

Youth Redefining Democracy: Guatemala's Electoral Odyssey



In Guatemala's electoral odyssey, the 2023 elections faced complexities stemming from exclusion of candidates, notably affecting the democratic transition. Despite challenges in voter registration and electoral inconsistencies, unexpected victories by the Semilla party, propelled by young urban voters, demonstrated the potential for change and ignited a nationwide movement, ultimately safeguarding democracy and fostering hope for profound societal transformation.



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Guatemala holds general elections every four years, during which a new president and vice president, as well as members of the congress and municipalities are elected. In 2023, the country was set to elect authorities who would assume office for the next four years. Various sectors had anticipated that this round of the electoral process would be particularly complex, primarily due to the judicialization and exclusion of candidates during the previous 2015 and 2019 electoral processes. This would pose as one of many barriers to Guatemalan democracy in ensuring the successful transition to a newly elected government backed by the people.

The electoral calendar stated that formal campaigning and candidate registration would begin in March, allowing parties to present political platforms. Instead, the electoral campaign started with challenges regarding registered voters for the election. According to data from Diálogos,[1] more than two million citizens over 18 years old were excluded from the electoral roll, of which just over a million were between 18 and 25 years old. In Guatemala, electoral law requires citizens to register with the electoral authority, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) to be eligible to vote. However, this process has become a barrier to political participation, especially for young people.

Despite efforts by the TSE in the months leading up to the electoral campaign to register citizens through various modalities, these were insufficient to close the gap of eligible voters and ensure the right to vote for all individuals over 18 years old. This highlighted the need to rethink and reform the current registration system to ensure that all eligible citizens, especially young people, would be able to exercise their right to participate in electoral processes. The young population in Guatemala between 13 and 30 years old represents 35.6%, just over a third of overall population, with those over 18 years of age and eligible to vote making up the majority at 61.9%.[2] Because of the significant representation of young people in the country, this demographic group has the capacity to define the outcome of an election.

During the election, a series of inconsistencies were carried out by electoral authorities that affected the outcome of the elections, due to the exclusion of different candidates with anti-system positions, extensive judicialization, and the misuse of public funds by the ruling party for the electoral campaign.[3]

Different sectors of Guatemalan society posed concern but placed their trust in the hands of voluntary citizens selected as poll

workers, as per electoral law. Polls had already secured Sandra Torres, of the National Unity of Hope party, a spot in the runoff election. But the real surprise came when Bernardo Arévalo from the Semilla party, unexpectedly acquired the votes to advance as well. Semilla won 23 out of 160 congressional seats, significantly more seats than the two previous ruling parties. Additionally, notably half of these 23 newly elected deputies are mostly young and professional women.

Despite being a political party with limited territorial structure and significantly less public and private funding, Bernardo Arévalo won the presidency over Sandra Torres, with a one million vote difference.

The exclusion of other political projects by electoral authorities, and a campaign directed at younger voters and executed through social media[4], particularly TikTok, may have favored Semilla. But results also determined that it was primarily young people in urban areas who gave victory to Semilla; a party with progressive stances and a strong anti-corruption discourse.

[1] <https://dialogos.org.gt/2023/06/01/una-caracteristica-de-la-autocracia-electoral-guatemalteca-la-exclusion-de-personas-jovenes/>
[2] <https://guatemala.unfpa.org/es/publications/documento-an%C3%A1lisis-juveniles-en-guatemala>
[3] <https://moe.et/publicaciones/>
[4] <https://dialogos.org.gt/2023/08/03/guatemala-analisis-preliminar-sobre-la-participacion-en-la-vuelta-de-elecciones-2023/>



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However, political-criminal networks that have for years held power within the state, including all institutions of the judicial system, used absolutely every resource they had to prevent the peaceful transition of power. Despite denying it, the Public Ministry publicly questioned the election results and the integrity of the electoral process, alleging evidence of fraud and concluding that the election results should be declared “null and void”[5].

This crisis tested the capacity of Guatemala’s weak democracy to establish an institutional solution that would ensure the transition of power to those legitimately elected by Guatemalans. It was indigenous peoples and young people who took to the streets and protested in favor of Guatemala’s democracy for months, even risking their physical safety in the face of possible repression by security

forces, and criminalization and persecution by the Public Ministry.[6]

Guatemala has a long 5-month transition period, which concluded on January 15, 2024, as President Arévalo and Vice President Herrera took office. Accompanied by those who defended their election, indigenous peoples and young people, Guatemalans celebrated that democracy had been saved. This was an achievement that is a victory for all, and the result of a diverse citizen mobilization from all territories that fought until the last moment to ensure the vote was respected.

Now, Guatemala is experiencing an unprecedented window of opportunity; democracy has given us the possibility to lay the foundations for profound changes in social and political structures. But mainly, what happened in 2023 gave us hope, and that is priceless.



[5] <https://elfaro.net/en/2023/12/centroamerica/27179/without-authority-or-proof-guatemalan-gc-asserts-arevalo-rsquo-s-election-is-null>
[6] <https://dialogos.org.gt/2023/10/12/las-voces-de-los-pueblos-deben-ser-respetadas-no-reprimidas/>