

# PRESERVING ELECTIONS IN GUATEMALA

Case Study, November 2025

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study examines the preservation of election results in Guatemala through the lens of the political crisis that occurred in that country in the second half of 2023. Despite Guatemala's democratic deficiencies, electoral results had not previously been threatened there in the 40 years since the democratic opening in 1983.

The case study explains in detail how the judicialization of politics in 2023 posed a genuine risk of derailing the popular will in Guatemala. It provides background on current electoral institutions and electoral law and describes the preventive measures that the Supreme Electoral Tribunal of Guatemala (TSE) took before the elections to try to ensure a smooth and transparent electoral process.

The main contribution of this case study lies in its analysis of the resilience of the electoral institutions in the light of the attacks they endured in 2023. It describes how the electoral authorities, workers and volunteers came together to protect the election results from multiple attacks that tried to overturn them. This case study also highlights the role of domestic observation missions, which, through sophisticated monitoring systems, were able to debunk false accusations of electoral fraud. It also highlights the involvement of multiple Guatemalan civil society and business organizations, which published communiques in national media in support of the electoral results, as well as the active role of individual leaders and citizens who took to the streets to defend the integrity of the elections. The resilience of the Guatemalan elections vis-à-vis the 2023 crisis is undoubtedly a case of a whole-of-society approach.

That said, the success of domestic actors in protecting elections in Guatemala against the attacks from some rogue actors within the political system would not have been certain without the involvement of international actors, which, through electoral observation missions, political pressure and extensive international media coverage, helped to tip the scales in favour of democracy.

This case study ends with a note of caution with regard to recovery. The rogue domestic actors who threatened to derail the results of the 2023 presidential election have not ceased their attacks against the electoral institutions and individual citizens who participated in the defence of democracy in 2023. In addition, internal disputes within the electoral body and the complications that could arise from the forthcoming selection of new TSE Magistrates in 2026 still cast a cloud of uncertainty over the June 2027 general elections.

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## INTRODUCTION

This case study focuses on the resilience of Guatemala's electoral system during and after the crisis that followed the general elections held there in June 2023. To better understand the events of 2023, the study provides relevant background on the electoral system and democracy in Guatemala. Relevant data and visualizations are presented throughout this case study, with the goal of adding precision and clarity to the narrative.

The case study addresses the issue of prevention and examines the policies and practices of the Guatemalan electoral authorities aimed at mitigating electoral risks. It then analyses the resilience of the electoral system in Guatemala by addressing how such prevention policies and practices fared during the political crisis in 2023. It examines the resilience of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) and the electoral infrastructure in the face of attacks that sought to question and overthrow the official outcome of the presidential election. Key to the analysis is the role of civil society groups that, through electoral observation missions, election verification mechanisms and demonstrations, protected the official results and consequently the continuance of a democratic regime in Guatemala. The case study also discusses the international community, which provided extraordinary support to the electoral authorities and democracy in general during the 2023 elections. The backing of international actors was fundamental to withstanding the threats from anti-democratic domestic actors.

Finally, the case study recounts what happened in the aftermath of the 2023 elections and how electoral institutions and civil society groups supported the continuation of the democratic process until a democratically elected president took office in January 2024. At the time of writing (August 2025), complete normalcy has not returned because the institutions that guarantee electoral transparency are still under stress. Since elections in Guatemala take place every four years, and the country does not have mid-term elections at

any level, the possibility of returning to normalcy cannot be fully evaluated until after the general elections in June 2027.

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## 1. BACKGROUND

Following decades of authoritarian military governments, Guatemala held a number of democratic elections after its democratic opening in 1985. The democratization process in Guatemala began in 1983, when the military government agreed to liberalize the political system (Rosada Granados 1984). A new Supreme Electoral Tribunal was created in 1983, and its first mandate was to organize elections for a new Constituent Assembly in 1984. The Constituent Assembly promulgated the current 1985 Constitution and the Electoral and Political Parties Law (Ley Electoral y de Partidos Políticos, LEPP), which define the existing electoral system. The first general election, which comprised presidential, legislative and municipal elections, was held on 3 November 1985. A run-off election for the presidency was held on 8 December in the same year (TSE Historia n.d.b).

Guatemala has evolved into an electoral democracy since the election of the first freely elected president in 1985, although international measures of democracy typically classify Guatemala as a weak electoral democracy. In its 2024 Global State of Democracy report, International IDEA gave Guatemala a score of 0.549 on Representation, 0.432 on Participation, 0.350 on the Rule of Law and 0.343 on Rights on a scale of 0 to 1. These scores are important because they show that Guatemala's democracy has made some advances in the representation category but lags in the area of participation, and especially in the areas of rights and the rule of law. (For more about regional results for Latin America see Azpuru 2024.)

With regard to regime type, using the scores provided by V-Dem, classification of the political regime in Guatemala has changed over the years (V-Dem n.d.). During the authoritarian military governments, Guatemala was classified as an electoral autocracy. The first years of democratic opening up moved the country into the so-called grey zone of electoral autocracies, regimes in which the limits of uncertainty make them unstable and prone to authoritarian degradation. In 2000–2003 and 2021–2023, Guatemala moved into the grey zone of electoral democracies. Guatemala improved its classification and was considered an electoral democracy between 2004 and 2020, and returned to that category in 2024 in view of the peaceful transfer of power in early 2024 (see Azpuru 2025).

It is interesting to note that Guatemala held democratic elections before the armed conflict between the military government and the Marxist guerrillas ended in December 1996 (Azpuru 1999). The end of the 36-year armed conflict allowed the participation of former guerrilla groups united around the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit (URNG). Allison (2024) notes that

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the former guerrilla party has been largely unsuccessful in garnering popular support.

Since the election of the Constituent Assembly in 1984, the TSE has organized 16 electoral processes in Guatemala. Ten of these were general elections that comprised presidential, legislative and municipal (local) elections; all 10 presidential elections have needed a run-off election between the two leading candidates after the first round. Three of the elections were municipal elections and three have been national referendums (known as *consulta popular* in Guatemala). Details on those elections can be found in Table A2 in Annex A.

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**In 40 years of electoral democracy, Guatemala has faced two major political shocks.**

In 40 years of electoral democracy, Guatemala has faced two major political shocks. The first was an executive coup d'état in 1993 staged by President Jorge Serrano Elías. The second occurred in 2023, when Guatemala made headlines around the world because of brazen attempts by certain anti-democratic groups to thwart the results of the June 2023 elections. While the 1993 coup forced the TSE to organize a referendum and new legislative elections in 1994, it did not affect the electoral system directly, and the credibility of the TSE and the elections was not called into question by any group within or outside of Guatemala. In 1993, major civil society organizations and the business sector, alongside political parties, came together to defend democracy (McCleary 1999).

