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Unfavorable conditions for Political Participation in Costa Rica: 2014 National Elections

On the first Sunday of February 2014 Costa Ricans will hold national elections for choosing the president, two vice presidents, and 57 members of Parliament that will remain in power for the period 2014-2018. The small Central American nation has been widely known as a very successful case of political stability in a region of the world where democracies have typically been featured as weak and vulnerable political regimes. In fact, Costa Rica is the oldest and most stable democracy in Latin America. Elections in consolidated democracies are seen as merely procedural events, however in the Costa Rican case this time, the presence of several factors and their combination challenges regime's political stability and creates unfavorable conditions for political participation.

After a long history of stable patterns in the political system two important changes occurred in the last decade. First, turnout levels decreased as in other consolidated democracies. A tradition of high electoral participation, 75% of the eligible voters cast their vote on average between 1962 and 1998, has turned into one of turnout decline more recently. Electoral participation decreased for the first time in 1998 and has remained in low since then. In the 2006 national election turnout hit a historic low: 65% of the electorate. Voter registration is automatic. Turnout is mandatory for the 3 million voters but the system lacks enforcement mechanisms.

Second, the political party system evolved from bipartisan to multi-party. The habitual low political fragmentation, which even had led scholars and experts to consider it as a "frozen" two-party system, was broken in 2002 with the first presidential run-off election in history due to the high dispersion of votes among parties. Electoral volatility has increased since the late 1990s leading to floating electoral preferences, weak party affiliations (particularly among youth voters), and less ideological party platforms. The reduction of party nationalization scores -the homogeneity of a party's support across the country- illustrates the fluid arena in which political parties and politicians are competing.

In addition to these two key changes in the political system it is possible to identify two other aspects that may have an impact in Costa Ricans' electoral behavior. On one hand, political culture studies have provided compelling evidence suggesting that individuals' support for democracy has eroded, undermining the pillars of political legitimacy. According to the 2012 Americas Barometer, public support for democracy is at its lowest value since late 1970s. On the other hand, data collected (<http://www.estadonacion.or.cr>) by Programa Estado de la Nación reveal an increasing trend in protests and mobilization as the individuals' preferred way to make their grievances more visible.

The 2014 national elections in Costa Rica are going to be held in a very unusual political context. The combination of different forces create unfavorable conditions for voting and getting involved in politics. Under these circumstances turnout prospects cannot be very optimistic.



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Luis Bravo · Works at University of Pittsburgh

Ronald, you mentioned that there are no mechanisms for enforcing the mandatory system. You mean that there are actually no system of enforcement or that it is a more symbolic system? I ask because in Brazil it is also mandatory and there is a "symbolic" monetary penalty, however, Brazilian citizens also cannot get or renew documents if they don't show that they either paid the fees or were excused from voting. Thank you for the interesting article on the upcoming election in Costa Rica!

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Ronald Alfaro Redondo · Columbia University

Luis, thanks for your comments. In the Costa Rican case, the system can be characterized as symbolic due to the fact that it lacks of sanctions. So, despite voting is mandatory, according to the Constitution, it is enforced only by individuals' civic duty.

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