


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Democracy Under Strain: Declining Public Support, Institutional Weakening, and Press Freedom in Costa Rica

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Abstract

Costa Rica has been one of the most stable democracies in Latin America since 1953. However, the 2022 election gave rise to a populist leadership combining confrontational tactics, attacks on institutions, and pressure on press freedom. While previous studies document democratic backsliding across Latin America, Costa Rica's case remains understudied. This article proposes the concept of "democracy under strain," a condition distinct from backsliding, in which systematic executive pressure on democratic conditions coexists with institutional resilience. Drawing on Bermeo's (2016) framework, I operationalize this concept through three indicators: decline of press freedom, institutional delegitimization, and decreasing citizen support for democracy. Using a mixed-methods strategy and combining Latin American Public Opinion Project survey data, press freedom indexes, and journalistic reports, the evidence shows that institutions remain formally intact and citizen disapproval of anti-press aggression is high, yet pressure is sustained and without historical precedent.

Keywords: Democracy; populism; Costa Rica; press freedom; public support

INTRODUCTION¹

Latin America has experienced a wave of autocratization and democratic backsliding over the past decade (Aguiar Aliguar, Castro and Monsiváis 2025; Pérez-Liñán, Schmidt and Vario 2019; Haggard and Kaufman 2021a; 2021b; Ovares-Sánchez 2021). Within this regional trend, Costa Rica remains as one of the most stable democracies: since 1953, presidential and legislative elections have taken place uninterruptedly (Alfaro-Redondo 2023). According to the Democracy Index from the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU 2025), Costa Rica classifies as a full democracy, distinguishing from most of its regional neighbors. Alongside with Uruguay and Chile, it stands among the few Latin American countries with the highest level of rule of law (WJP 2025).

Costa Rica's democratic stability rests on a robust institutional design, including a strong separation of powers, an independent judiciary (Cascante and Brenes 2015), and a Constitutional Court established in 1989, which stands as a key check on executive power and a guarantor of

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¹Claude Sonnet 4.5 was used to translate this manuscript from Spanish to English.

fundamental rights (Miranda 2019). The Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE), created in 1949, guarantees the integrity of electoral processes through its independence (Alfaro 2023). The abolition of the army in 1948 further allowed the state to redirect resources toward education and social welfare, consolidating a model of democratic governance free from militarism (Alfaro 2023).

This institutional framework correlates with historical high levels of democratic support among citizens, with averages between 0.7 and 0.8, the highest in Central America (Pignataro, Treminio, and Chavarría 2021). For decades, there were two major political parties, Partido Liberación Nacional and Partido Unidad Social Cristiano. However, this changed over the last two decades (Alfaro 2023; Cascante and Lara 2020). Since the 2006 elections, fragmentation of the party system occurred, where historical loyalties eroded, party dealignment intensified, and the distance between parties and society grew (Barragán and Echeverría 2023).

Despite longstanding institutional stability, Costa Rica has undergone transformations such as increased voter abstention, an economic crisis, citizen insecurity, corruption scandals, inequality and distrust of institutions (Casas-Zamora 2024; Ovares-Sánchez 2021). Rodrigo Chaves's electoral victory in the 2022 presidential election transformed the traditional pattern of democratic stability. His leadership reflects a profile that combines social conservatism with economic liberalism, a confrontational governing style, and discursive affinities with the authoritarian and populist leaders such as Trump, Bolsonaro, and Bukele (Cascante and Guzmán 2022; Cascante and Muñoz 2023). The V-Dem freedom of expression index, which ranged between 0.93 and 0.99 from 2006 to 2021, declined to 0.88 in 2022 (Coppedge et al. 2025).

The rise of this leadership is often associated with democratic backsliding, understood as the gradual weakening of the core attributes of democratic regimes, regardless of their prior level of institutional consolidation (Del Tronco and Monsiváis-Carrillo 2020; Laebens and Lührmann 2021; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Unlike abrupt breakdowns such as military coups, this process of executive aggrandizement and electoral manipulation, typically unfolds incrementally and may occur in both consolidated democracies and political systems with authoritarian features (Bermeo 2016).