In contrast, the 2023 attacks on the elections and on some of the participating candidates and parties constituted a threat to the TSE and the whole electoral system. International IDEA (2024: 22–23) notes that the threats against the elections in Guatemala are a clear example of the judicialization of elections: 'Prosecutions and court challenges were a regular feature of this electoral process. President Arévalo and his party faced investigation by prosecutors, attempts to have his candidacy invalidated, and later attempts to prevent him from taking office.'

In the end, the institutions established by the 1985 Constitution and the LEPP survived the attacks from anti-democratic groups within Guatemala. However, the recovery process in the aftermath of the 2023 crisis is not yet fully under way and the judicialization of electoral institutions is still ongoing.

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## 2. PROTECTING ELECTORAL INTEGRITY IN GUATEMALA

The TSE in Guatemala is an independent institution, formed by five sitting Magistrates (Magistrados titulares) and five substitutes. They are elected with the favourable vote of two-thirds of the total number of deputies in Congress and elected from a list of candidates proposed by the Nomination Committee (TSE n.d.a). Their term of office is six years. The Magistrates are legally independent from political parties. A major body within the TSE is the Registro de Ciudadanos (Citizen Registry), which is in charge of registering citizens as voters on the electoral roll (padrón electoral), the oversight

of political parties (including the registration of party affiliates and the supervision of party conventions for selecting candidates), registering citizens who want to run for public office and ensuring the compliance of parties, candidates and other actors involved in the electoral process with the law and court rulings. Alongside the TSE Magistrates, the Citizen Registry was an effective barrier against the attacks and attempts to overturn the elections in 2023.

The system for counting votes established in the LEPP was another protective barrier for electoral integrity. Azpuru (2023) recounts that:

Despite the many shortcomings of democratic developments in Guatemala, the institutional design that tallies the votes is recognized as reliable, even by critics of the political system within the country. The vote counting relies on over 100,000 non-partisan volunteers who form the Voting Boards (*Juntas Receptoras de Votos*, or JRVs) and who spend election day sitting at electoral tables throughout the country, receiving the secret ballots cast by citizens. At the end of the day, the members of each JRV count the paper votes in the presence of appointees from all political parties who are able to corroborate each vote that goes to the party it is intended to go to. The certificate of electoral results (known as *acta*) is signed by the members of each JRV and appointees of the political parties, is then transmitted electronically to the headquarters of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE), and the physical certificates and ballots are afterwards moved to the TSE.

Before the 2023 election, electoral results were typically not questioned by opposition parties, and political parties and civil society organizations, as well as the wider population, generally accepted the electoral outcome.<sup>1</sup>

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### 3. PREVENTION

In addition to the safeguards included in the creation of the TSE and the promulgation of the LEPP, it is important to explain the more recent systems put in place to prevent electoral uncertainty. In 2021, the Office of the Comptroller General of Accounts (Contraloría General de Cuentas, CGC) established a National System of Internal Government Control (SINACIG). This system seeks to guarantee compliance with the fundamental objectives by each entity audited by the CGC, including the TSE. As a result, that same

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<sup>1</sup> Before the 2023 elections, criticism of the political system focused on the weakness of the political party system (one of the most fragmented party systems in Latin America), the personalization of politics, the use of clientelism by governing parties, relatively low electoral participation compared to other Latin American countries and the lack of opportunity to win elections by individuals who are not members of the political establishment. The latter issue took a more worrying turn in 2019 when certain candidates were blocked from participating using questionable legal manoeuvres (see Sanchez-Sibony 2024, 2025). For an in-depth discussion of Guatemala's political establishment, see Schwartz and Isaacs (2023).

year, through Agreement 476-2021, the TSE created the Specialized Risk Management Unit (UEGR), responsible for evaluating issues that might affect the execution and fulfilment of institutional strategies and objectives. In the institution's organizational chart, the UEGR is located between the Magistrates and the President of the TSE.

To fulfil its mandate, the UEGR must adhere to the three approaches to internal control established by SINACIG—preventive, detective and corrective. These approaches constitute the basis for the specialized unit to provide advice and technical assistance on the design of the court's internal control processes. Furthermore, TSE staff have received training from the CGC on the general standards and techniques of government internal control. When it was created, the UEGR was assigned 11 permanent staff members: a coordinator, nine auditors and an assistant. They are responsible for preparing an annual risk assessment matrix, a risk map, a risk assessment work plan and an annual internal control report, in collaboration with the other TSE units (see Contraloría General de Cuentas 2021).

The first review was produced by the UEGR in 2022. It identified various risks to the 2023 electoral process, both institutional and external. Among the risks identified were the following: being unable to register certain political organizations or candidates due to their ignorance of all the requirements established in the LEPP; failure to increase the number of people registered to vote or to update the electoral roll for TSE operational reasons; and lack of capacity to monitor early electoral campaigning, which is prohibited by law. These risks were addressed before they escalated, through information campaigns directed at political parties and citizens. The TSE also communicated to political parties that individuals who engaged in early campaigning would not be registered as candidates.

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**The TSE established an electoral conflict prevention round table one year before the 2023 elections.**

The TSE established an electoral conflict prevention round table (*mesa de prevención*) one year before the 2023 elections. This space was intended to coordinate the actions of public institutions, but occasionally participation was extended to civil society organizations to publicize the round table's progress. The round table discussions concluded that electoral conflict in Guatemala usually materialized after the election results were announced. Thus, to prevent post-election conflict, the round table suggested that the institutions involved in the logistics of the electoral process should conduct a campaign on civility and appropriate electoral conduct and hold workshops for the Voting Boards (Juntas Receptoras de Votos, JRVs) responsible for receiving and counting votes.<sup>2</sup>

The TSE also sponsored the signing of a National Agreement on an Ethical and Peaceful Campaign with Democratic Values. This agreement was signed three months before the 25 June 2023 elections by representatives of the 27 registered political parties. According to the President of the TSE at the time,

<sup>2</sup> However, the election crisis in 2023 was generated by rogue individuals within the judicial system and far-right groups, something that was not foreseen by the conflict prevention round table.

