations, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. 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 absent, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were limited. As classified by FH for this regime period, the country fluctuates between 10 and 12, scoring not free, which we interpret as moving between rather not free and not free. Moreover, the state of political liberties is indicated as absent by both LIED and V-Dem's PCLI.

10/15/1985 End Military Autocracy/Start Electoral Autocracy: After a new constitution in Liberia was drafted in 1985, providing a multi-party republic, on this date, the first general elections were held. Doe was elected president in these subsequent elections that were internationally condemned as deceptive (Basedau 1999).⁸

Doe had the ballots taken to a secret location and 50 of his own handpicked staff counted them. Foreign observers declared the elections fraudulent and suggested that runner-up Jackson Doe of the Liberian Action Party had actually won the voting.⁹ Following the general election, the new Constitution came into effect on 01/06/1986.¹⁰ Doe didn't significantly change politics, economy, or society. He tried to manage conflicts like the previous regime but faced financial troubles and increased tension, with several coup attempts from 1985 onward. Doe built support among his own ethnic group. After a 1985 coup attempt, Doe's regime targeted certain people, fueling intense hostility. This led to a rise in ethnic identity among various groups (Outram 1999: 167, McDonough 2008: 360). 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 the period as not competitive. V-Dem's EF&FI scores electoral freedom and fairness as ambiguous. Their CEI scores the elections as not really clean. Per FH's evaluation for the period until 1988, the country scores from 9 to 10 as not free, which we categorize as rather not free. For the remaining period the country scores between 11 and 14 as not free, which we also interpret as not free. Besides, LIED's score still remained absent and V-Dem's PCLI still indicates a not real presence of political liberties. 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 moderate.

09/09/1990 End Electoral Autocracy/Start No Central Authority: Rebel forces occupied Monrovia, captured, tortured and executed Samuel Doe. This was the beginning of the First Liberian Civil War. Liberia entered a state of anarchy in the following days and Doe was killed. (Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 75).¹¹ On 11/22/1990 the rebels Taylor and Johnson warred for the presidency. An interim government was established abroad, and Amos Sawyer was voted the president. On 03/07/1994 Amos Sawyer was forced to step down as the factions continued to war both in the country and in the government. Kpormapkor became head of the interim civilian junta. On 09/01/1995 as fighting continued, the Council of State forced Kpormapkor out and Sankwulo took the chair with the new Peace Accords. Another cease-fire agreement on 09/03/1996 led to the ousting of the previous chairman and the introduction of a new chairwoman. Based on our observations, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. According to FH's classification for the assessed regime period, a score between 11 and 14 makes the country not free, which we also place in the not free category. Political liberties are still coded as absent following LIED. V-Dem's PCLI increased into a range which we interpret as an ambiguous state. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were moderate until 1995, limited in 1996 and absent in 1997, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were robust until 1994 and moderate until 1997.

07/19/1997 End No Central Authority/Start Electoral Autocracy: On this date, Charles Taylor was elected in an atmosphere of fear and intimidation (Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 75).¹² Accusations against Taylor included supporting guerrillas in neighboring nations and diverting diamond funds for arms acquisitions to aid the rebel armies he endorsed, as well as indulging in personal luxuries. The underlying unrest is reflected in the significant national economic decline and the widespread exchange of diamonds and timber for small arms. Former members of anti-rebel groups established the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD). LURD began fighting in Lofa County with the aim of destabilizing the government and gaining control of the local diamond fields, leading to the Second Liberian Civil War.¹³ The second civil war began on 04/21/1999, when Liberian dissidents under the banner of the Organization of Displaced Liberians invaded Liberia from Guinea. In 07/2003 the United States sent a small number of troops to bolster security around the US embassy in Monrovia, which had come under attack. On 07/29/2003, LURD declared a ceasefire.¹⁴ Taylor stepped down on 08/11/2003, amidst insurgencies that had gained control over much of the country, paving the way for a peace agreement and the establishment of a neutral transitional government (Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 75).¹⁵ Vice-president Moses Blah replaced Taylor. On 08/14/2003 rebels lifted

their siege of Monrovia and United States Marines landed to support a West African peace force. On the same date Blah was forced to hand over power to the National Transitional Government of Liberia. The second civil war officially ended on 08/18/2003.¹⁶ Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. During this period elections are categorized as not competitive by LIED. V-Dem's EF&FI scores them as somewhat free and fair. Their CEI scores electoral cleanliness as ambiguous. Per FH's evaluation for this regime period until 1999, the country scores from 9 to 10 as not free, which we categorize as rather not free. From 2000 onward a score between 11 and 14 makes the country not free, which we also place in the not free category. However, political liberties were still absent per LIED. V-Dem's PCLI indicates an ambiguous regarding political liberties from 1997 to 1999 and since 2000 that they were not really present. According to Polity5, during this period, the executive's constraints fell into Intermediate Category 1, between unlimited authority and slight limitations. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were absent until 1999 and limited between 2000-2003, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate.

08/14/2003 End Electoral Autocracy/Start Non-Electoral Transitional Regime: On this day Moses Blah was forced out by a new UN-baked peace arrangement. The peace agreement furthermore stated that the National Transitional Legislative Assembly was Liberia's legislative body during the country's transition from civil war to democratic rule. It also called for the creation of a broad-based transitional government.¹⁷ This government held power for two years until the general elections in 2005 and the installation of a democratically elected government by January 2006.¹⁸ According to LIED only legislative elections, which weren't multiparty, were held. Per FH, for this regime period, the country score fluctuates between 8 and 9, categorized as partly free and not free, which we interpret as rather not free. Moreover, LIED continued to code political liberties as absent. V-Dem's PCLI states them as ambiguous in 2003 and as somewhat present in 2004. 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 comprehensive.