This raises a puzzle: how can a consolidated democracy with strong institutional foundations experience systematic executive pressure on its democratic credibility without falling into erosion or backsliding? More specific, how can we explain the democratic tensions observed in Costa Rica under the Chaves administration? Drawing on Bermeo's (2016) concept of democratic backsliding, I propose the term "democracy under strain" to describe a regime in which the executive power delegitimizes institutions, attempts to restrict alternative media, and undermines press freedom, yet institutional resilience has so far absorbed these dynamics. This concept seeks to fill a gap in the literature by identifying a moment of tension distinct from erosion, crisis, or autocratization. Drawing on previous studies, I operationalize "democracy under strain" through three indicators: decline of press freedom, institutional delegitimization, and decreasing citizen support for democracy. I apply these indicators to Costa Rica, where there is an emergence of a populist leader with confrontational tactics.

Press freedom, as an indicator of democratic regimes, enables access to information and participation of diverse groups of society (Fitriana et al. 2023); yet it is undermined by government actions such as harassment and persecution of journalists, censorship and media closure (Kenny 2020). Institutional delegitimization operates through rhetorical attacks against institutions; not as constructive criticism, but as "norm sabotage" targeting public support rather than policy change (Köker et al. 2025). Finally, declining support for democracy shows the diffuse dimension: citizens' willingness to accept or tolerate political decisions (Easton 1953) and arises from the intersection of political, economic, and social factors.

The article consists of four sections: a literature review in the case of Costa Rica, the theoretical argument, the empirical evidence, a discussion of findings and conclusions.

PRESS FREEDOM, INSTITUTIONAL DELEGITIMIZATION AND SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY IN COSTA RICA

Press freedom plays a key role in understanding the dynamics of Costa Rica's political regime. In a democracy, news media facilitates the debate of ideas (Garro and Solís 2022). The literature generally agrees that press freedom entails the essential guarantees for the full exercise of citizenship (Garro and Solís 2022), with particular emphasis on the right to access information (Vargas and Brenes 2012). Effective access to information contributes to the formation of critical citizenship, which requires not only the formal existence of press freedom, but the broader framework for its exercise.

Chaves' communication strategy relies on weekly press conferences in which he controls the narrative and the questions from journalists (Díaz 2024; Salazar Aguilar and Bonilla 2026). Survey data from Central American countries evidence how Chaves publicly calls the press "scoundrels" and attacks those who question his conduct (Martínez and Rodríguez 2022, 20). Garro and Solís (2022) examine the security conditions faced by journalists and find that 34.9% report exposure to harassment, 35.5% to threats, and 33.9% to surveillance.

Casas-Zamora (2024) notes a 15-position drop in the World Press Freedom Index and an 11-place decline in the International IDEA's Representative Government indicator during 2023, linking these setbacks to rising electoral abstention, economic crisis, citizen insecurity, corruption scandals, inequality, and declining institutional trust. This decline in press freedom aligns with a broader pattern of institutional delegitimization. Méndez-Castellanos (2025) analyzes national reports and news coverage over four months, revealing conflicts between Chaves and the Legislative Assembly, the Judicial Power, and the General Comptroller's Office. Although this decline began before 2022, it has worsened into political conflict, governance crisis, and polarization (Méndez-Castellanos 2025).

Citizen support for democracy has also declined regionally: Costa Rica, Panama, and Paraguay experienced drops of more than 10 percentage points, while Argentina, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, and Jamaica saw decreases of up to 20 points (Schiumerini and Lupu 2021). Alfaro, Seligson, and Zechmeister (2014) link political tolerance to democratic support and system stability in Costa Rica. However, between 2012 and 2014, this indicator decreased, suggesting that support for democracy is not exempt from authoritarian predispositions (Mora, Solís, and Soto 2014). Moreover, this decline is lower among younger age groups (Treminio and Pignataro 2015; Pignataro, Treminio, and Chavarria-Mora 2021).