Irma Elizabeth Palencia, the agreement's goal was to promote fair and equal electoral competition, and to ensure transparency, accountability and respect for the democratic rights of all participants (see TSE y 27 partidos 2023c). The agreement was also signed by witnesses, such as members of civil society, the business sector and public sector institutions. The agreement contained 16 commitments, which included a pledge to use social media appropriately, to avoid promoting fake news and disinformation, and to avoid discrediting other competitors in the electoral race.<sup>3</sup>

On inter-institutional coordination, the LEPP establishes in article 195 that all state security forces must assist the authorities and officials at the TSE to guarantee the freedom and legality of the electoral process. Within this framework, for the 2023 elections, the Public Ministry, the Ministry of the Interior (Mingob) and the Ministry of Defence developed and presented an Integrated Strategic Action Plan (2023) that outlined two prevention objectives: to ensure public order and safety, and the creation of working groups to promote spaces for outreach and dialogue with Indigenous communities. Mingob was responsible for the prevention component through the National Civil Police. Three preventive activities were selected: risk analyses in areas with a high incidence of crime and social conflict; early warning systems to prevent crime during electoral campaign events; and activating prevention, response and investigation mechanisms during the electoral process. These three actions were divided into four phases: (a) a pre-election phase of information gathering, analysis and action planning; (b) an intermediate phase of strategic coordination with TSE delegations, perimeter security and personalized security; (c) an electoral phase of resource allocation and deployment of police personnel based on levels of crime and social conflict; and (d) a post-election phase of continued police presence, coordination with other institutions and follow-up on investigations arising from the electoral process.

In addition, the TSE, with the support of UN Women and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), developed a Protocol to Address Violence Against Women in the Political and Electoral Sphere. This protocol sought to strengthen the courts' strategies and activities for assisting in the prevention of and response to violence against women in the context of elections. Among other things, the protocol contained international principles, references to the national regulatory framework, definitions of the types of violence and the scope and management of the protocol, and the responsibilities of the TSE departments involved in conducting training and developing awareness-raising (TSE 2023b).

As a result of the preventive measures taken by the TSE and other Guatemalan institutions and organizations, the first-round and the run-off of the 2023 elections were considered well organized. The European Union Election Observation Mission Report (see UE 2023) found that TSE personnel and

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<sup>3</sup> Despite this agreement, the 2023 campaign was particularly nasty, especially against candidate Arévalo (see Azpuru 2023). However, the groups that engaged in fake news, disinformation and discrediting were not political parties, but far-right groups that had not signed the agreement.

representatives from political organizations demonstrated a commitment to democracy, and the security forces maintained professional conduct and did not interfere in the elections.

Among the actions aimed at minimizing risks that can lead to conflict and violence, electoral advertising is regulated by 2016 electoral reforms. For the 2023 elections, the TSE determined that Facebook and Instagram were acceptable social networks for electoral propaganda but did not exclude the use of other social networks.

**The 25 June 2023 general elections were marked by an early judicialization of the electoral process.**

#### 4. RESILIENCE TO STRESS AND SHOCKS

The 25 June 2023 general elections were marked by an early judicialization of the electoral process. Various lawsuits initiated by individuals and political entities resulted in the disqualification of three presidential candidates by the Citizen Registry of the TSE (Garcia 2023a).<sup>4</sup> This early disqualification of presidential candidates impacted how other candidates were perceived: those who were able to remain on the ballot were seen by many as aligned with the status quo (Martínez 2023).<sup>5</sup>

Some citizens were not satisfied with the final 22 candidates who remained on the ballot, and this became evident on the day of the election when 17.38 per cent of Guatemalans (955,389 voters) voided their ballot. This was the highest percentage of null votes in any election since the democratic opening began and was deemed a sign of protest against the existing political system (AQ Editors 2023). The percentage of null votes was higher than the share obtained by the two leading presidential candidates who made it to the run-off election: Sandra Torres gained 881,592 votes (15.86 per cent of the vote) and Bernardo Arévalo obtained 654,534 votes (11.7 per cent).

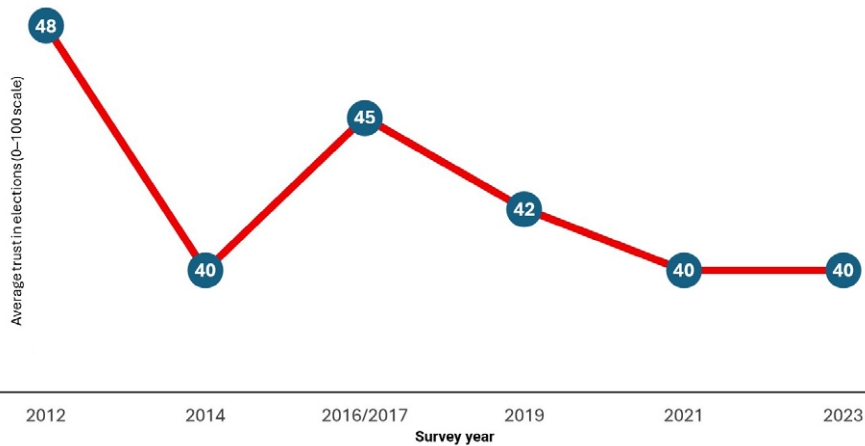
Figure 1 shows that trust in elections has declined in Guatemala in recent years. In 2023, a survey conducted three months before the elections by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) showed that trust in elections had declined eight points since 2012 (on a 0–100-point scale).<sup>6</sup> Notably, trust in elections in Guatemala has never passed the 50-point mark, which means

<sup>4</sup> Since 2015, candidates considered non-aligned by the dominant members of the economic-political establishment have been disqualified. Some presidential candidates were allowed to participate even if they were considered non-aligned, as long as they were perceived as lacking any real chance of being elected (see Sanchez-Sibony 2025).

<sup>5</sup> In Guatemala, a party must register two individuals for the presidential ticket (*biomio presidencial*). If one of the two individuals is disqualified or not substituted on time, the *biomio* is disqualified. In some cases, lower-level candidates are also disqualified if the party convention is proved to have been flawed. In 2023, the three individuals disqualified were Roberto Arzú, Carlos Pineda (presidential candidates), and Jordán Rodas (vice-presidential candidate).

<sup>6</sup> Data from LAPOP. Before 2012, the survey used to ask about trust in the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE). Between 2012 and 2019, the LAPOP survey asked about both trust in the TSE and trust in the elections. The results of the comparison can be seen in Table A1 in Annex A. In some of those years, the TSE as an institution obtained a higher average level of trust than the elections themselves. In 2021 and 2023, LAPOP only asked about the elections. Unfortunately, at the time of writing, no surveys to measure trust in the TSE or the elections have been conducted since the August 2023 election.

