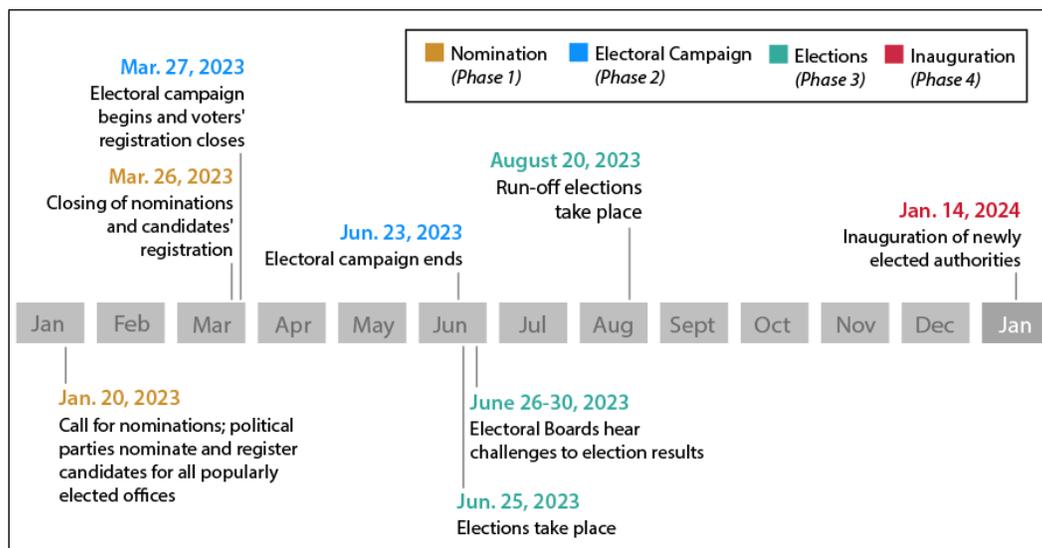


Guatemala: 2023 Elections and U.S. Interests

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On June 25, 2023, Guatemala held national elections for president, the entire 160-seat congress, 340 mayors, 20 Central American parliament members, and other local posts. After a tumultuous path to first-round elections marred by alleged irregularities, no presidential candidate received more than **50% of the vote**. A runoff election is scheduled to be held on August 20, 2023. The **State Department** and some Members of Congress in both houses have **expressed concerns** about recent threats to Guatemala's electoral process. The outcome of these elections could have implications for U.S. interests in Guatemala and U.S.-Guatemalan cooperation in addressing key challenges, such as migration, corruption, and human rights, that are of long-standing **congressional interest**.

Figure I. Guatemala Election Timeline



Sources. CRS, based on information from Human Rights Watch and *La Prensa Libre*.

In the lead-up to the first-round vote, the **European Union** and **human rights organizations**, among others, expressed concerns about preelection conditions in Guatemala. They particularly scrutinized the actions of Guatemala's election oversight body, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE), which controversially rejected several leading presidential candidates, including Maya Indigenous candidate Thelma Cabrera of

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the left-wing *Movimiento para la Liberación de los Pueblos* party; Roberto Arzú, son of former President Álvaro Arzú (1996-2000) of the right-wing *Podemos* party; and Carlos Pineda of the center-right *Prosperidad Ciudadana* party.

First-Round Presidential Election Results

According to the TSE, 60.1% of registered voters participated in Guatemala's first-round presidential election; some 24% cast null (17.4%) or blank (7.0%) ballots. Guatemalans split their remaining votes among 22 candidates, none of whom registered more than 16% support. A runoff is scheduled for August 20 between the top two candidates:

- **Sandra Torres**, former first lady of President Álvaro Colom (2008-2012) of the centrist *Partido Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza (UNE)*, who obtained 15.9% of the vote; and
- **Bernardo Arévalo**, anti-graft candidate and son of Guatemala's first democratically elected President Juan José Arévalo Bermejo (1945-1951) of the center-left *Movimiento Semilla (Semilla)*, who obtained 11.8% of the vote.