Increases in citizen dissatisfaction toward democracy generate contradictions between citizen demands for a functional democratic system and institutional capacity to satisfy such expectations (Ovares-Sánchez 2021). In sum, previous studies suggest that Costa Rica experiences a process of democracy under strain, shaped by the decline of press freedom, verbal attacks on institutions, and declining citizen support for democracy.

ARGUMENT: THE THREE SIGNALS OF A DEMOCRACY UNDER STRAIN

The concept "democracy under strain" draws on Bermeo's (2016) framework of democratic backsliding, but differs in two dimensions. First, whereas backsliding entails the actual dismantling of institutions through executive aggrandizement, "democracy under strain" includes verbal attacks and delegitimization of institutions that remain formally intact. Second, whereas backsliding entails strategic electoral manipulation, "democracy under strain" seeks to restrict press freedom, but without full success. Thus, institutional resilience checks these pressures: it is a moment of democratic tension distinct from backsliding, erosion, or crisis (Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Laebens and Lührman 2021; Lührman and Lindberg 2019; Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2013; Morlino 2025; Schedler 2024). The indicators shaping this tension are the decline of press freedom, institutional delegitimization, and decreasing citizen support for democracy.

Decline of Press Freedom

Press freedom refers to the autonomy of media from political interference or censorship (Kenny 2020), a condition essential for democracy given media's capacity to criticize government actions (Craft 2010). Van Belle (2000) argues that press freedom enables communicators to safely question political and economic elites, while Fiss (1996) suggests the state itself can serve as its ally by preventing the marginalization of minority voices.

In a democracy, news media fulfills five functions:² representation, deliberation, conflict resolution, accountability, and dissemination (Cook, cited in Craft 2010). The first three provide a forum for civil society to debate and resolve problems; accountability refers to monitoring those in power (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2021); and dissemination ensures citizens access the information needed for effective participation (Craft 2010). Under this framework, any governmental interference may be an obstruction to press freedom (Waisbord 2020), ranging from harassment and censorship to media closure and the use of internet trolls to silence critics (Kenny 2020; Tsui 2015).

The decline of press freedom thus reflects a democracy under strain, undermining institutional checks on government, restricting the public sphere and the accountability that defines a democratic system.

Institutional Delegitimization

Attacks on institutions by a political leader implicated in corruption scandals are a deliberate strategy of institutional delegitimization.³ This strategy connects to contemporary populism: the ideational approach interprets populism as a thin-centered ideology that views society as “ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’” (Mudde 2004, 562; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). From a Latin American perspective, De la Torre's (2007) vision of populism is a political style based on a Manichaean rhetoric that builds on the struggle between the people and the oligarchy as a moral confrontation between good and evil.

However, interpretations that focus on people-centrism and anti-elitism without considering the antagonistic nature of populism fail to recognize its anti-pluralist nature (Benedek 2025). Building on this, Benedek (2025) defines populism as an autocratic interpretation of democracy and political representation. As Olvera (2022) notes, populist inclusion is symbolic rather than organic: participation is limited to the initiatives, topics, and timelines defined by the leader, constructing an abstract subject—“the people”.

Building on this argument, the populist leader holds arbitrary power to determine and articulate the people's will, making accountability virtually impossible and providing the ideological infrastructure for institutional delegitimization: when institutions are framed as instruments of elite domination rather than democratic safeguards, attacking them can be presented as an act of democratic re-build. This dynamic intensifies when the populist leader faces institutional controls for acts of corruption: institutions that investigate or constrain the executive are reframed not only as obstacles to popular will, but as instruments of elite conspiracy, the leader claims to be fighting.

²Wiggins (1942) identifies three functions of the press in modern democracy. (1) Surveillance, that is, the press as government “watchdog.” (2) Informational, to relate and interpret news with accuracy, completeness, and fairness. (3) Social function, as a substitute for collective knowledge.

³Monsiváis (2023) proposes a broader concept of authoritarian repertoire: “a set of discourses, behaviors, decisions, initiatives, and public policies that transgress, weaken, reduce, or eliminate the exercise of civil liberties, democratic accountability, or the rule of law. In contrast, they strengthen opacity and arbitrariness in the configuration and exercise of state power and governmental authority. Authoritarian repertoires subvert democracy insofar as they transform democratic control and accountability norms and institutions into mere decorative facades, instruments at the service of executive power” (p. 15).

