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## Costa Ricans' Favorite Presidential Candidate: Undecided

by George Rodríguez

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Most Costa Rican voters say they plan to cast their ballot in the presidential elections two months from now, but about half of them say they are still wavering on which of the candidates to support.

This uncertainty, coupled with a shortage of appealing candidates, is resulting in a cold electoral environment. Television campaign spots and gigantic—but not numerous---highway and street billboards are about the only signs of the ongoing campaign.

According to the latest monthly poll by the Centro de Investigación y Estudios Políticos (CIEP) a political research center at the Universidad de Costa Rica, about 66% of voters plan to participate in the elections, but around 37% of them have not decided whom to back for president, or have been changing their minds. The undecided voters are generally prone to vary their support from one candidate to another as the election campaign process develops, according to CIEP.

The study also revealed that the elections are not a conversation topic for most Costa Ricans. In reporting its survey, CIEP pointed out that the study “reflects a cold political election atmosphere, since some 74.2% of the people do not talk about the campaign at home, and the majority have little interest and enthusiasm in this process.”

Similar figures were revealed in another November survey, in this case by the Instituto de Estudios Sociales en Población (IDESPO), a population research center at the Universidad Nacional (UNA).

This study placed those who said there was a “very high” possibility that they would vote at 56%, followed by those with a “high” possibility at 13.8%, and those with an “intermediate” chance at 13.7%. Only 9.3% said they would not vote.

### *A reluctance to commit*

According to Costa Rican political analyst Gustavo Araya, this sector “has a very characteristic feature, and it is that ... they're people who are increasingly defining themselves toward the end of the campaign,” even on election day itself.

Voters who say they are uninterested or undecided in the electoral process are not necessarily people upset or disappointed about politics, Araya said.

“It's people who, definitely, have no party loyalties any longer, who are focusing more on the candidate than on the program offer, who have no ideological attachments, and who, in general, are actually waiting for candidates to define themselves,” he said. But the latter is not happening, because “the candidates have fallen into a kind of campaign where concrete proposals ... have not been the rule.”

Since so many voters are still undecided, the CIEP said, none of the candidates is showing even 20% support in the polls.

Actually, according to the center's latest estimates, three of the nine presidential hopefuls are technically tied at the top. Antonio Álvarez, a social democrat representing the Partido Liberación

Nacional (National Liberation Party, PLN), and Juan Diego Castro, of the rightist Partido Integración Nacional (National Integration Party, PIN) each have 15% support in its poll. Rodolfo Piza, of the Partido Unidad Social Cristiana (Social Christian Unity Party, PUSC) has 11%.

In comparison to an October CIEP poll, Álvarez's support dropped from 40% to 15%, while Castro jumped from 13% to 15%. Piza's numbers remained unchanged.

### *Weak party identity*

Gustavo Román, political adviser to Costa Rica's election authority, the Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones (TSE), agreed with Araya. "There's no direct link between indecision and uneasiness about politics, or lack of trust," he told the UCR weekly *Universidad* last month. "The undecided are not within the group of voters who are most upset with politics. The undecided seem to be people who are waiting to see what the election campaign tells them ... [and] have become a group that's hard to convince."

Román said that, traditionally, Costa Ricans who had a very strong party identity usually made up their minds early and "no one would move them," while the undecided fluctuated.

"And now, the undecided are quite firm in their indecision, and the decided voters aren't [firm in their choices]," which is "consistent and coherent with a long-term trend in Costa Rican democracy—through the past several decades—and has to do with the fall of party identity," Román said.

Velia Govaere, a columnist for the influential daily *La Nación*, blamed the indecision on the candidates' lack of appeal.

"None of the individuals stirs enthusiasm, and in the prelude to a historic encounter with ballot boxes, Costa Ricans, disoriented, do not know how to find a clear path," she said. Govaere pointed out that if you add up all the voters who say they are committed to a candidate, the sum would barely pass the 40% plus one needed to win a presidential election without a runoff.

"Even many of those who have chosen a candidate have declared themselves susceptible to changing their mind between now and February," she said. "There is a manifest detachment of voters regarding the historical parties."

Govaere was referring to Costa Rica's long-standing political organizations, such as the PLN and its main rival, the PUSC, and the younger, center-left ruling party, Partido Acción Ciudadana (Citizen Action Party, PAC).

### *Growing absenteeism*

For the last decade, voter absenteeism has been in the 30% range in Costa Rica, a country of approximately 4.9 million people and just over 3.3 million registered voters. Absenteeism had hovered around 20% since the 1960s, but it climbed to 35% for the presidential and parliamentary vote in 2006, then slightly dropped to 31% in 2010. For the first round of the elections in February 2014, 43.3% of voters stayed away from the polls, but more Costa Ricans cast their ballot in the runoff round, when absenteeism was 31.8% ([NotiCen, April 17, 2014](#)).

Municipal elections—which, since 2002, are held apart from the presidential and legislative ballots—have consistently showed massive voter absenteeism—72% in 2010 and 64.8% in 2016.

“We’re in a political scenario of much election volatility,” said CIEP director Felipe Alpízar. “The bulk of the electorate is undecided, and candidate support levels are very low. At this point in time, the outlook is uncertain, and political parties will have to direct their strategies at convincing this major group of persons who have not yet made a decision.”

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