10/11/2005 End Non-Electoral Transitional Regime/Start Electoral Democracy: On this date general elections were held, with a runoff election for the presidency held on 11/08/2005. The presidency and all seats in the House of Representatives and Senate were up for election. The elections were first held since 1997 and marked the end of the political transition following the second civil war, having been stipulated in the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2004. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, previously employed by the World Bank and serving as Liberia's finance minister, emerged victorious in the presidential election, securing her position as the first democratically elected female African head of state in January 2006.¹⁹ The 2017 election, the latest one held, was deemed generally peaceful and credible by both domestic and international observers. However, administrative challenges such as lengthy queues at polling stations and issues with voter identification were noted. Notably, this election marked the first peaceful transition of power between leaders since 1944. Nonetheless, Liberia continues to grapple with significant problems including corruption, impunity, and violence against women.²⁰ General elections in November 2023 were characterized by a rematch of the incumbent President George Weah and former Vice President Joseph Boakai in a run-off election on the 11/14/2023. The EU Observation Mission in Liberia 2023 reported the voting procedure to be very good at polling stations, generally well organized, and noted high-turnout rates.²¹ Civil liberties and freedom of press and opinion were generally respected, although a level-playing field was distorted by biased state-owned media and the use of state resources. Self-censorship in the media poses the largest issue to a diversified media landscape. As classified by FH for this regime period, the country is partly free with a score ranging from 6 to 7, which we place in the rather free category. Furthermore, political liberties were still not achieved according to LIED. Nevertheless V-Dem's PCLI underlines their full presence since 2005. The legal framework was provided a functional base for democratic elections, yet some shortcomings remained relating to the processing voter complaints.²² In an extremely close head-to-head race, the oppositional candidate Boakai

managed to secure the majority vote and became the new acting president after a peaceful transfer of power.²³ While universal suffrage remains warranted and the executive is constrained by legislature, corruption remains a pervasive issue that permeates into policy prioritization, independent media issues and judicial institutions, thereby compromising the rule of law (FH rating 1/4 for judiciary independence).²⁴ Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Since 2005, elections are categorized as competitive by LIED. V-Dem's EF&FI scores them as somewhat free and fair. Their CEI scores them as somewhat clean, except between 2012 and 2017 when it scores electoral cleanliness as ambiguous. FH classifies the regime in this period as partly free. According to Polity5, during this period, the executive's constraints fell into Intermediate Category 3, between substantial limitations and executive parity or subordination. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust until 2009 and between 2017-2018, and moderate between 2010-2016 and 2019-2023. On the other hand, V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were comprehensive until 2012, robust between 2013-2017, and moderate between 2018-2023. According to our classification the regime in this period is a borderline case between an electoral and a liberal democracy.

Electoral Democracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Notes

- ¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberia#History>
- ² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_suffrage#cite_note-centralasiainstitute.org-37
- ³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/True_Whig_Party
- ⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1923_Liberian_general_election
- ⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/True_Whig_Party
- ⁶ <http://africanelections.tripod.com/lr.html>
- ⁷ https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1985/liberia_1_tolbertpresidency.htm
- ⁸ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberia>
- ⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Doe
- ¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constitution_of_Liberia
- ¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/09/11/world/liberian-insurgents-kill-president-diplomats-and-broadcasts-report.html>;
<https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-liberia/>
- ¹² <https://africanelections.tripod.com/lr.html>
- ¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Liberian_Civil_War
- ¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Liberian_Civil_War
- ¹⁵ <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/502077>; <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-liberia/>
- ¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Liberian_Civil_War
- ¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Transitional_Legislative_Assembly_of_Liberia
- ¹⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Transitional_Legislative_Assembly_of_Liberia
- ¹⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2005_Liberian_general_election
- ²⁰ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/liberia/freedom-world/2022>
- ²¹ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eom-liberia-2023/remarkably-close-and-well-administered-run-election-0_en?s=410332
- ²² https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eom-liberia-2023/remarkably-close-and-well-administered-run-election-0_en?s=410332
- ²³ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/liberia/freedom-world/2024>
- ²⁴ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/liberia/freedom-world/2024>

References

Basedau, Matthias (1999): Liberia, in: Nohlen, Dieter, Krennerich, Michael & Thibaut, Bernhard (Hrsg.), Elections in Africa: A Data Handbook. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 507–522.

- 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.
- Lowenkopf, Martin (1972): Political Modernization in Liberia: A Conservative Model, in: *The Western Political Quarterly* 25, 94-108.
- Ludwig, Bernadette (2016): A Black Republic: Citizenship and Naturalisation Requirements in Liberia, in: *Migration Letters* 13, 84-99.
- Mcdonough, David S. (2008): From Guerrillas to Government: Post-conflict Stability in Liberia, Uganda and Rwanda, in: *Third World Quarterly* 29, 357-374.
- Outram, Quentin (1999): Liberia: Roots and Fruits of the Emergency, in: *Third World Quarterly* 20, 163-173.
- Schmidt, Gerold W. (1981): The New Constitutional Developments in the Republic of Liberia, in: *Verfassung und Recht in Übersee* 14, 243-268.
- Vanhanen, Tatu (2019): Measures of Democracy 1810-2018 Dataset. Finnish Social Science Data Archive.