As Recio and Vidal (2023, 160) argue, “populism instrumentalizes institutions, puts them at its service, and does so by disrupting their proper functioning, trivializing the activity carried out within them.” In practice, populist leaders undermine institutions that obstruct popular will (Köker et al. 2025), such as the Judicial Power, which can invalidate laws passed by the elected legislature and thus obstruct any political agenda.

What are the attributes of delegitimization strategies? Köker et al. (2025) define them as systematic campaigns of rhetorical and verbal attacks against institutions that, rather than seeking constructive change, operate as “norm saboteurs” aimed at eroding public support. Each attack links criticism of the institution to a broader narrative of systemic failure and the need for replacement.

Brown Arauz and Casullo (2023) analyze Chaves’s discourse through populist traits: harm, the traitor, the enemy, a hero, bad manners, and autobiographical narration. They find that his internal traitor is “the same old one,” and his past-oriented myth is the phrase “making Costa Rica the happiest country in the world again.” The harm, according to presidential discourse, involves “privileges” that shaped an unequal system against the general interest, blaming both fiscally favored business sectors and the political class represented by traditional political parties with governing experience.

Based on the above, I propose that Rodrigo Chaves, as a populist leader, relies on these institutional delegitimization strategies that are harmful to Costa Rica’s democratic system. This populist rhetoric of delegitimization is another signal of democracy under strain, as it weakens control mechanisms, accountability, and separation of powers.

Support for Democracy

Easton (1953) distinguishes between diffuse and specific support. The former refers to favorable attitudes that allow citizens to accept or tolerate political decisions in the long term; the latter implies the evaluation of short-term performance or specific actions. In this framework, support for democracy as the best possible political system is part of diffuse support.

What factors influence support for democracy? We can find three types of explanations: first, economic explanations, such as satisfaction with personal economic situation; second, social explanations, including perception of corruption and security; finally, political explanations, such as presidential approval, respect for institutions and political participation.

Along economic lines, Amri (2023) finds that higher GDP per capita correlates with more positive attitudes toward democracy. Similarly, Carlin (2006) notes that inequality and poverty negatively affect expressed support for democracy. In Latin America, Alister, Cea, and Guerrero (2015) argue that support for democracy increases with income level; however, positive economic evaluations have a greater effect in high-income countries than in low-income ones (Booth and Seligson 2009; Alister et al. 2015).

Regarding social factors, experiencing corruption weakens citizen trust in political actors, institutions, and the government system, undermining support for democracy (Seligson et al., 2000, cited in Salinas and Booth 2011). Citizens hold the government responsible for fulfilling the social contract, and exposure to political corruption or crime erodes loyalty toward democratic practices (Cruz 2008; Seligson et al., 2000, cited in Salinas and Booth, 2011). Those victimized by corrupt officials or criminals may thus lose faith in democracy and its benefits.

However, comparative studies in Latin America show that perception of security and direct victimization by crime have different effects on democratic support (Malone 2010). Similarly, direct victimization by corruption has little effect on democratic norms, whereas perception of widespread corruption significantly decreases democratic attitudes (Almeida and Casalecchi 2025). Morales Quiroga (2009) notes that the impact of corruption on democratic legitimacy is not direct, suggesting that intermediate mechanisms and moderating variables condition this relationship.

Regarding political factors, Vairo (cited in Alister et al. 2015) argues that low electoral participation replicates the existence of “dissatisfied democrats,” citizens who feel unrepresented and hold negative opinions about the political regime. Sendra and Bohigues (2023) find that presidential approval can generate in-group and out-group divisions among citizens. Since presidential approval follows cycles of gain and loss (Carlin et al. 2018), the timing of democratic support surveys matters. Moreno and Osorio (2022) find that citizen support for democracy in four Andean countries is affected by political positions than by government approval.