Figure 1. Trust in elections in Guatemala, 2012–2023



Source: Prepared by Azpuru with raw LAPOP data. Cases weighted.

that trust has always been at the lower end of the spectrum. The regional average for Latin America was 46.20 points in 2023.<sup>7</sup>

As indicated above, 2 of the 22 presidential candidates made it to the run-off election: Sandra Torres from the National Unity of Hope (UNE) Party and Bernardo Arévalo from the Seed Movement Party (Semilla). A successful candidate needs 51 per cent of the votes.<sup>8</sup> The fact that Arévalo made it to the run-off caught the establishment off guard because he had not been expected to obtain popular support. Roughly one month before the election, he had been polling in eighth place with less than 5 per cent support. Arévalo was not considered part of the political establishment, although he had been a member of Congress for several years.

Two events caused stress to the system between the first round and the run-off. First, some representatives of the establishment political parties attempted to contest the first-round results through lawsuits against the TSE voting boards at the Constitutional Court, arguing irregularities in the vote count. The Constitutional Court suspended the results and decided that a public hearing was necessary to ascertain the accuracy of the electoral results (Papadovassilakis and Voss 2023). The LEPP establishes (article 238) that obligatory hearings must be held after the election to clarify any impugnation. The Constitutional Court ordered the Magistrates at the TSE to conduct a review, which produced the same results as the TSE had originally announced.

The second event occurred when the Attorney General's Office attempted to suspend Bernardo Arévalo's party, Semilla, which would have automatically

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<sup>7</sup> Trust in elections varies in the countries of Latin America. Among the countries with the highest level of trust are Uruguay (67 point average) and Costa Rica (61 point average). Six of 18 countries have an average level of trust below 40 points, and Guatemala is one of them (figures obtained from LAPOP 2023 raw data).

<sup>8</sup> Article 201 of the LEPP says half plus one of the valid votes.

knocked Arévalo out of the run-off election. The Attorney General alleged that Semilla had used forged signatures during its incorporation process as a political party. This request, which was approved by a judge, was controversial because it was based on article 82 of the Law Against Organized Crime (Ley contra la Delincuencia Organizada), even though article 82 had been amended in 2024 to exclude its application to constitutional laws such as the LEPP (see Sas 2023). In a post-election interview on 5 July, then-candidate Arévalo argued: 'It is evident that those [who are attacking Semilla] are trying to see if the conditions can be created for Manuel Conde to be promoted'. Candidate Conde, from the incumbent Vamos party, would have been able to participate in the run-off election if Arévalo was barred from participating, since he had been placed third in the first-round election. The Vamos party denied the accusation (Infobae 2023).

After protection measures were filed (*amparos*) to defend Semilla, the Constitutional Court intervened to shield the party until the end of the electoral process. Following another resolution from the Constitutional Court, the TSE was able to make the results of the first round of elections official on 12 July 2023.<sup>9</sup>

**In an unprecedented way, for the first time in 40 years, there was a serious threat that electoral results were in danger.**

In an unprecedented way, for the first time in 40 years, there was a serious threat that electoral results would be jeopardized. The threat came from attacks within the political system, when some rogue justice operators, aligned with some politicians and some members of the business elite, tried to impede the election of a candidate who was seen as anti-establishment.<sup>10</sup> The Attorney General's Office was backed by individuals and groups under the umbrella of the so-called Pacto de Corruptos (corrupt pact). Among these individuals were members of the political and economic elite and what are usually considered extreme right-wing organizations.<sup>11</sup>

The period between the first and the second round elections was fraught with instability because of the attempts to prevent Arévalo from being on the ballot in the run-off election. Finally, the run-off election took place as scheduled on 20 August, 2023. Semilla's candidate, Arévalo, won with 60.9 per cent of the vote (2,442,718 valid votes), versus the 39.1 per cent obtained by UNE's candidate Torres (1,567,664 valid votes)..

Even though the Constitutional Court's interventions helped to protect the integrity of the results, most legal experts argued that the attempts to suspend Semilla set a negative precedent (Abbott 2023), especially since the LEPP states that a political party cannot be suspended during an electoral process (article 92). Legal experts also argued that the TSE Magistrates, not another court, should have resolved the issue. The events highlighted a flaw in the electoral system: despite being the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, the TSE's

<sup>9</sup> The resolution from the Constitutional Court on 13 July ratified the TSE Agreement 1328-2023 dated 12 July, which made the results of the first-round official.

<sup>10</sup> It is important to emphasize the word 'some' because a blanket statement accusing all justice operators, politicians or business leaders would be misleading.

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed analysis, see Schwartz and Isaacs (2023).

resolutions can be revoked by the courts in the regular justice system, even when they are related to electoral issues.

According to one TSE Magistrate,<sup>12</sup> one of the strengths of the institution, which can help to protect the integrity of elections, is the pool of knowledgeable public servants who have been working for it for 12 to 40 years (Alfaro 2025). She noted that some of them were already working at the TSE during the first democratic election in 1985. In the words of the Magistrate, 'there is no methodology that can replace the work of a human being, and it is reassuring to have people in the institution that know how to do things and have always done them right'. A member of civil society also mentioned that the people who have worked at the TSE for years are the pillars of the institutionality of Guatemala's electoral body. She further indicated that they should have a more prominent role in the post-election evaluation of the electoral process, although going unnoticed is a common practice among public sector workers to keep their jobs (Ortiz 2025).

In addition to the important role played by the TSE Magistrates and workers in withstanding threats and protecting the integrity of the election results, other important factors helped to protect Guatemala's 2023 elections. A crucial factor was the electoral model of the country, which relies on citizens who volunteer to be part of the JRVs. Thus, when it came to resisting the attacks against the first-round electoral results, many members of the JRVs took to social media to post photographs or videos showing copies of the electoral results from their tables, which coincided with the official results provided by the TSE (Mutz 2023).

Citizens not linked to the TSE also played a crucial role in defending the integrity of the electoral results in 2023. Citizens' platforms such as Digital Prosecutor (Fiscal Digital) helped to verify 100 per cent of the certificates of the electoral results published in the TSE Preliminary Electoral Results Transmission (*Transmisión de Resultados Electorales Preliminares, TREP*) informatics system,<sup>13</sup> which was protected by blockchain technology. The mission statement on their website (translated by the authors) states that:

In 2023, 100 per cent of the election ballots published in TREP by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal were audited in real time: together we verify the votes! Visit the section called Report to learn more about what we learned in this process. We acknowledge the support of 1,763 voluntary users who together released 66,158,542 Satoshis to achieve this success. We particularly recognize the efforts of the 10 most productive users...

