
Guatemala: 2023 Elections and U.S. Interests

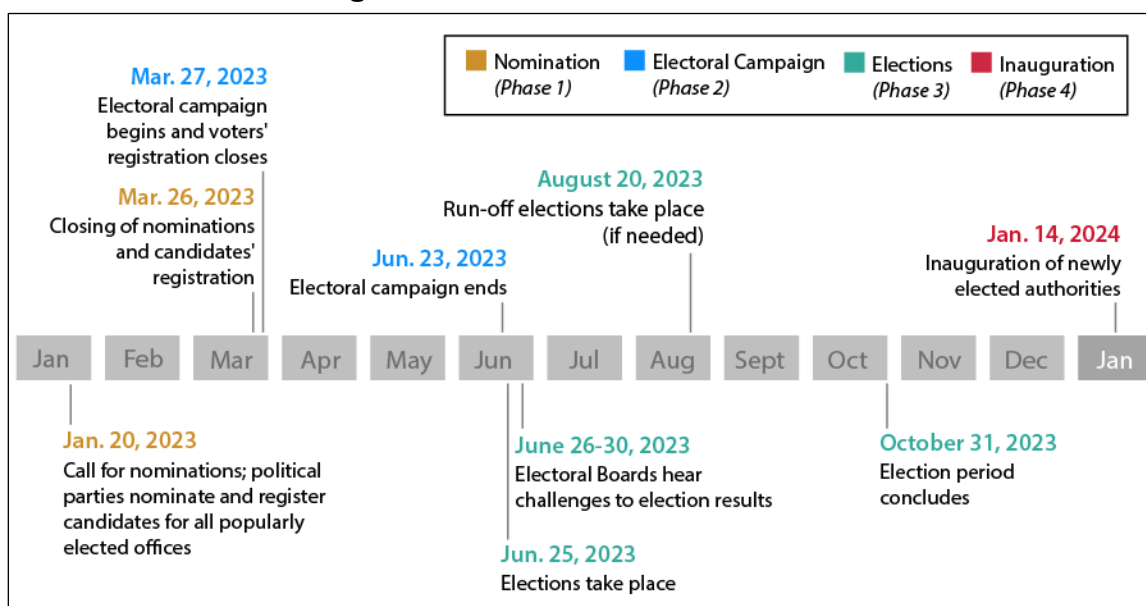
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On June 25, 2023, [Guatemala](#) is scheduled to hold national elections for president, the entire 160-seat congress, 340 mayors, 20 Central American parliament members, and other local posts. Almost [83%](#) of Guatemalans surveyed responded that the political situation in Guatemala has gotten worse in 2023, and many [expressed pessimism](#) about the election. 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*.

Presidential and Congressional Elections

President Alejandro Giammattei (2020-present) is nearing the end of his four-year term and is constitutionally ineligible for reelection. During his term, the U.S. government has taken action to stem Guatemala's backsliding on corruption and the rule of law under President Giammattei.

Some 25 [presidential candidates](#) are running to succeed President Giammattei. As of early June 2023, Guatemala's Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) had suspended three presidential candidates and one vice

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presidential candidate (see “2023 Electoral Suspensions”). Among the remaining contenders, [leading candidates](#), in order of polling popularity, include

- [Sandra Torres](#), former first lady to former President Álvaro Colom (2008-2012), of the centrist *Partido Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza*;
- [Edmond Mulet](#), retired diplomat, of the center- to center-right *Cabal* party; and
- [Zury Ríos](#), daughter of former military dictator Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-1983), of the right-wing *Partido Unionista*.

If no presidential candidate receives more than 50% of the vote, a runoff between the top two finishers is to take place on August 20, 2023. Since the end of the Guatemalan civil war in 1996, no president has won a [first-round](#) victory.

In June 2023, Guatemala is set to also elect 160 congressional deputies. Unlike presidents, deputies may run for reelection. In this election cycle, roughly [78%](#) of deputies are seeking reelection and more than half have changed political parties since the last elections in 2019.

2023 Electoral Suspensions

The TSE is an important part of Guatemala’s democracy, as it organizes all electoral contests and enforces the country’s electoral rules. Since January 2023, the TSE has rejected and suspended roughly [8%](#) of candidacies; several of those suspensions have been controversial.

In March 2023, the TSE rejected the candidacies of Maya Indigenous candidate [Thelma Cabrera](#) and her running mate, former human rights ombudsman [Jordán Rodas](#), of the left-wing *Movimiento para la Liberación de los Pueblos* party, over a criminal complaint against Rodas presented by the current ombudsperson. Cabrera and Rodas are both well-known anti-corruption activists. The TSE also rejected the candidacy of [Roberto Arzú](#), son of former President Álvaro Arzú (1996-2000) and presidential nominee of the right-wing *Podemos* party, for campaigning prior to the start of the 2023 campaign.

In May 2023, the TSE suspended the candidacy of [Carlos Pineda](#) of the center-right *Prosperidad Ciudadana* party due to “noncompliance with rules governing the nomination process, such as the failure to collect signatures from party delegates and file a required financial report.” Pineda was leading the polls at the time of his suspension. Pineda appealed, but the Guatemalan Supreme Court rejected that appeal.

The [European Union](#) and [human rights organizations](#) have repeatedly [expressed concerns](#) about the TSE’s decisions and their potential to undermine the competitiveness of the electoral process. Some observers argue the TSE has suspended candidates on [dubious](#) and [inconsistent](#) grounds. For example, in 2019, the TSE rejected Zury Ríos’s registration, citing a constitutional prohibition against coup leaders and their relatives seeking public office. This cycle, the TSE accepted her candidacy.

Thousands of voters have [protested](#) against the TSE leading up to the June 25 elections.

Election Observation Missions

Several international and local organizations are observing Guatemala’s elections to assess whether they are free and fair. These observation missions include the following:

- [European Union Election Observation Mission](#)
- [Organization of American States Mission](#)
- [Guatemala’s Mission of Electoral Observation \(MOE-Gt\)](#)

MOE-Gt has issued [statements](#) characterizing the progress of the Guatemalan elections and highlighting [anomalies](#) related to the TSE and the need to preserve Guatemala’s already fragile democracy.

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](#), [irregular migration](#), and other issues.

If newly elected Guatemalan officials prove hesitant to address such concerns, Congress could consider a range of responses.

Congress may consider additional legislative measures intended to support democracy and the rule of law in Guatemala. For example, Congress could consider reauthorizing or modifying the United States-Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act (P.L. 116-260, Division FF, Subtitle F), which directs the State Department to impose visa sanctions on individuals who engage in [significant corruption](#) or [undermine democratic processes or institutions](#). This sanctions authority is scheduled to expire in December 2023.

Congress also could consider whether to scale back support to the Guatemalan government. 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 to Guatemala until the Secretary of State certifies that the Guatemalan government has met a series of conditions related to the rule of law, human rights, and migration, among other issues. 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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