



Nicaragua — Va-PoReg Country Report

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12/10/1893 Start Electoral Autocracy: On 09/15/1821, Nicaragua became part of the Federal Republic of Central America, which declared independence from Spain. On 11/05/1838, Nicaragua declared independence from the Federal Republic of Central America. Thirty years of Conservative dominance in Nicaragua ended in 1893, when President Roberto Sacasa was forced to resign, and a bipartisan provisional government was established. A month later, a coup led by the Liberals and supported by the military ousted the provisional government and installed a rival provisional government headed by José Santos Zelaya. On 08/10/1893, the junta established the regulation for the selection of members of the constituent assembly. This assembly's responsibility was not only to draft a new constitution but also to formulate a new electoral code (Cruz 2002: 133). The constituent assembly was composed of deputies elected in Nicaragua's electoral districts and departments. On 09/20/1893, the junta resigned and transferred its executive powers to the Constituent Assembly (Cruz 2002: 133). On 09/16/1893, the Constituent Assembly elected Zelaya provisional president and president for the first new constitutional term (La Botz 2016). On 12/10/1893, the Assembly adopted a new constitution, constructing a new, liberal, national state and introducing male suffrage (Kellam 2013).¹ On 07/20/1886, Zelaya called a constitutional referendum, which allowed for universal suffrage, but no presidential elections were held throughout his 17-year regime. In 1905, Zelaya aimed to overhaul the Constitution once again, intending to enable the president to have unlimited succession (Cruz 2002: 143). Zelaya evolved into an authoritarian president, employing repressive legislation and police actions to sustain his regime. He orchestrated multiple re-elections through the national Assembly and frequently declared a 'state of siege' to maintain order (La Botz 2016:40). Weakened and influenced by both internal and external factors, Zelaya stepped down on 12/17/1909. Following his resignation, José Madriz, his minister of foreign affairs, was appointed president by the Nicaraguan Congress. Holding liberal beliefs, Madriz struggled to establish stability amidst ongoing pressure from conservative factions and the intervention of the United States. Eventually, he resigned on 08/20/1910. Following Madriz's departure, Conservative leader Estrada, who governed Nicaragua's easternmost region, assumed control. The United States pledged support to Estrada under the condition that a Constituent Assembly be elected to draft a new constitution. With this condition accepted, a coalition government comprising conservatives and liberals, led by Estrada, was officially recognized by the United States on 01/01/1911.² Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. During this time, parliamentary and presidential elections with male suffrage were held but were not competitive according to LIED. V-Dem's CEI affirms no electoral cleanliness. According to V-Dem's EF&FI, no freedom and fairness for the elections is stated. Since 1902 no elections were conducted, except in 1905 when the overall conditions were not free and fair. Moreover, LIED scores absent political liberties and V-Dem's PCLI not really political liberties for the entire time. From 1900 to 1908, as per Polity5's classification, the executive wielded unrestricted authority without any formal limitations during this time. From 1909 to 1912, Based on Polity5's assessment, the executive faced slight 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 absent, and V-Dem's LCE is similarly interpreted as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also absent.

08/04/1912 End Electoral Autocracy/Start Indirect Rule Occupation Regime [by USA Electoral Democracy]: The occupation was a component of the Banana Wars, during which the U.S. military invaded several Latin American countries between 1898 and 1934.³ Until 1933, with a nine-month exception in 1925, US Marines were stationed in Nicaragua to maintain control over the construction of a Nicaraguan Canal.⁴ In 1913, the United States reduced its military presence in Nicaragua to just 100 troops, signaling its readiness to use force and support conservative regimes. National elections were held under U.S. oversight, but liberals declined to take part, leading to Adolfo Díaz's reelection. Violence and political unrest led to a decline in foreign investment. Although a treaty granting U.S. intervention rights was never ratified, a revised version, excluding the intervention clause, was approved in 1916. This collaboration with the U.S. enabled conservatives to hold power until 1925. Despite liberal participation in the 1920 elections, U.S. support and election fraud ensured Emiliano Chamorro's uncle, Diego Manuel Chamorro, secured victory.⁵ According to LIED, both executive and legislative elections were held until 1919, but they were not categorized as multiparty. Thereafter, multiparty executive and legislative elections were conducted until 1925. In 1926 and 1927, only legislative elections were conducted but they were not categorized as multiparty. In 1928 legislative elections were classified as multiparty. No executive elections were present during this year. From 1929 onward, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held. During this period, LIED lists male suffrage as present. From 1912 to 1925, and from 1928 to 1933, according to Polity5, 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 absent, and V-Dem's LCE is similarly interpreted as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also absent. For this period, LIED identifies political liberties as absent, while V-Dem's PCLI is classified by us as indicating that political liberties were not really present.