This mobilization of different groups in civil society protected the integrity of the elections. In an unprecedented way, students from the public San

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<sup>12</sup> Due to a judicial process launched against four TSE Magistrates, Blanca Alfaro is the only Magistrate left of the collegiate body; in the absence of Gabriel Aguilera, who should be the president, she is acting as interim president. This situation is addressed below.

<sup>13</sup> For more information see Fiscal Digital, <<https://fiscaldigital.net/reporte>>.

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**The existence of national and international electoral observation missions undoubtedly helped to guarantee the integrity of the 2023 electoral results.**

Carlos University,<sup>14</sup> as well as students from some private universities, staged demonstrations and protests to defend the integrity of the electoral results (Morales and García 2023). In addition to the demonstrations by university students, other non-organized Guatemalan citizens and civil society groups staged protests against the Attorney General, calling for her resignation (Deutsche Welle 2023b). One of the slogans of the demonstrations was: ‘Elections are defined at the ballot boxes, not in court’ (see Deutsche Welle 2023a).

The existence of national and international electoral observation missions undoubtedly helped to guarantee the integrity of the 2023 electoral results. Within Guatemala, diverse groups joined forces to establish different observation missions, such as the Electoral Observation Mission of Guatemala (Misión de Observación Electoral de Guatemala, MOE-GT),<sup>15</sup> the Electoral Observation Programme (Programa de Observación Electoral, PROE) and the Local Electoral Observation Mission (Misión de Observación Electoral Local, MOEL K’at). There were also international missions, such as the Organization of American States Electoral Observation Mission (Pérez Gallardo 2023), the European Union Electoral Observation Mission (UE 2023), and the World Association of Electoral Bodies (A-WEB 2023). Domestic and international missions emphasized that the 2023 electoral process was free and fair, and that the accusations against the process by undemocratic actors were unfounded.<sup>16</sup>

Beyond the important contribution of international electoral observation missions to the safeguarding of the 2023 elections, the international community also played a key role in several ways. First and foremost, the coverage of national and international media maintained the alert about the attacks on Guatemala’s democracy during the period between the first-round and the run-off election. Important backing for the electoral process and the TSE also came from the pressure exerted by diplomatic missions accredited in Guatemala, especially the US Embassy and the embassies of EU member states, which announced sanctions against several individuals who were threatening the elections.

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**The Special Prosecutor’s Office Against Impunity (FECI), raided election facilities and TSE headquarters.**

The attacks on the integrity of the elections continued after the run-off. On 29 September 2023, 40 days after the run-off election, the Attorney General’s Office, through the Special Prosecutor’s Office Against Impunity (FECI), raided election facilities and TSE headquarters.<sup>17</sup> The FECI seized 160 ballot boxes containing around 125,000 official electoral records on the results of the first round—ballots, tally sheets, electoral rolls, and other documents. This action, which made international headlines, was considered yet another attack on electoral integrity because it sought to interfere with the inauguration of

<sup>14</sup> Universidad de San Carlos is the only public university in Guatemala. There are several private universities.

<sup>15</sup> This electoral observation mission conducted a parallel vote count to verify the TSE electoral results.

<sup>16</sup> Electoral observation missions, national or international, are not regulated by law in Guatemala; instead, in 2023, they were included in manuals produced for the Temporary Electoral Organs, giving space for discretion and occasionally hindering electoral observation (Ortiz 2025).

<sup>17</sup> The TSE published photographs on social media showing the raids (*allanamiento*) and documents rejecting the attacks against its offices, <<https://x.com/TSEGuatemala/status/1707860073865691627>>; <<https://x.com/TSEGuatemala/status/1708181949192294532>>.

Arévalo, the elected president, which was scheduled for January 2024 (Patzán 2023; García 2023b).

The actions of the Attorney General's Office (also known as Ministerio Público or MP), provoked more citizen protests, especially by Indigenous organizations, which demonstrated in front of the MP building (Martalo and Argueta 2024). The protests lasted 106 days until Arévalo was sworn in as president on 15 January 2024 (Ochoa García 2024). There were also other demonstrations and blockades at the national level.

It is important to highlight that women took leading roles as Magistrates of the TSE, as members of national electoral observation missions, and as citizens engaged in demonstrations to defend the integrity of the electoral process. Women were front and centre in the demonstrations, including women from Indigenous movements. A member of Guatemala's civil society (Ortiz 2025) noted that dynamics are changing in the country, as women are becoming heads of households, which makes them more aware of the impact of politics on their day-to-day lives.

In summary, the resilience of the Guatemalan electoral system in 2023 in the face of the unprecedented but persistent attacks against it was remarkable. The existing legal safeguards and the protective measures established before the electoral process began (described above) were important, but in the end the determining factor that protected the electoral results was a timely and sustained whole-of-society approach. This approach involved TSE Magistrates and workers, the volunteers in the JRVs, national electoral observation missions, citizens who organized around digital platforms to verify the results of the elections, the civil society groups which published press statements in defence of the electoral results, and the citizens who took part in demonstrations in support of the democratic process. Together, they became an unexpectedly united bloc that, despite ideological differences, helped to protect not only the results of the elections but democracy more generally. The contribution of the international community through electoral observation missions, the international press, and diplomatic pressure was also important, as indicated above. Without the efforts of Guatemalans themselves, however, the actions of international actors would not have been sufficient to save the elections.

### **Electoral conflict and electoral violence**

Aside from the major crisis faced by the electoral system in 2023, it is also important to discuss issues related to electoral conflict and electoral violence. As discussed above, existing legislation and some of the actions that the TSE took to prevent electoral conflict yielded positive results. The European Union Observation Mission (UE 2023) noted that isolated incidents of electoral violence occurred in the first round of the elections, but only related to

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**Women were front and centre in the demonstrations, including women from Indigenous movements.**

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**Misión de Observación Electoral de Guatemala identified 100 electoral violence events in different parts of the country.**

municipal elections. The report also indicated that violence ceased during the campaigning for the run-off election.<sup>18</sup>

The Guatemalan organization *Diálogos* monitors violence in the country through its Violence Observatory.<sup>19</sup> During the 2023 electoral process, it became part of the Guatemalan Observation Mission (MOE-Gt). Its specific contribution was to monitor electoral violence and conflict throughout the entire electoral process. A comprehensive report published by the Misión de Observación Electoral de Guatemala (MOE-Gt July 2023), covering the period 1 January to 8 July, identified 100 electoral violence events in different parts of the country, most of them at the municipal level. More specifically, the MOE-Gt report cites 23 cases of the destruction of property, 21 cases of threats, 20 cases of verbal violence, 17 cases related to beatings, 9 murders, 5 attempted murders, 3 illegal retentions of individuals (hostages), 1 sexual assault and 1 disappearance/kidnapping (*Diálogos* 2023: 57, Tables 17 and 18).

