

Costa Rica looks a little less exceptional after its heated election

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Rachel E. Bowen

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Carlos Alvarado Quesada has won the Costa Rican presidency with 61 percent of the vote, an overwhelming victory for a progressive candidate who entered election day in a dead heat with his conservative rival.

Alvarado Quesada, a 38-year-old former labor minister under the unpopular outgoing President Luis Guillermo Solís, ran on an “agenda of equality” that included support for same-sex marriage, public education and renewable energy. In Costa Rica, this is a rather classic political platform.

But his opponent, Fabricio Alvarado Muñoz – an evangelical senator and former Christian musician who opposes gay marriage, secularism and sex education in schools – won the first round of Costa Rica’s election in February. The April 1 runoff was widely viewed as a referendum on social values in a country historically seen as stable and progressive.

In a region where nearly every other nation faces extreme violence and has a history of political upheaval, peaceable Costa Rica is sometimes called “the Switzerland of Central America.” Many commentators will tout Alvarado Quesada’s triumph as a confirmation of Costa Rican exceptionalism.

I see things differently. In the 15 years I have studied Central American politics, deep fractures have emerged in Costa Rica’s democracy – the same social and religious tensions that were on display in the 2018 election.

Meanwhile, I’ve watched troubled El Salvador and Guatemala become stronger democracies. Costa Rica is still an exception, but it is closer to the Central American average than ever before.

Costa Rican equality

The origins of Costa Rica’s exceptionalism are often attributed to the fact that it has no military. President José Figueres abolished it after the country’s brief 1948 civil war.

As a result, modern Costa Rica has seen neither the military dictatorships nor protracted civil wars that plagued every other Central American Country during the 20th century.

Less defense spending has freed up the national budget, allowing Costa Rica to invest in gold-standard environmental protections and universal public education. Its population is among the world's most literate.

Costa Rica is also wealthier than the rest of Central America, which is one of the poorest regions on the globe. It scores as well as European nations on many of the United Nations' human development measures, including gender equality. About a third of seats in Costa Rica's legislature are held by women, thanks to strong gender parity laws. Costa Rica had a woman president, Laura Chinchilla, from 2010 to 2014.

The country is also Central America's least corrupt. Just 9 percent of Costa Ricans reporting having experienced corruption, according to Vanderbilt University's AmericasBarometer survey. By comparison, a quarter of Guatemalans say they've been the victim of corruption.

The state of democracy in Costa Rica

In some ways, this year's election was in keeping with Costa Rican tradition. Turnout was typically high – about 62 percent. The election was free and fair, as Costa Rica's elections usually are. There were none of the irregularities seen in, say, Honduras' contested November 2017 presidential election.

But the campaign was still unusual. Nearly 40 percent of Costa Ricans voted for an ardently anti-gay candidate from the upstart Evangelical National Restoration Party. That is consequential in a historically secular country.

It is also significant that neither of the two finalists for president was from a mainstream political party.

The National Liberation Party decided to back Alvarado Quesada after he progressed to the second round of the election, but it was the first time since the party's founding in 1951 that its own nominee did not compete for Costa Rica's presidency, indicating widespread voter discontent with politics as usual.

Neither did the official candidate of the Social Christian Unity Party, Costa Rica's mainstream conservative opposition, which did not back Alvarado Munoz.

The rise in outsider candidates and the unexpected strength of evangelical voters this year demonstrate that Costa Rica is less unified and less progressive than it once appeared.



Marriage equality was a big winner in Costa Rica's presidential election. Juan Carlos Ulate/Reuters

Guatemala's outsider candidates

Alvarado Quesada's victory does not erase these fissures. Watching him lag behind a religiously conservative, tough-on-crime political outsider with pop culture roots during most of the 2018 campaign, I was actually reminded of neighboring Guatemala.

In 2015 comedian Jimmy Morales won a surprise bid for that country's presidency. Competing against a former first lady, he ran on the slogan "Neither corrupt nor a thief."

Political parties in Guatemala are traditionally weak, so an outsider candidacy was not surprising there. In fact, many saw the Morales win as a positive sign for Guatemalan democracy.

Morales was elected a month and a half after President Otto Pérez Molina stepped down to face trial on corruption charges. Molina is one of hundreds of Guatemalan officials to be tried for corruption since 2007, when the country invited in a UN-backed anti-corruption commission to clean house.

Today Morales, a conservative, is himself embroiled in a corruption scandal, confirming that public malfeasance remains a major political problem.

But the nonviolent democratic transfer of power after a presidential resignation was a sign that peaceful change was possible in Guatemala. This alone was a significant step forward for a Central American nation with a long history of conflict.

El Salvador on the rise

Democracy is gaining ground in troubled El Salvador, too. There, the leftist Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) and its main conservative opposition, ARENA, have participated together in politics since 1992, when peace accords brought quiet to El Salvador. The two factions once fought each other in bloody civil war.

Under the FMLN former revolutionaries, who have been in power since 2009, El Salvador has followed a moderate political path, seeking to improve access to social services and reduce inequality.

I believe El Salvador has actually replaced Costa Rica as having the strongest party system in Central America. This is an especially impressive achievement just 26 years after the 12-year civil war ended decades of military dictatorships.

In a country battling perhaps the world's highest homicide rates, El Salvador has also created specialized courts to address violence against women.

More Salvadoran women are getting involved in politics, too. From 2003 to 2012, the number of female mayors in El Salvador increased from 15 to 28, according to United Nations data. There are 262 mayors nationwide.

Toward a Central American average

Guatemala and El Salvador are far from perfect democracies. As I argued in my recent book, both still struggle to build the rule of law. Corruption and crime remain huge challenges.

Along with Uruguay, Costa Rica is still one of just two "full democracies" in all Latin America, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit, which ranks countries worldwide based on civil liberties, transparency and political participation, among other measures.

But its neighbors are making strides. 60 percent of Guatemalans vote regularly – just shy of the Costa Rican average. Turnout is even higher in El Salvador. Central America is changing.

So is Costa Rica. In a region where democracy is improving, the 2018 election showed that it is just a little less of a Central American exception.