

Measuring Democracy: Central America

Under the direction of the Nyblade Foundation, this paper aims to analyze the level of democracy within the region of Central America, specifically the following states: Belize, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama. For the most part, the countries of this region have had rather tumultuous political histories. This has had very real implications on the ability for some of these countries to implement successful democracies, which can be seen by analyzing the scales used in this paper. [Cohesive definition of democracy based on findings to come].

Measurements Used

In order to dissect this definition of democracy, I will be analyzing three measures of democracy as provided by Freedom House (FH), Polity IV (Polity), and Political Regime Change (PRC). Each utilizes a distinct method of measuring democracy and subsequently facilitates a more thorough analysis. However, particular attention will be paid to Polity and FH measures of democracy as I found these two to compliment each other well and provide an interesting contrast in their measurement.

Of the three scales used to analyze democracy in this paper, the most comprehensive and precise was the Polity scale. This data set was a particularly helpful scale because of the intricacy of the variables it included. This scale was by far the most detailed and specific of the three. However, one of the drawbacks of this scale was that it did not include data for Belize, one of the countries in this region. There was a lack of attention paid to civil liberties, despite Polity's thorough analyses of other factors. This scale focused predominantly on political rights, electoral legitimacy, as well as subsequent factors related to these general categories. One interesting aspect of the Polity scale was its use of democracy not necessarily as an end but as a necessary variable in calculating the Polity of a state (the polity score of a nation is calculated by the variable produced by subtracting the Autocracy score from the Democracy score). According to the Polity codebook, a democratic state is one in which “(a) political participation is unrestricted, open, and fully competitive, (b) executive recruitment is elective, and (c) constraints on the chief executive are substantial” (cite). Polity thoroughly analyzes each nation's political scheme based on a 21 point scale

The Freedom House scale was the second scale used to analyze the degree of democracy in these countries. The non-governmental organization (NGO) publishes annual reports that analyze the degree to which a given state can be considered democratic, based on a variety of different criteria. In determining the level of democracy in a state, Freedom House looks at two factors in particular: civil liberties (CL) and political rights (PR). For each country, the current state of these two categories is evaluated on a scale from 1 (most free) to 7 (least free). Specific values are simultaneously assigned to the numbers, dividing the range into three categories: Free (F), Partly Free (PF), and Not Free (NF). The political climate in a given year may be apparent in the rankings of the nations analyzed in this study, however for the most part the countries' results stayed relatively

consistent. According to Freedom House, there are no countries in this region that fall within the NF and the lowest ranking reported is PF.

The third scale used to analyze data in this paper was the Political Regime Change scale (PRC). However, I found this to be the least helpful in dissecting the level of democracy for the countries in this region. The PRC rankings are separated into four distinct categories: transitional, democratic, semi-democratic, and autocratic. Although this would have been helpful if it had covered the entirety of the period being analyzed (1990-2010), the PRC dataset only covered through 1998. Although incomplete, this data set offered an interesting contrast to the other two scales. I have chosen to focus primarily on the Polity and FH datasets.

I will now include an overview of democratic measurements of the six nations being analyzed in this region. Since I found the Polity scale to be the most comprehensive, a Polity graph will supplement the summary of each nation. Furthermore, I will be focusing on FH and Polity measurements of each state. FH analyzes both Political Rights and Civil Liberties, the second of which is particularly important considering that Polity does not really cover civil liberties in its analysis. Combined, the two scales do an effective job at providing a thorough analysis of the democratic measure of each state.

Belize (1990—2010)

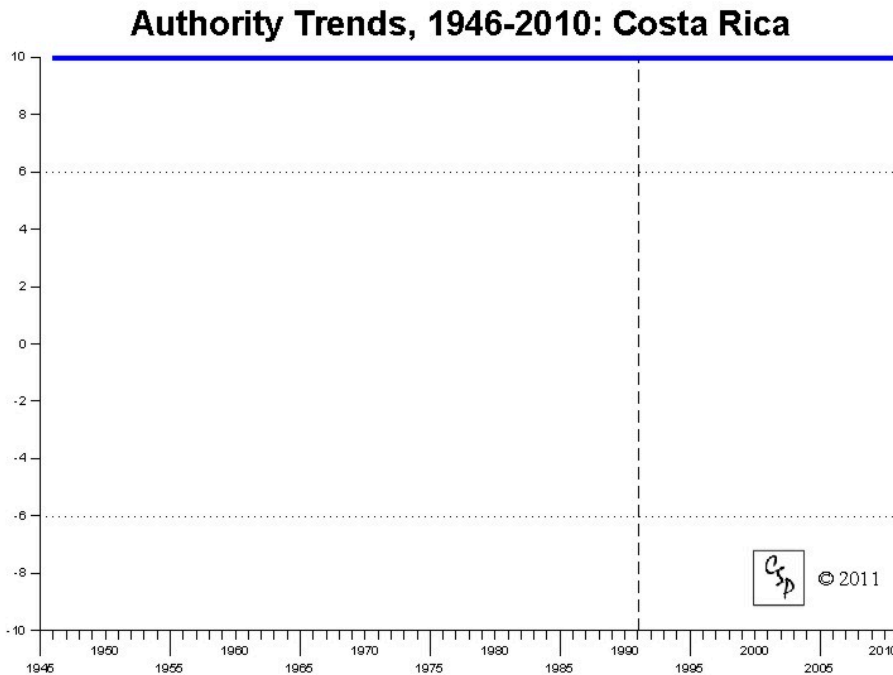
Of the six countries analyzed in this region, the first was Belize. Within the twenty years analyzed, Freedom House consistently categorized Belize as being free (F). The ratings for CL and PR fluctuated between 1 and 2, both of these values remaining within the F category. Excluding 1991, before 2001 the ratings were consistently 1,1,F (meaning the highest possible score in all categories). After 2001, the second category, civil liberties, was moved down to a 2. This is still considered, however, to be within the F category. Neither the PRC nor the Polity scales analyzed Belize, so the democratic analysis of this particular state falls slightly short in comparison to the other countries of this region.