The MOE-Gt report, which is the most comprehensive and accurate source on electoral conflict and violence, did not report specific incidents against women. However, a United Nations and European Union assessment, which interviewed 10 women representatives of political parties, social organizations and academia, reported that some candidates faced sexist messages, the dissemination of humiliating content and criticism of their physical appearance, among other things (Uriona 2023). It is noteworthy that the TSE had published guidelines on addressing violence against women in the political and electoral realms before the elections (TSE 2023a).

One notable achievement during 40 years of democracy in Guatemala has been the diminishing gender gap in voting. Figure 2 shows that the gap in turnout between women and men in Guatemala has narrowed considerably (Azpuru 2025).<sup>20</sup>

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**Guatemala was one of three countries in Latin America with less than 20 per cent women's representation in parliament.**

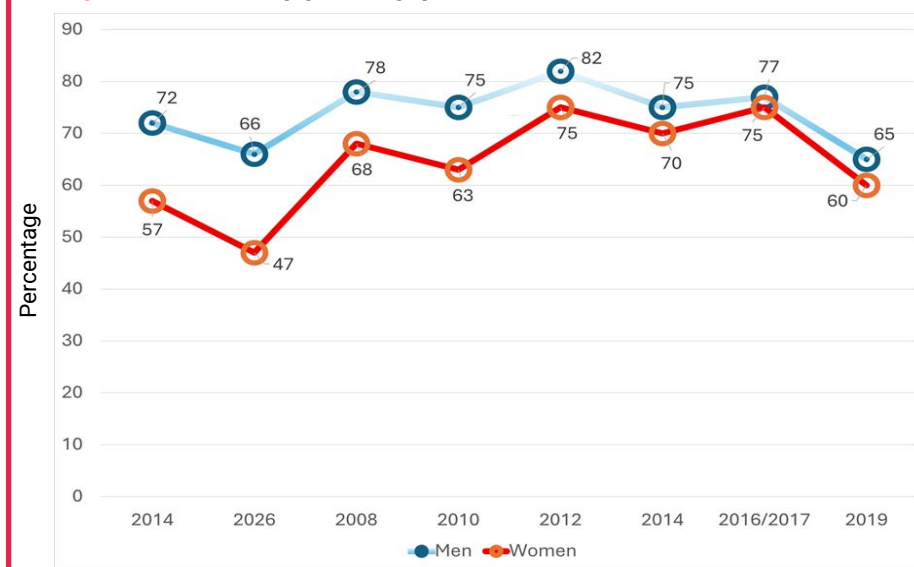
Nonetheless, in other respects, Guatemalan women continue to be disadvantaged in terms of political representation. For example, Guatemala and Venezuela are the only Latin American countries not to have introduced gender quotas for elections (Piscopo 2020). In addition, before the 2023 elections, Guatemala was one of three countries in Latin America with less than 20 per cent women's representation in parliament (von Blücher López 2023). The United Nations and European Union assessment (Uriona 2023) notes some of the challenges women face in participating politically: lack of trust in women's leadership, the continuation of sexist practices, the lack of promotion of women's political rights within political parties, and a lack of support from political parties to provide women with campaign resources.

<sup>18</sup> According to the EU Observation Mission, during the first round of elections, eight candidates at the local level were murdered.

<sup>19</sup> During non-electoral periods, *Diálogos* conducts research on high-impact crimes such as violence against women in its various forms, extortion, injuries resulting from violent acts and murder. During electoral periods, it focuses on electoral conflict and violence. See <<https://dialogos.org.gt/dialogos-es-parte-de-la-la-mision-de-observacion-electoral-moe-gt/>>.

<sup>20</sup> No data is available for the 2023 election.

Figure 2. The voting gender gap in Guatemala



Source: Prepared by Azpuru with raw LAPOP data.

The report notes that these limitations are particularly marked for Indigenous women.

Lastly, on issues related to the behaviour of candidates, members of political parties and other individuals on social media, there were mixed results in 2023. The MOE-Gt report (*Diálogos 2023*: 55) indicates that 'During the period under review (January 1–July 8), attacks, disinformation campaigns, and complaints against candidates, parties, and national and international organizations related to the electoral process intensified'. It highlights four incidents: (a) a Twitter (X) campaign promoting the expulsion of the European Union Electoral Observation Mission; (b) the publication of attacks generated in accounts recently created against candidate Bernardo Arévalo, using the hashtag #UruguayoComunista; (c) a Twitter (X) publication providing false information about the United Nations 2030 Agenda; and (d) a campaign against candidate Sandra Torres on TikTok, publishing conversations she had with other politicians.

In addition, there were many rumours and unfounded criminal accusations made on social media to try to persuade the TSE to cancel the participation of certain candidates. Attempts to discredit certain candidates on social media had a negative impact on the elections (International Republican Institute 2023). That said, social media also had a positive side as the extensive use of social media by younger voters may have helped Arévalo make it to the second round, and it was used by many citizens to defend the integrity of the electoral results (Diestra 2023).

**Attempts to discredit certain candidates on social media had a negative impact on the elections.**

## 5. RECOVERY FROM CRISIS

On the day that the winner of the run-off election, Bernardo Arévalo, was expected to take office as established in the Constitution, the Guatemalan actors who had tried to prevent Arévalo from participating in the run-off and later tried to prevent him from taking office, continued their attacks in Congress. These attempts failed, and Arévalo took office on 15 January 2025 as the 10th democratically elected president of Guatemala since 1985: 40 years of democracy and the integrity of the electoral process had been protected, although the judicialization of elections and legal actions against Arévalo and several members of his government and his party have continued during Arévalo's tenure as president.

