

The general election in Costa Rica, February 2010

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On 7 February 2010, almost 2 million Costa Ricans (69% of the registered electorate) voted in the country's general election, the fifteenth consecutive general election to be held since the end of the short but bloody civil war of 1948. Laura Chinchilla was elected as Costa Rica's first woman president but her *Partido Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Party, PLN) fell short of a parliamentary majority and so will have to sustain agreements with other parties in the legislature in order to pursue its policy agenda.

1. Electoral system

General elections take place once every four years on the first Sunday in February. Voters are presented with a ballot paper for the offices of the president and two vice presidents; a separate ballot is used for to elect all 57 deputies (*diputados*), the members of the single-chamber national legislative assembly. Simultaneously, the 495 representatives for the 81 municipal governments are also elected on a separate third ballot (*Regidores Municipales, Propietarios* and *Suplentes*, regular representatives and alternates). Neither deputies nor the president can seek immediate reelection: the former must sit out a four-year term, while presidents can seek a second stint only after sitting out two full terms. (From, 1969 until 2003, presidents could only serve a single term; a ruling by the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court in 2003 removed the prohibition and returned to the original constitutional provision that allowed reelection after eight years out of office.)

For presidential elections, the country is treated as a single constituency where the candidate with the largest vote share is declared winner so long as he or she received more than the 40% threshold. If no candidate receives more than 40% of the vote, a second round is held one month later between the two leading candidates. In the post-Civil War period, only one presidential election has required a second round: in 2002, Abel Pacheco de la Espriella fell

approximately one percentage point short of the threshold and went on to win the run-off (Wilson, 2003; Lehoucq and Rodríguez-Cordero, 2004).

For legislative elections, Costa Rica uses a closed-list, proportional representation (PR) electoral system. The country's seven geographic provinces serve as seven multi-member districts, with the total number of representatives for each district allocated in proportion to its population (as measured by the most recent census but with updates based on population estimates by the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos* (National Institute for Statistics and Census, INEC)). The distribution of seats for the 2010 elections is the same as those used in the last two elections and is based on the 2000 census. In this particular version of PR, the quotient is calculated by dividing the number of votes cast in a district by the number of seats allocated to that district. If no party has enough remaining votes to secure a seat through the quotient, a sub-quotient (50% of the quotient) is used. Any seats remaining once the sub-quotient has been exhausted go to the party with the largest remainder. By way of an illustrative example, San José, the most populous province, was allocated 20 of the 57 seats. A total of 690,336 votes was cast in the 2010 Legislative Assembly election (90,000 more than in the 2006 election), which produced a quotient of 34,517 votes per seat (almost 4000 votes more per seat than in 2006) and a sub-quotient of 17,258.

2. Electoral administration

Elections are staged under the auspices of the *Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones* (TSE, Supreme Tribunal of Elections). The TSE, a constitutionally mandated quasi-fourth branch of government, controls all aspects of electoral administration and is composed of three full-time Magistrates (*Magistrados Propietarios*) who are appointed by the Supreme Court to renewable six-year terms. Supreme Court Magistrates, for their part, are elected to eight-year terms by a supermajority vote of the Legislative Assembly, which helps enhance the political independence of the TSE. Twelve months before the general election, two "supplemental magistrates" (*Magistrados Suplentes*) are added to the Tribunal's

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