Costa Rica (1990—2010)

Costa Rica was the second country in this region analyzed for this paper. Looking at the FH scale, Costa Rica received perfect scores (1,1,F) from 1990 through 1992. Starting in 1993, the FH scale noted a decrease in the CL category, lowering the score from a 1 to a 2. However, in 2002, the FH score showed that Costa Rica had returned to a score of 1,1,F and this remained the case until the most recent analysis in 2010. Of the countries analyzed in this region, Costa Rica consistently had the highest scores of all, based on the scales evaluated.

Receiving a 10 and a 0 for democracy and autocracy (respectively), Costa Rica received a perfect polity score according to the Polity scale. Costa Rica consistently received extremely high if not perfect scores according to this scale, ultimately enabling the state to be categorized by the Polity index as an almost ideal Democratic state. Below is a

graph highlighting the historic trends according to the Polity scale, which makes the extent to which Costa Rica has maintained a consistent score very apparent.

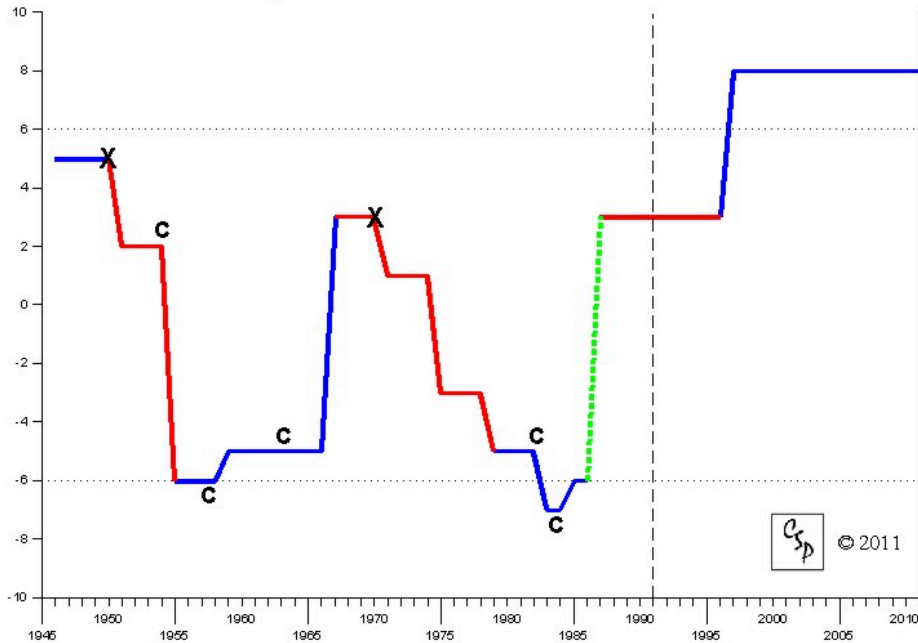


Guatemala
(1990—2010)

Guatemala, like many other countries in Central America, has experienced many years plagued by military coups and political corruption. Often, the government has failed to provide adequate civil liberties and political rights for its citizens. These realities have had a significant impact on the assigned values from all three scales. The highest score given to Guatemala according to Freedom House was 3,4,PF (the lowest was 4,5,PF). These scores, although defined by FH as moderate, are not ideal.

According to Freedom House, “Guatemala’s political rights rating improved from 4 to 3 due to progress made by the UN-backed International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) in investigating corruption, violence, and organized crime within Guatemalan public institutions, political parties, and civil society, and due to the anticorruption efforts of the country’s attorney general.”