**In the aftermath of the 2023 electoral process, the electoral organ, the TSE, has been affected as an institution.**

In the aftermath of the 2023 electoral process, the electoral organ, the TSE, has been affected as an institution. At the time of writing (August 2025), the TSE is still in a process of recovery. On 30 November 2023, Guatemala's Congress stripped four of the five TSE Magistrates who organized the 2023 elections of their immunity as public officials, due to a formal complaint presented by the Attorney General's Office before the Supreme Court of Justice (CSJ). The complaint alleges corruption in the acquisition of the TREP informatics system (Barreto 2023). In March 2024, a judge prohibited the four Magistrates from holding office until they legally prove that the accusations are false (Barrientos and Cuevas 2024). Since then, the TSE has worked with only one Magistrate (Blanca Alfaro) and the substitutes (lawyers elected by congress as substitute TSE Magistrates when they are needed).

The absence of 80 per cent of the TSE Magistrates generated an internal dispute over the presidency of the institution between the only Magistrate left and the substitutes. In article 126, the LEPP states that the presidency of the TSE should be held by the titular Magistrates in order of age, from oldest to youngest. When four titular Magistrates were stripped of their functions, Magistrate Blanca Alfaro was the president (she was not included in the complaint). However, her one-year term as TSE president formally ended in January 2025, leaving the TSE without a president.<sup>21</sup> In that context, the presidency of the TSE in the new term that began in February of 2025 was assumed again by the only titular Magistrate left, Alfaro, acting as interim president. This action was questioned by the substitutes, who contended that in the absence of the other titular Magistrates, one of the substitutes should assume the presidency. They took the dispute to the Supreme Court and the Constitutional Court (Maldonado 2025a; García and Cuevas 2025), which as of August 2025 had not made a decision. It is essential to note that article 127 of the LEPP outlines a procedure for substitutes to step in in cases of temporary or permanent vacancies. However, since the four Magistrates have not been permanently separated from their roles, the substitutes cannot be considered regular Magistrates.

<sup>21</sup> The Magistrate who was supposed to take the presidency was suspended.

The actions taken by the substitutes have revived the discussion on the procedure for electing Magistrates to the TSE in Guatemala. Legal experts argue that the existing model is no longer viable, since the election is based on political negotiations between the members of Congress, which compromises the principle that the TSE Magistrates must be independent of political parties.

A member of Guatemala's civil society notes that the current crisis at the TSE displays the flaws that the institution has been experiencing in recent years, which has resulted in opaque administrative processes, discretionary application of law, doubtful disqualifications of candidates and other factors that have contributed to a decline in trust in elections among Guatemalans (Ortiz 2025).

While it is true that the TSE played a positive and crucial role in permitting the continuation of electoral integrity in the 2023 elections, there were underlying problems within the institution itself. As the representative of civil society (Ortiz 2025) points out, the first Magistrates following the return to democracy in 1985 were impartial, and any rifts between them at that time were unknown to the public. This has changed in recent years, when disagreements between the Magistrates or between the Magistrates and the substitutes have become more obvious. She concludes that profound cleavages weaken institutional integrity.

To help alleviate the discrepancies between Magistrate Alfaro and the substitutes, representatives of political parties offered to serve as intermediaries to find common ground and mitigate the effects of the delays in decision making about electoral matters (Ramón 2025). Civil society organizations and members of academia urged all parties to meet and negotiate. After three months, the Magistrate and the substitutes finally reached an agreement by which Magistrate Alfaro continues to act as interim president (Maldonado 2025b). This agreement is still in place as of August 2025.

In addition to the four TSE Magistrates who are suspended, the IT director at the TSE, the Citizen Registry director and 30 delegates from different areas have faced judicial problems since the elections, all prompted by the continued judicialization of the electoral process spearheaded by the current Attorney General's Office. The interim TSE President has faced 44 attempts to strip her of her immunity. As a result, according to Magistrate Alfaro (2025), the directors of TSE departments are fearful of making decisions related to preparations for the 2027 general elections. According to her, it is difficult to draw lessons for the next group of Magistrates when they take office in 2026, given that the situation that generated the crisis—the attacks by the Attorney General's Office—is continuing.<sup>22</sup> Dialogue may be one of the options, but from her point of view, without political agreement, electoral processes will continue to become more and more conflictive.

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<sup>22</sup> The current Attorney General, Consuelo Porres, who has spearheaded the attacks, is expected to step down from her post when her term ends in May 2026. At that point, President Arevalo will be able to appoint a new Attorney General.

The current TSE president believes that dialogue can be positive. For this reason, the TSE has decided to organize three round tables on the three phases of the electoral process. In these round tables, the TSE is asking political parties, civil society organizations, and strategic partners to indicate problems they identified in the 2023 general election, and for suggestions on how these problems can be addressed and prevented through modifications to the internal regulations of the TSE rather than electoral reform. The directors and the various administrative departments of the TSE are also discussing possible solutions.

The Electoral Updating and Modernization Commission (Comisión de Actualización y Modernización Electoral, CAME), formed after the 2023 elections, received 117 proposals that suggested 1,256 changes. Table 1 shows that the majority of the suggestions (304) were related to changes to the electoral system itself. This was followed by suggestions for changes to the electoral process (295) and changes to strengthen the TSE (220). Other proposals were related to changes to the political party system (189), changes related to political financing and media (159), and changes to electoral justice procedures (89).

**Table 1. Changes suggested by the CAME 2023, by theme**

<b>Electoral system</b>	<b>Political party system</b>	<b>Political financing and media</b>	<b>Electoral justice</b>	<b>Strengthening of electoral body</b>	<b>Electoral process</b>
304	189	159	89	220	295

Source: Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE) 2024, <[https://www.tse.org.gt/images/reformas\\_LEPP\\_2024.pdf](https://www.tse.org.gt/images/reformas_LEPP_2024.pdf)>, accessed 3 November 2025.

Some of these proposals for change made it into an initiative for electoral reform presented to Congress by the TSE Magistrates. However, no discussion of electoral reform had been scheduled in Congress at the time of writing (August 2025). One shortcoming of the CAME is that the suggestions for change can be ignored by political actors. The TSE is not able to implement most of the suggested changes unless they have been mandated by law.

One member of Guatemala's civil society interviewed for this report (Ortiz 2025) argues that the TSE needs to strengthen the capacity of its administrative units to analyse risks and communicate early warnings, and that the Magistrates need to develop an improved political radar to act on risks.

In short, at the time of writing (August 2025), the Guatemalan electoral system is not out of the woods and the process of recovery in the aftermath of the 2023 crisis is mostly incomplete. This is largely because of the still ongoing judicial attacks against the Magistrates and other electoral actors, but also

because of the internal crisis within the TSE, which, which makes it difficult to move forward.