01/02/1933 End Indirect Rule Occupation Regime [by USA, Electoral Democracy]/Start Electoral Autocracy: Under U.S. supervision, elections took place in November 1932, leading to the triumph of Liberal Party candidate Juan Bautista Sacasa, who had been involved in the 1926 coup prior to the second U.S. intervention. U.S. military forces withdrew entirely from Nicaragua on 01/02/1933, just one day after Sacasa assumed office (Bulmer-Thomas 1990: 320-23, 329, Gobat 2005: 205, Puig 2013: 152-53, Casey et al. 2020: 12). President Sacasa saw a decline in his popularity due to his ineffective governance and allegations of electoral fraud during the 1934 congressional elections. Taking advantage of Sacasa's waning influence, Somoza García strategically unified the National Guard and the Liberal Party (Partido Liberal-PL), positioning himself for success in the 1936 presidential elections.⁶ Quantitative indicators show mixed results regarding the integrity of the elections. Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. LIED indicates the presence of competitive elections until 1935, whereas according to V-Dem's CEI and EF&FI the elections were neither clean nor free and fair. In this case our qualitative observations are in line with V-Dem. In addition to that, no political liberties were present for this time, according to LIED and V-Dem's PCLI. 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 absent, and V-Dem's LCE is similarly interpreted as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also absent.

06/09/1936 End Electoral Autocracy/Start Personalist Autocracy: Leveraging control of the National Guard, Anastasio Somoza García overthrew President Juan Bautista Sacasa and replaced him with his own candidate for Acting President, Carlos Brenes Jarquín (Booth 1998a: 132, Casey et al. 2020: 12). Somoza was nominated for the presidency a week later at a Liberal Party convention on 06/16/1936 and was inaugurated on 01/01/1937 (Crawley 1984: 94-95, Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 81-82). The Somoza family ruled Nicaragua for forty-three years from 1936 to 1979. The dictatorship started by Anastasio Somoza García was continued by his two sons Luis Somoza Debayle and Anastasio Somoza Debayle. Anastasio Somoza García was the President of Nicaragua from 1937 until 1956. In 1944, Anastasio Somoza García responded to

increasing criticism by establishing a puppet government to preserve his authority. He opted not to seek reelection and instead had the PLN nominate the elderly Leonardo Argüello, under the belief that he could manipulate Argüello from behind the scenes. However, Argüello had no inclination to serve as a puppet. In under a month, as Argüello's actions started to encroach on Somoza García's authority, the National Guard chief orchestrated a coup and installed a family associate, Benjamín Lacayo Sacasa, as the president.⁷ Anastasio Somoza was succeeded by his eldest son, Luis Somoza, who held the presidency from 1957 to 1963. The youngest Somoza son, Anastasio Somoza, held two presidential terms: 1967-1972 and 1974-1979. Although the Somoza's did not hold the presidency for the full forty-three years, they continued to rule through puppet presidents and their control of the National Guard.⁸ In 1955 female suffrage had been introduced. According to LIED, both executive and legislative elections were held in 1936, but they were not categorized as multiparty. In 1937 and 1938 multiparty executive and legislative elections were held but from 1939 onward, multiparty elections remain absent. LIED indicates that multiparty executive and legislative elections were conducted once more between 1947 and 1970. In 1971, only executive elections were held, but they were not categorized as multiparty and no legislative elections were held. From 1972 onward, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held once again. For the given timeframe, LIED identifies political liberties as absent, and V-Dem's PCLI is also classified by us as indicating that political liberties were absent. 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, and V-Dem's LCE is similarly interpreted as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also absent. Per FH in 1972 the country scores between 6 and 7, categorized as partly free, which we interpret as rather free. From 1973 the country scores from 9 to 10 as not free, which we categorize as rather not free.