Arévalo's second-place finish was **unexpected** (he was polling at 2.9% before the election) and is regarded as reflecting voter frustration with the political establishment and perceived government corruption. Some **sectors** of Guatemala's political establishment, however, may regard Arévalo as threatening the status quo. For her part, frontrunner Sandra Torres has **faced** allegations mainly related to corruption.

Certification Delays

On July 1, Guatemala's Constitutional Court (CC) **suspended** the release of official election results and called a hearing to review contested tallies in response to challenges brought by nine parties alleging irregularities, including Torres's UNE and incumbent President Alejandro Giammattei's *Vamos* party. On July 7, the Chief Justice of Guatemala's Supreme Court (CSJ) **issued an order** blocking certification of the results until electoral authorities reported on the vote tallies and their review methods. On July 8, the Organization of American States (OAS) Electoral Observation Mission **concluded** that the first-round results and verification procedures were satisfactory. Amid pressure from **Guatemalans, the U.S. government, and international organizations**, the CSJ ruled on July 10 that the TSE had complied with the review ordered by the CC. On July 12, the TSE **certified** the first-round results.

Attempts to Suspend *Semilla*

On July 12, Rafael Curruchiche, chief of the Public Ministry's Office of the Special Prosecutor Against Impunity (FECI), **launched** an investigation into Arévalo's party, *Semilla*, for allegedly forging party registration signatures. The same day, Guatemalan Seventh Criminal Court Judge Fredy Orellana **ordered** the TSE to suspend *Semilla*—an act widely **recognized** as illegal. The CC ultimately **reversed** the suspension on July 13, in the face of **significant** domestic and international disapproval. Since then, FECI prosecutors have **raided** the TSE's registration office and *Semilla* party **headquarters**, and Judge Orellana **issued** an arrest warrant against the deputy director of the TSE electoral registry for "obstruction of justice" for not complying with his order to suspend *Semilla*. The State Department identified FECI Chief Curruchiche and Judge Orellana, respectively, in its **2022** and **2023** lists of "corrupt and undemocratic actors," subjecting both to visa sanctions pursuant to the United States-Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act (P.L. 116-260, Division FF, Subtitle F).

The State Department welcomed certification of Guatemala's first-round results but remains "**deeply concerned**" by the attempts to revoke *Semilla*'s legal status, which "put at risk the legitimacy of the

electoral process.” The [OAS](#) and [European Union Election Observation Mission](#) expressed similar sentiments.

Issues for Congress

U.S. officials and some Members of Congress are closely following the integrity of the Guatemalan elections and the policy positions endorsed by the leading candidates. The elections, and their perceived legitimacy, could have significant implications for U.S. policy. Elections the public perceives to be less than free and fair could spark additional protests and exacerbate social and political instability in Guatemala. The election results also may determine the extent to which the next Guatemalan government is willing to cooperate with the United States to [address corruption](#), [transnational crime](#), and [irregular migration](#), among other issues.

If newly elected Guatemalan officials prove hesitant to address such concerns, Congress could consider a range of responses. For example, Congress could consider reauthorizing or modifying the sanctions authority in the United States-Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act, which is scheduled to expire in December 2023.

Congress also could consider whether to scale back or reorient foreign assistance to Guatemala. The Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2023 (P.L. 117-328, Division K), requires the State Department to withhold 60% of Economic Support Fund and security assistance for the Guatemalan government until the Secretary of State certifies that the Guatemalan government has met a series of conditions, including making efforts to strengthen the independence of electoral institutions and protecting the rights of opposition political parties. The State Department reprogrammed some FY2021 assistance to other countries, citing the Guatemalan government’s failure to meet similar criteria, and has yet to issue certifications for FY2022 or FY2023. Congress may assess the postelection situation as it considers President Biden’s [\\$164.5 million](#) FY2024 foreign assistance request for Guatemala and any conditions on such assistance.

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