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Polls Show Costa Rica’s Traditional Political Center Threatened from Left and Right, but Half of Voters Define Themselves as Centrist

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Since the five-week revolution of 1948—sparked by a congressional decision to annul a presidential election—when the present Second Republic was founded, bipartisanship has occupied the Costa Rican political stage, in the center—both center-right and center left.

Through the years this evolved so that the two traditional players—the Partido Unidad Social Cristiana (PUSC) and the social democratic Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN)—became the two election options.

The PUSC, founded in 1986, has its origins in the pre-revolution’s Partido Republicano Nacional, which later became the Partido Unificación Nacional, led by Rafael Angel Calderón Guardia (1940-1944), popularly known as "el doctor." The PLN, founded in 1951, has its origins in the Partido Acción Demócrata, headed by José Figueres Ferrer, popularly known as "don Pepe" (1948-1949, 1953-1958, 1970-1974).

In an unusual political alliance between his party, the Partido Comunista Costarricense, and the Catholic Church, Calderón pushed forward a very socially oriented policy, creating institutions such as the Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social (CCSS)—which includes a system of universal health care—and the state Universidad de Costa Rica (UCR) and also gave the country it’s Código de Trabajo.

When his archrival Figueres came to power as the winning revolutionary leader, Calderón sought exile in neighboring Nicaragua, then under the harsh and corrupt Somoza dictatorship at the time headed by the criminal dynasty’s founder Gen. Anastasio "Tacho" Somoza.

Regardless of the enmity between him and Calderón, Figueres maintained those institutions and created others, along the same line, and also guaranteed Costa Rican women the right to vote, established universal public education, and abolished the army—his landmark achievement.

With time, this Central American nation’s political stage began hosting new players, which started to have deputies in the 57-strong unicameral Asamblea Legislativa (AL).

Years after Figueres outlawed it, the Partido Comunista Costarricense became legal again, and several leftist political organizations began to appear—some on the moderate side, others more radical—and managed to have an occasional deputy, but they were not strong enough to hold power.

**PAC emerges in 2002 as third political force**

Three elections ago, the 2002 vote resulted in a surprise, when a new center-left organization, the Partido Acción Ciudadana (PAC), taking part in its first election, positioned itself as the third
political force—after the PUSC, that year’s winner, and the PLN (NotiCen, Feb. 7, 2002). It went up one step in 2006 and remained there in 2010, which, according to polls, does not seem to be the case any more.

Founded by political leaders representing an array of moderate ideologies, some of the PAC’s main personalities—including its head, Ottón Solís—were disgruntled PLN members who had left the party because of what they saw as the party’s drifting away from its social-democratic principles toward a neoliberal position and its being permeated by corruption.

The two following elections (2006, 2010) were again won by the PLN—first, by former President Óscar Arias (1986-1990, 2006-2010) and then by the first woman to ever hold the post, Laura Chinchilla, the country’s present head of state. The PLN presidents saw popular dissatisfaction and criticism grow—initially from opposition parties and grassroots organizations, and now as a vast majority feeling, according to recent polls.

In Arias’ case, anger flared at his pushing the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) between the region’s nations—with the Dominican Republic joining later on—and the US (NotiCen, March 2, 2006, and Oct. 4, 2007). In Chinchilla’s case, the administration is seen as incapable of solving many of the country’s top problems.

But massive dissatisfaction includes both the PLN and the PUSC, held responsible for what a majority of people see as the deteriorating standard of living in this country’s traditionally high middle class, corruption that is considered rampant for Costa Rican traditional standards, and organized crime—mainly drug trafficking—which has positioned itself here (NotiCen, May 3, 2012, and April 4, 2013).

Added to this, the overwhelming opinion regarding the Asamblea Legislativa is that it just does not work, that deputies are choricos (corrupt) and incompetent, all of which, according to the majority, reflects the discredit of the country’s traditional political class.

They’re both the same, say voters

The usual reference—from the top to the base of the political and social pyramid—to the PLN and the PUSC is "son los mismos" (they’re the same), and they are often referred to as the PLUSC.

Given this context, in the present campaign period leading to the presidential and congressional elections set for Feb. 2, the PLN—in its effort to obtain an unprecedented third consecutive presidential term—and the PUSC—in its effort to recover from two corruption scandals that involved two former Costa Rican presidents and top party leaders and get back to the top—see threats coming from both sides (NotiCen, Nov. 14, 2013): from the right, in the form of the Movimiento Libertario (ML); and from the left, the Frente Amplio (FA).

The PLN’s Johnny Araya, a former mayor of San José and a nephew of former Costa Rican President Luis Alberto Monge (1982-1986)—a former union leader and one of the party’s founders—and the PUSC’s Rodolfo Piza, a lawyer who has held high government positions, coincide in warning voters against "the extremes."

They describe the ML’s four-time presidential hopeful Otto Guevara—who in 1994 broke with the PUSC to found his party—as an extreme right-winger who, among other things, opposes taxes.
Guevara says he opposes creating new taxes. But he describes himself not as a right-winger but as a moderate leader who wants to reach the presidency to combat corruption as well as poverty.

They also describe the FA's José María Villalta—the party’s only deputy—as a communist who admires extreme leftist Latin American leaders such as Cuba’s former President Fidel Castro and Venezuela’s President Nicolás Maduro as well as the ideals of the late Venezuela President Hugo Chávez (1999-2013). They also say that, were Villalta to win the vote, he would impose on Costa Rica political models such as those of Cuba or Venezuela, which go against Costa Rican values.

Villalta’s repeated answer to these repeated accusations is that he is not a communist, that the FA includes communists as well as followers of other ideologies, and that he is the answer to the people’s need for change from los mismos to a new type of government.

Since late last year, poll results have been placing Villalta, Araya, and Guevara as the people’s three top choices, almost tied in popularity. Results for one of the latest surveys, published Jan. 16 by the conservative influential daily newspaper La Nación, lined them up in that order.

**Voters do not identify with right, left**

Asked, "Who would you vote for if the elections were held today?" 22.2% replied Villalta, while 20.3% favored Araya and 20.2% mentioned Guevara. Far behind, and with almost no chance to win, fourth place went for the PAC’s Luis Guillermo Solís (5.5%) and fifth to Piza (3.6%). The other eight of the 13 presidential candidates obtained a combined total of 5.8%, while 17.2% said they had not yet decided.

But despite the FA’s leading position in polls, in the same survey, when potential voters were asked to define themselves ideologically, 50% answered "centrist," 25% said they "don’t know," 19% replied "right," and 6.0% said "left."

Analysts say these apparently contradicting figures reflect the degree of people’s dissatisfaction with traditional parties, but they are not certain the vote trend shown in polls will actually hold, come election day. The general opinion, from experts to voters, is that, for the first time, an election in Costa Rica is unpredictable.

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