07/17/1979 End Personalist Autocracy/Start Military Autocracy: Anastasio Somoza stepped down after his forces were defeated by the Sandinista insurgency, and shortly thereafter, a government led by insurgent leaders was established (Booth 1998b: 148, Crawley 1984: 173, Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 82). At the institutional level, political authority was centralized within a Provisional Junta of National Reconstruction, while a newly established State Council was granted certain legislative capabilities (Krennerich 2005). The five-member junta reaffirmed its commitment to promoting political pluralism, implementing a mixed economic system, and pursuing a nonaligned foreign policy.⁹ Somoza Debayle was assassinated in September 1980.¹⁰ The Sandinistas aimed to change the oppressive and brutal practices of the previous government. Most individuals accused of crimes during the Somoza regime were given fair trials, and the Ministry of Interior prohibited mistreatment of prisoners. Within their initial two years in power, Amnesty International and other human rights organizations noted significant improvements in Nicaragua's human rights situation. To enhance representation, the new government established a consultative assembly called the Council of State on 05/04/1980. This assembly could approve laws proposed by the junta or create its own legislation. However, the junta retained veto power over laws initiated by the council and controlled much of the budget. Despite its limited authority, the council had autonomy and often modified legislation proposed by the junta. The council's composition, consisting of thirty-three members, was determined through negotiations among revolutionary factions in 1979. These members were appointed rather than elected by various political groups.¹¹ According to LIED, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during the specified period. In this timeframe, LIED identifies political liberties as absent, while V-Dem's PCLI is classified by us as ambiguous regarding the status of political liberties, indicating an intermediate state between present and absent. In 1979 and 1980, based on Polity5's assessment, the executive faced slight limitations on power. From 1981 to 1983, the executive faced weak constraints, classified as Intermediate Category 1 between unlimited authority and slight limitations. In 1984, as per Polity5's classification, the executive's authority was subject to minor institutional constraints. In 1979, V-Dem's JCE indicates that judicial constraints on the executive are absent. Simultaneously, V-Dem's LCE shows no value, which, with appropriate caution, can be interpreted as an absence of legislative constraints on the executive. For 1980-1984, V-Dem's JCE is

classified as limited, indicating weak judicial oversight. Concurrently, V-Dem's LCE shows no value, which can be cautiously interpreted as indicating an absence of legislative constraints on the executive. According to FH in 1979 and 1980 a score between 9 and 10 makes the country not free, which aligns with our interpretation of rather not free. FH doesn't provide information for 1981. From 1982 onward the country scores between 11 and 14 as not free, which we also interpret as not free.

11/04/1984 End Military Autocracy/Start Electoral Democracy: On this date, general elections were held at the initiative of the incumbent authoritarian Sandinista government in 1984, amidst a temporary easing of the state of emergency (which was later reinstated from 1985 to 1988). The roles and responsibilities of these institutions were officially outlined in the 1987 Constitution. This constitution instituted a presidential system featuring a unicameral congress and a president possessing extensive powers (Krennerich 2005). The main opposition figure, Arturo Cruz, opted out of running in the election, citing restrictions imposed by the regime. However, the majority of external observers deemed the election to be free and fair (Haggard/Kaufman/Teo 2016: 46). Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. On the contrary, LIED classifies the elections during his period as not competitive. Between 1985 and 1989 and from 1999 to 2011 V-Dem's CEI indicates ambiguous cleanliness levels. For the remaining years, the election were what we interpret as somewhat free and fair. However, the elections are characterized as somewhat free and fair by V-Dem's EF&FI. In addition, according to LIED political liberties were absent at this time. V-Dem's PCLI scores an ambiguous presence of civil liberties until 1988. In 1989 and since 2007 somewhat political liberties were present. Between 1990 and 2006 V-Dem's PCLI is classified by us as indicating that political liberties are present. Based on Polity5's assessment, the executive faced slight limitations on power during this period. Daniel Ortega assumed his six-year presidential term on 01/10/1985. Following the United States Congress's refusal to continue funding the Contras in April 1985, the Reagan administration implemented a complete trade embargo against Nicaragua the next month. They accused the Sandinista government of posing a threat to U.S. security in the region. In response, the FSLN government suspended civil liberties and targeted both the media and the Roman Catholic bishops, alleging that they were destabilizing the political system. The church's publications and the conservative newspaper *La Prensa* faced censorship or closure at various times due to their critical stance on the military draft and the government's handling of the civil war (Krennerich 2005).¹² Although the extent of autocratic manipulation of the elections is disputed. Until 1989 according to our classification the regime was a borderline case between an electoral democracy and an electoral hybrid regime. On 02/25/1990 the government of the dominant Sandinista Party held presidential elections in 1990, with intense international monitoring. The election was won by an opposition coalition led by Violeta Chomorro (Close 1999: 37, Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 82, Haggard/Kaufman/Teo 2016: 46).¹³ A historic and peaceful transfer of power ensued thereafter. The early phase of this period was characterized by efforts towards national reconciliation, state reform and pacification.¹⁴ In 1995, constitutional reforms came into force which transferred part of the presidential power to the National Assembly (Staff 1995: 1). On 10/20/1996 general elections were held. Arnoldo Aleman led the Liberal Alliance against Daniel Ortega's Sandinistas, despite international observers noting irregularities, the results were accepted (Krennerich 2005: 482).¹⁵ Per FH's evaluation in 1984 and 1985, the country scores from 9 to 10 as not free, which we categorize as rather not free. In 1986 the country scores between 11 and 14 as not free, which we also interpret as not free. From 1987 to 1989 the country scores from 9 to 10 as not free, which we categorize as rather not free. From 1990 to 1992 the country scores between 6 and 7, categorized as partly free, which we interpret as rather free. In 1993 and 1994 the country scores between 9 and 10 as not free, which we interpret as rather not free. In 1995 the country is partly free with a score of 8, which we interpret as rather not free. In 1996 and 1997 the country scores between 6 and 7, categorized as partly free, which we interpret as rather free. In 1998 the country is rated as free with a score of 5, which we interpret as rather free in our framework. From 1999 to 2008 the country is partly free with a score ranging from 6 to 7, which we place in the rather free category. In 2009 and 2010 the country is partly free with a score of 8, which we interpret as rather not free. From 1990 to 1994, as per Polity5's classification,