The current Magistrates and the substitutes will be replaced by new lawyers, elected by Congress in 2026 for the period 2026–2032. This will be a critical juncture for the TSE, as the new Magistrates will not only have to deal with the 2027 general elections, but also have to rebuild citizens' trust in the institution and the elections.

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## 6. CONCLUSION

The political crisis that began in Guatemala in June 2023 threatened to derail the results of the elections, particularly the presidential election, for the first time in 40 years. In 2024, International IDEA (2024: 23) concluded that 'Ultimately, a combination of popular mobilization, international pressure and the use of writs of amparo by Arévalo's supporters ensured that he would be sworn in as president'.

This case study has shown that the 2023 Guatemalan electoral process survived the attacks that sought to invalidate its results because of a combination of long-standing structures and practices, and timely interventions by a host of organizations and citizens throughout the crisis. In other words, it was the institutional design and safeguards established in the Constitution and the Electoral Law (LEPP), and the risk-prevention measures taken before the 2023 electoral process, combined with unwavering support for the electoral results from Magistrates and staff at the TSE, the national electoral observation missions, civil society organizations and business organizations, as well as the citizens who organized around digital platforms to verify the results of the elections, and citizens who took part in demonstrations in support of the democratic process. Taken together, it was a whole-of-society approach that protected the electoral process. In addition, the contributions of the international community through electoral observation missions, the international press and diplomatic pressure were also key to surmounting the difficulties.

The next general election in Guatemala will take place in June 2027. As indicated above, the TSE has begun a process of reviewing the shortcomings of the 2023 election and is trying to plan accordingly. The TSE is working with civil society to ensure that the 2027 electoral process runs smoothly. Transparent, well-organized elections will be essential to improve the credibility of political institutions in the eyes of Guatemalan citizens.

The ongoing internal crisis within the TSE and the fact that new Magistrates will be sworn in only one year before the election complicate the establishment of an effective blueprint. Furthermore, at the time of writing, there is still a great deal of uncertainty and even distress among electoral operators, linked to the ongoing judicialization of politics. Recovery in the aftermath of the 2023 crisis

has not been straightforward because the same justice operators who tried to block the electoral results have continued to launch judicial attacks against political parties and individual political actors, some Magistrates at the TSE and some of the members of civil society who participated in pro-democracy demonstrations.

Some of the justice operators who are now launching attacks against the TSE will be replaced by law in 2026. This could help to finally achieve a full recovery of the system. A lesson learned from Guatemala is that when rogue operators within the political system seek to undermine democracy, it is not enough to have strong electoral institutions.

It is important to remember that Guatemala does not have mid-term elections, which in this case is a positive factor that gives the system time to recover. Nonetheless, a full recovery under the current circumstances is still uncertain. A successful electoral process in 2027 will be key to the continuation of democracy in Guatemala. Right now, nobody is taking anything for granted.

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## ANNEX A

**Table A1. Citizens' trust in the Supreme Electoral Tribunal and in elections in Guatemala, 2004–2023 (trust using 0–100-point scale)**

Year of survey	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016/ 2017	2019	2021	2023
Average trust in Supreme Electoral Tribunal	50	49	47	51	49	n/a	53	48	n/a	n/a
Average trust in elections	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	48	40	45	42	40	40
Difference					+1 TSE		+8 TSE	+5 TSE		

**Table A2. Elections organized by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) in Guatemala since the transition to democracy**

Type of election	Date of presidential election	Year of election	Elected president
1 National Constituent Assembly election		1984	
2 General elections (1)	3 November	1985	
Run-off presidential election	8 December		Vinicio Cerezo
3 Municipal elections		1988	
4 General elections	11 November	1990	
Run-off presidential election	6 January	1991	Jorge Serrano
5 Municipal elections		1993	
6 (Extraordinary) Referendum on constitutional reforms and legislative election (2)		1994	
7 General elections	12 November	1995	
Run-off presidential election	7 January	1996	Alvaro Arzú
8 Municipal elections (3)		1998	
9 (Extraordinary) Referendum on Peace Accords and constitutional reforms		1999	
10 General elections	7 November	1999	
Run-off presidential election	26 December		Alfonso Portillo
11 General elections	9 November	2003	
Run-off presidential election	28 December		Oscar Berger
12 General elections	9 September	2007	
Run-off presidential election	4 November		Álvaro Colom
13 General elections	11 September	2011	
Run-off presidential election	6 November		Otto Pérez Molina
14 General elections	6 September	2015	
Run-off presidential election	25 October		Jimmy Morales
15 (Extraordinary) Referendum on Belize (4)		2018	
16 General elections	16 June	2019	
Run-off presidential election	11 August		Alejandro Giammattei

**Table A2. Elections organized by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) in Guatemala since the transition to democracy (cont.)**

Type of election	Date of presidential election	Year of election	Elected president
17 General elections	25 June	2023	
Run-off presidential election	20 August		Bernardo Arévalo

Source: Prepared by authors with information from TSE and others.

Notes:

1. General elections include presidential, legislative elections, Central American Parliament elections and municipal elections.
2. This election was held because President Jorge Serrano staged a self-coup in 1993. He dissolved the legislature and new elections had to be held when Serrano resigned.
3. Mid-term municipal elections were no longer held after 1998.
4. Asked Guatemalans to vote on whether the dispute with Belize should be decided by the International Court of Justice. Guatemalans supported this.

## ABBREVIATIONS

<b>CAME</b>	Electoral Updating and Modernization Commission (Comisión de Actualización y Modernización Electoral)
<b>CGC</b>	Office of the Comptroller General of Accounts (Contraloría General de Cuentas)
<b>JRV</b>	Voting Boards (Juntas Receptoras de Votos)
<b>LAPOP</b>	Latin American Public Opinion Project
<b>LEPP</b>	Electoral and Political Parties Law (Ley Electoral y de Partidos Políticos)
<b>MOE-GT</b>	Electoral Observation Mission of Guatemala (Misión de Observación Electoral de Guatemala)
<b>Semilla</b>	Seed Movement Party
<b>SINACIG</b>	National System of Internal Government Control
<b>TREP</b>	Preliminary Electoral Results Transmission (Transmisión de Resultados Electorales Preliminares)
<b>TSE</b>	Supreme Electoral Tribunal of Guatemala
<b>UEGR</b>	Specialized Risk Management Unit
<b>UNE</b>	National Unity of Hope party

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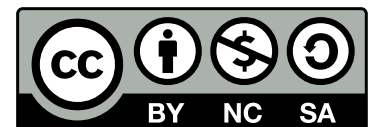
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