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Notes on recent elections

The general election in Costa Rica, February/April 2014

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On February 2 and April 6, 2014, Costa Rica held its scheduled general election. For the sixteenth consecutive time, the quadrennial election was free and fair, its results uncontested. For only the second time, the presidential election required a second-round runoff in April, though a very peculiar one in which one of the candidates opted to retire from the contest. Its results, too, were accepted without qualm by the overwhelming majority of voters. Costa Ricans were rightly proud of these accomplishments, even if their significance was occasionally obscured by the inevitable acrimoniousness and tensions characteristic of campaign season. Before, during, and after the election politicians, scholars, and government officials alike celebrated the 'maturity' of the Costa Rican system and the strength of its institutions. Few of them missed an opportunity to compare the state of their nation to the political instability in nearby Venezuela, a sobering instance of the collapse of once-strong democratic institutions.[1]

The 2014 presidential election turned out to be a surprisingly eventful affair, full of unexpected turns. The eventual victor, Luis Guillermo Solís of the *Partido Acción Ciudadana* (Citizen Action Party, PAC), will likely need some time to establish his footing after a surprising win. The overwhelming hope expressed by Costa Ricans through the media is that the new president will find a way to work with a divided legislature and 'get things done.' The accession of the PAC, after two consecutive administrations by presidents from the traditional powerhouse – *Partido Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Party, PLN) – has been hailed, even by figures from the losing party, as a potentially revitalizing moment in national politics.

1. Electoral rules

For the first time, the national election took place independently from municipal and local elections, which are scheduled to take place in 2016. On February 2, 2014, Costa Ricans voted to elect the president, two vice presidents, and 57 *diputados*, members of the Legislative Assembly. Also for the first time, Costa Ricans living abroad were permitted to cast absentee ballots.

Voting is mandatory by law for all eligible citizens, who must nevertheless register in the electoral database

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[1] The electoral victory of the late Hugo Chávez in 1998 was not the cause, but a consequence of the weakening of democratic institutions in Venezuela (McCoy, Meyers, 2004).

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(*padrón electoral*) in order to be permitted to cast a ballot. The elections are run by the *Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones* (Supreme Electoral Tribunal, TSE), an independent government body that has historically enjoyed a high degree of respect and legitimacy from the citizenry. The TSE goes to great lengths to insure parity among competing parties and to make voting accessible to as many Costa Ricans as possible (Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones, 2009).

Victory in a first-round presidential election entails that the winning candidate receives the most votes, as well as over 40% of the total votes cast. Failing to reach the 40% threshold, the two most popular candidates face each other in a runoff election. The sitting president cannot run for reelection, although reelection is permitted in non-consecutive terms.

Legislators are elected through a closed-list proportional representation system (Wilson, Rodríguez Cordero, 2011, 231). The composition of the Legislative Assembly is determined according to the population of the country's seven provinces. The legislative seats are divided proportionally according to the population in each province. For the 2014 elections the distribution was: 19 seats for the province of San José, 11 for Alajuela, 7 for Cartago, 6 for Heredia, 5 for Puntarenas, 5 for Limón, and 5 for Guanacaste. Votes cast are divided by the seats allocated to the province to determine the number of seats won by each party. Costa Rican law requires that each party submit a closed list of legislative candidates. Candidates win legislative seats in the order that their names appear on the list. The law requires that the names of candidates on the list alternate between male and female, in order to achieve as much gender parity as possible.

2. The 2014 presidential election

The presidential campaign took place in an uncertain political environment. This might seem surprising at first glance. Outgoing president Laura Chinchilla represented a continuation of the political dominance of the PLN. She was widely seen as the protégé of her predecessor, Nobel Prize winner and two-time president Oscar Arias. The *liberacionista* model she represented could boast of a number of significant accomplishments: Costa Rica remains a stable, peaceful, democratic society. Its citizens enjoy relatively good government services, universal health care, an impressive public education system, well-protected civil liberties, and the tranquility that comes with living in a demilitarized state. Economic growth is moderate but stable, averaging slightly over 4% a year most recently. In 2012 a highly publicized international survey declared Costa Ricans the happiest people on the planet (New Economics Foundation, 2012). For most of that year, the consensus among observers of Costa Rican politics was that Arias' brother and former right-hand man, Rodrigo Arias, was the overwhelming favorite to win the 2014 contest.

It turned out very differently. By early 2013, both the Chinchilla administration and Rodrigo Arias had lost their luster. Chinchilla had a difficult time governing in part because the PLN lacked a majority in the Legislative Assembly. In 2011, a coalition of opposition parties assumed control of the legislative body and created the first divided government in the country's history (Alfaro-Redondo, Gómez Campos, 2012, 110).[2] The Chinchilla government also became embroiled in a protracted dispute with Nicaragua over border resource use. Allegations of corruption plagued the administration, and a particularly embarrassing incident involving improper use of the presidential plane provoked national condemnation. Social protest increased to its highest levels in decades (Diario Extra, 2014). By the end of her presidential term, according to international surveys, Chinchilla had received the worst approval ratings of any president in the Americas for two consecutive years (Rivera González, 2014a) and Costa Rica had seen the sharpest drop of any Latin American country in terms of popular support for democracy (Economist, 2014). Bernal Jiménez, president of the PLN, Chinchilla's own party, declared that she ran the government as if it belonged to her 'club of friends' and that hers was the 'least capable' administration he had ever seen (Rivera González, 2014b). Arias similarly became the target of a number of corruption allegations, mostly unsubstantiated rumors, and suffered in polls due to his close association with the sitting administration. He dropped out of his party's primary race in January 2013 (González, Ruíz, 2013).

The PLN's eventual candidate, Johnny Araya, was nevertheless deemed a heavy favorite at the start of campaign season. As late as August 2013, his lead in the polls was commanding and indisputable (Jiménez Badilla, 2014). Far behind were the candidates for the former powerhouse, now moribund, *Partido Unidad Social Cristiana* (United Social Christian Party, PUSC), Rodolfo Hernández (who would drop out of the race in October and be replaced by Rodolfo Piza), and challengers from upstart parties: Luis Guillermo Solís of the centrist PAC, Otto Guevara of the market-friendly *Movimiento Libertario* (Libertarian Movement, ML), and José María Villalta of the left-leaning *Frente Amplio* (Broad Front, FA). Araya, the scion of a prominent Costa Rican family, adopted an initial strategy designed to impress on the voting public his credentials, which dwarfed those of his opponents, while distancing himself as much as possible from the outgoing government. His campaign motto, 'Hire Me' ('*Contráteme*'), reflected his confident assurance that Costa Ricans cared most of all about jobs and continued economic growth and would therefore vote for the safe known.

It became clear, however, that Araya and his campaign team misinterpreted the political mood. Costa Ricans' increasing mistrust of their political leaders and the major parties had been at the core of the national conversation at least since the mid-2000s (Lehoucq, 2005). Araya's strategy seemed predicated on the belief that economic stability and a well-run campaign would suffice him to emerge victorious even under these circumstances. It failed to recognize, as Araya would later admit, that much of the blame now rested on the PLN as an institution (Solano, 2014). The party was, in a sense, a victim of its own success, having outlived the PUSC and weathered a serious

[2] The number of parties represented in the Assembly had begun to increase in 2002, and the pattern continued in 2006, 2010 and in the most recent election (see Wilson, 2007, 712).