the executive's authority was significantly constrained by institutional checks during this time. Since 1995, as per Polity5's classification, the executive's authority was on par with or below that of other branches, reflecting executive parity or subordination. For the period of 1985-1989, 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 years 1990-1995, 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. From 1996-2005, 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. In 2006, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were absent, whereas V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were robust. For 2007-2011, 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.

09/06/2011 End Electoral Democracy/Start Electoral Autocracy: The incumbent President Daniel Ortega, won a third term in the 2011 Nicaraguan elections. At the same time, parliamentary elections were held in which monitors from the OAS reported many irregularities (Lansford, 2021: 1207). The re-election of Ortega was made possible by rule of the Supreme Court of Justice, which consisted of six judges with connections to the Sandinista party.¹⁶ We therefore code this regime change event as a strategic autocratic restructuring. On 11/06/2016 national elections for the presidency and the assembly were held. Ortega was re-elected with 72.4 % of the vote. The polling was described by observers as corrupt and fraudulent especially after antiregime candidates were barred from campaigning and foreign election observers were banned (Lansford 2021: 1208). During an anti-government protest in 2018, state forces used harsh repression against protesters. The latest presidential elections in November 2021 were described as not free nor fair due to the prior crackdown on Ortega's challengers.¹⁷ Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. According to LIED elections were competitive until 2015, and not competitive afterwards. V-Dem scores elections as not really clean since 2012 (CEI). The overall election conditions were ambiguous from 2011 to 2020. Since 2021, the election are stated as not really free and fair according to V-Dem's EF&FI. As classified by FH in 2011 and 2012, the country scores between 9 and 10 as not free, which we interpret as rather not free. From 2013 to 2015 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 2016 and 2017 the country scores from 9 to 10 as not free, which we categorize as rather not free. From 2018 to 2024 the country scores between 11 and 14 as not free, which we also interpret as not free. However, LIED indicates the absence of political liberties for the entire time. V-Dem's PCLI scores an ambiguous presence of political liberties until 2017 and no presence since 2018. From 2012 to 2015, as per Polity5's classification, the executive's authority was on par with or below that of other branches, reflecting executive parity or subordination. In 2016, 2017 and 2018, as per Polity5's categorization, the executive's authority was significantly constrained, nearing parity with other branches, placing it in the third intermediate category. For 2012-2023, 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 Autocracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Additional Sources (Cuzan , Walter 1993, Wilson 2013)

Notes

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_suffrage#Dates_by_country

- ² <https://countrystudies.us/nicaragua/10.htm>
- ³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_occupation_of_Nicaragua
- ⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Nicaragua
- ⁵ <https://countrystudies.us/nicaragua/10.htm>
- ⁶ <https://countrystudies.us/nicaragua/10.htm>
- ⁷ <https://countrystudies.us/nicaragua/11.htm>
- ⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Somoza_family
- ⁹ <https://countrystudies.us/nicaragua/14.htm>
- ¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Somoza_family
- ¹¹ <https://countrystudies.us/nicaragua/15.htm>
- ¹² <https://countrystudies.us/nicaragua/18.htm>
- ¹³ <https://tinyurl.com/8rdzdsq>
- ¹⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Nicaragua/Nicaragua-from-1990-to-2006>
- ¹⁵ <https://tinyurl.com/8rdzdsq>
- ¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011_Nicaraguan_general_election#Controversy
- ¹⁷ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/nicaragua/freedom-world/2022>

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