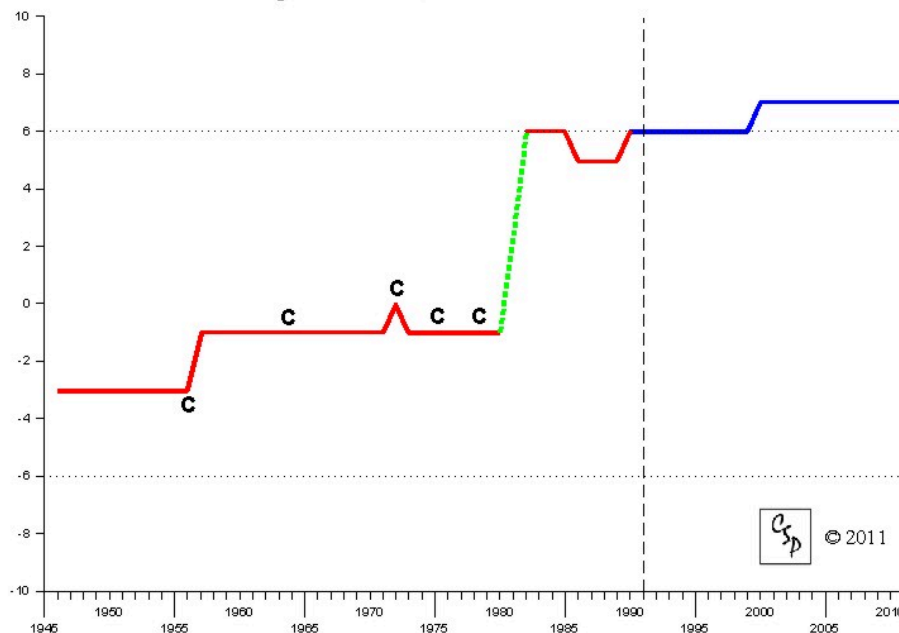
Authority Trends, 1946-2010: Guatemala



Honduras (1990—2010)

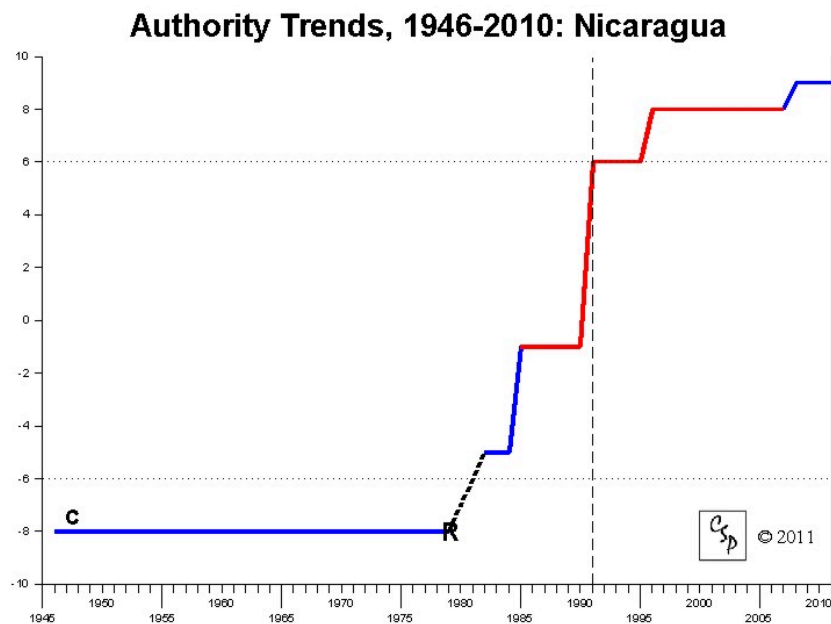
Honduras fell under the F category according to Freedom House for only five years of the 21 years analyzed (1990-1992, 1997-1998), falling under PF for the remainder of the time. In terms of civil liberties and political rights, Honduras ratings have worsened since 1990 (2,3) to 2010 (4,4). According to the Polity scale, Honduras' latest democracy score was a 7. Honduras' remaining scores on the Polity scale have increased since 1990, but only slightly so, as can be seen in the graph below.

Authority Trends, 1946-2010: Honduras



Nicaragua (1990—2010)

The FH scale depicted Nicaragua as consistently PF, never more. The best score received in terms of political rights and civil liberties was a 2,3 in 1998. Some factors contributing to the fact that Nicaragua's ratings worsened according to the FH scale were irregularities and an absence of transparency throughout electoral processes. According to Polity, Nicaragua has had an increase in democratic tendencies since 1990, its democratic score increasing from 6 (1990-1994) to 8 (1995-1996) and finally to 9 in 2007 (until 2010).



Panama (1990—2010)

According to the Polity scale, Panama's level of democracy has consistently improved, and quite drastically so, since its regime change in 1990 (as can be seen in the graph below). According to Polity, Panama consistently received a 0 for the autocracy category, and received an 8 for democracy from 1990 to 1993, which was raised to a 9 from 1994 until 2010 (rendering the Polity scores the same as the Democracy scores for the lack of Autocracy). The Freedom House scale also reflects a general upward trend in its data set for Panama. Although the civil liberties category have remained relatively steady, fluctuating between 2 and 3, the political rights category underwent the most significant change, from 4 in 1990 to 1 in 2010. Furthermore, despite four years of falling under the "PF" category for Freedom House (From 1990-1993), Panama has remained in the Free category ever since.

Overall, both scales reflected a general increase in Panama's level of democracy.

Authority Trends, 1946-2010: Panama