About institutional trust, Kim (2014) finds that greater political trust correlates with voting and formal participation, which in turn influences democratic support. Peralta (2013) proposes that variation in regime support derives from an interaction between cultural values and institutional arrangements.

In sum, support for democracy is shaped by economic evaluations, perceptions of corruption and security, political participation, institutional trust, and presidential approval.

DIMENSIONS OF A DEMOCRACY UNDER STRAIN: EVIDENCE

To analyze the three dimensions of democracy under strain, I apply a mixed-methods strategy combining qualitative and quantitative analyses. First, I examine the evolution of press freedom through a longitudinal analysis covering 2006–25, complemented by specific cases from the current administration identified through a systematic search on the MediaCloud platform.

Second, I build a narrative based on judicial corruption cases involving the president and attacks directed at institutions, evidencing delegitimization strategies and confrontation with democratic accountability mechanisms.

Finally, I estimate a statistical model to explain variations in citizen support for democracy between 2006 and 2025. This period begins with the 2006 elections, which marked Costa Rica’s transition from a two-party to a multiparty system, a turning point that changed national political dynamics and created the structural conditions underlying contemporary democratic transformations.

Press Freedom

Figure 1 presents the evolution of Costa Rica’s score in the World Press Freedom Index developed by Reporters Without Borders. A higher index, means a higher level of press freedom. During the period (2006–25), the average score was 88.24.

The analysis shows three moments: between 2006 and 2012, Costa Rica held its highest press freedom scores, consistently above 90; from 2013 through 2021, scores remained stable, between 85 and 91. However, from 2022 onward, there is a sustained decline, with scores dropping from 85.92 in 2022 to nearly 74.09 in 2025—the lowest value in the entire period.

To evidence the president’s attacks on news media, I conducted a systematic search on the MediaCloud platform using the following equation: “Rodrigo Chaves” AND (ataca OR insulta OR agrede OR ofende OR agravia OR menosprecia OR arremete OR descalifica) AND (prensa OR periodista OR medio OR “medios de comunicación” OR reportero) AND (“Costa Rica” OR “costarricense” OR “ticos”). I searched news from May 1, 2022, to September 4, 2025. The results yielded a total of 135 publications, primarily in: *La Nación*, *La Teja*, *El País*, *NCR Noticias*, *El Financiero*, and *Teletica*. Figure 2 presents a word cloud that visualizes the most frequent words.

The analysis of 135 articles shows how President Chaves developed a communication strategy of systematic attacks against media (Salazar Aguilar and Bonilla 2026), an evident pattern since his electoral campaign. During his prior tour, Chaves publicly expressed his intention to “destroy” media companies such as *La Nación* and Canal 7 if elected (Inter-American Press Association 2022). Political communication specialists identify similarities between Chaves’s discourse and the rhetorical strategies of Trump and Bolsonaro, both grounded in a narrative that frames the press

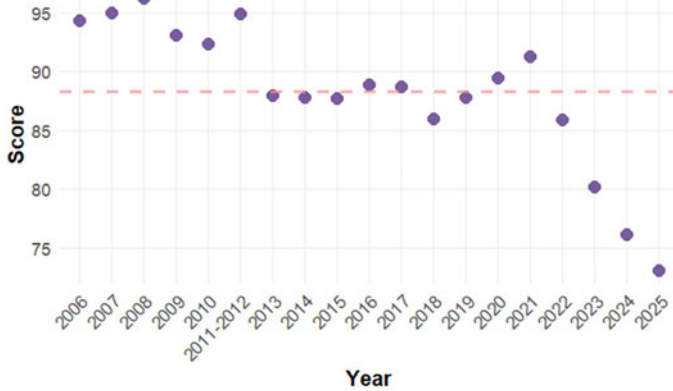


Figure 1. Evolution of press freedom score in Costa Rica 2006–25⁴.

chaves rodrigo presidente costa rica prensa arremete gobierno
ccss libertad periodistas parque viva video cisneros asamblea arias diputados
ataca ataques pilar política investigación navas legislativa joselyn chacón diario
francés pln fiscalía discurso cierre gloria expresión ataque violencia diputada país seguridad
contrato fiscal atacar presidenta cartas monde importante destaca llama atención internacional editorial sala
secretario nuevamente medios caso barrenador pierde periodista defiende periodismo peligroso cidh violaciones
derechos nivel campaña andrea álvarez futuro califica tse mujeres decreto indica pide judas judicial abre
municipalidad negociación vea diputadas exigen beligerancia asistir lujo irse ciudadano derecho información marta
esquivel autor piero órdenes díaz directiva proyecto

Figure 2. Words with The Highest Number of Mentions.

