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The 2024 “Electoral Super-Cycle” in Latin America

The year 2024 has been dubbed by The Economist, “the biggest election year in history,” with millions of people headed to the polls in dozens of countries across the globe, including Latin America’s own “[electoral super-cycle](#)” of contests in six countries.

In February, El Salvador held its legislative and presidential elections. President Nayib Bukele was re-elected, and his Nuevas Ideas (NI, “New Ideas”) party [won a supermajority](#) in the Legislative Assembly. The significant [decline in homicide rates](#) in recent years drove this electoral success. The improvement in public safety, however, should not obscure the danger of the authoritarian consolidation taking place there. The Salvadoran constitution prohibits an incumbent president from standing for re-election, yet Bukele did so anyway. The NI-controlled legislature had packed the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court with allied judges who then [ruled](#) in favor of Bukele’s move to remain in office beyond the one-term limit.

This is not an isolated issue. In 2020, just months into his presidency, Bukele sent [armed soldiers and police](#) into the legislature to threaten the opposition after they rejected a proposed loan for new military and police equipment. In March 2022, the president declared a [state of emergency](#), which has been used to arrest as many as 70,000 people and hold them indefinitely without trial. In 2023, Bukele’s party [removed barriers to amending the constitution, reduced the number of seats](#) in the Legislative Assembly from 84 to 60, and eliminated over 200 municipalities, all of which further cemented NI control over both national and local government now and into the future. El Salvador’s democracy was a hard-won victory in the 1980s. Bukele’s actions and institutional changes threaten to undo the progress the country has made by installing a system that will be less responsive to the will of the voters once the popularity of the current leadership fades, they [make mistakes](#), or new problems arise. For democracy to work, elections must be a safety-valve that allow for the country to course-correct by peacefully putting someone else in charge. When elected officials use their power to hang on to their power, they imperil the whole system of peaceful self-government.

In May, Panama and the Dominican Republic both held their legislative and presidential elections. For Panama, uncertainty over the candidacy of Ricardo Martinelli dominated the campaign. Martinelli served as president a decade ago and was seeking a return to office, despite having been found [guilty of money laundering](#) and sentenced to 10 years in prison in 2023. In February 2024, Martinelli took refuge in the Nicaraguan embassy, where he was granted asylum. He continued campaigning from there until a court ruling in March [disqualified him](#) from office due to his conviction for financial corruption. José Raúl Molino, a former minister in Martinelli’s government, took his place on the party’s ticket and [won handily](#).

The Dominican Republic [re-elected](#) President Luis Abinader and gave his Partido Revolucionario Moderno (“Modern Revolutionary Party”) almost total [control of the Senate](#)—29 of 32 seats. Abinader’s victory did not come as a surprise; he was consistently up in the polls thanks to a public [perception](#) that he has presided over more economic success and less government corruption than previous administrations, particularly that of the three-term former president Leonel Fernández, who was Abinader’s chief competition in the contest.

As other observers [have noted](#), this recent run of success for incumbents marks a shift in the trend of the last several years in Latin America in which sitting presidents or their parties were punished at the ballot box. This year’s pattern of incumbent success continued in June, with [Claudia Sheinbaum’s victory](#) in Mexico’s presidential race. Sheinbaum is the former mayor

of Mexico City and candidate for Morena, the populist political movement of outgoing president Andres Manuel López Obrador (AMLO). Her victory is a watershed moment for Mexico, marking the election of the country's [first female president](#). Mexico joins other Latin American countries that have elected a woman to the highest office in the land in recent decades such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama.

Considerable challenges await Mexico's new chief executive. AMLO is leaving behind a complicated legacy. The reinvigorated state role in the [energy sector](#), implementation of [new social programs](#), and last-minute overhaul of [pensions](#) have been popular measures, but AMLO has also picked self-serving [fights with electoral authorities](#) and [given power to the armed forces](#) to an unprecedented and troubling degree. The military budget has been doubled and the armed forces now have a major [role in the economy](#) including management of customs offices, ports, and airports. The new National Guard, which was established as a civilian organization, specifically to reduce the government's reliance on the army and navy in law enforcement, has instead come under military control. Leaning on the military for support has not solved public insecurity, another ongoing problem awaiting the next president. While Sheinbaum touted the decline in homicide rates under AMLO as evidence of success in this area, the extreme levels of violence, including against candidates for public office, kept the issue front-and-center in the campaign. Since September 2023, there have been over [200 victims](#) of election-related attacks on public officials or candidates, with dozens killed.

Venezuela is also expected to hold elections in July, but these will be far from democratic contests. At the beginning of 2024, there was [some hope](#) that new elections could at last provide a pathway for peaceful political change, after which the country could begin to address its economic and humanitarian crisis that has been unfolding for many years. Instead, President Nicholas Maduro has continued the [repression](#) emblematic of his rule and has repeated the authoritarian playbook of the last several rounds of elections. Many members of the opposition have been [jailed](#), and María Corina Machado, the candidate originally selected to challenge Maduro, is now [barred](#) from the competition.

The final election of the year will take place in October, when [Uruguay](#) goes to the polls to elect members of the legislature and decide who will replace the term-limited president, Luis Lacalle Pou. Uruguay faces many of the same issues as other countries in the region such as recent [increases in homicide](#) rates and growing concerns over [organized crime](#). Nevertheless, as a country known for durable political parties and generally stable competition among them, Uruguay offers a bright spot for democracy in the region in 2024.

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