Source: MediaCloud.

as “scoundrels and enemies” of the people (Quirós 2023). The official response, in turn, dismisses these attacks as a “myth” and denies any systematic policy against media (Angulo 2025).

The first event happened when the administration ordered the closure of “Parque Viva,” owned by Grupo Nación. Subsequently, during an official press conference, the president publicly attacked the newspaper using distorted information about corporate bond issues made between 2013 and 2014, questioning the company’s financial solvency. The executive management of Grupo Nación responded by clarifying that payments were made punctually (Alvarado 2022; Chacón 2022; Sequeira 2022).

A second case involved the false profile “Piero Calandrelli” (Alberto Vargas), who received payments from the Health Minister to produce defamatory content against journalists and opposition legislators. Although pro-government legislator Pilar Cisneros was identified as an intermediary, she denied involvement. The president responded by accusing the media of employing “political hitmen” and dismissing criticism of the minister as “unjustified” (elmundo.cr 2023; elperiodico.cr 2023).

Direct confrontations with journalists have also been recorded: Danilo Chaves from La Reacción was aggressively questioned by the president after suggesting disagreements between the Executive and the Legislative Assembly (Debrús 2024), and Ignacio Santos from Teletica faced systematic criticism for disclosing presidential contact information on social media (Arce 2024).

How have other actors beyond the press and the government responded? The opposition has framed these behaviors as a democratic threat, arguing that press freedom is essential for

⁴Press freedom scores for 2006–12 were originally recorded on an inverted scale where lower values indicated greater press freedom. To ensure comparability with post-2013 data, these scores were rescaled to a 0–100 index using the formula $(\max - x)/(\max - \min) \times 100$, applied separately by year, where max and min correspond to the observed maximum and minimum values within each year. The resulting index assigns 0 to the least free and 100 to the freest observation in each year.

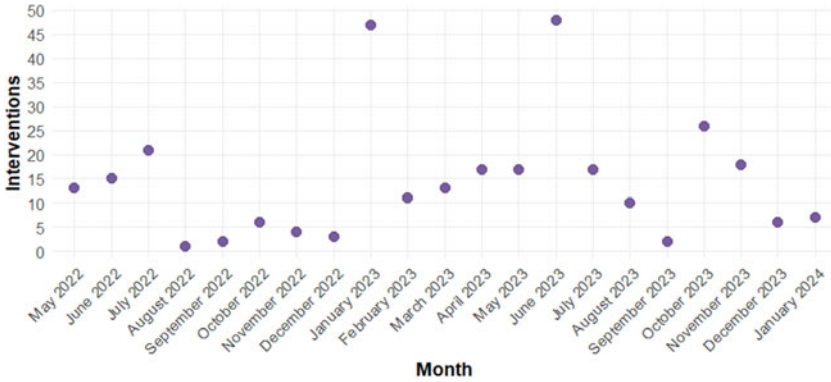


Figure 3. Number of Negative Interventions from May 2022 to January 2024.

denouncing corruption and exercising institutional checks (Chinchilla 2023). The International Federation of Journalists issued a statement condemning violence against journalists and restrictions on access to information imposed by the Executive (Pomareda 2023).

From civil society, the Program for Freedom of Expression and Right to Information (PROLEDI 2024) found that 82.4% of citizens disapprove the presidential attitudes towards media, and that 99% of Chaves’s references to journalists in press conferences have been negative. Reporters Without Borders similarly identifies a decline in political guarantees for press freedom in the country.

Figure 3, based on information from the IV Report on the State of Freedom of Expression in Costa Rica (UCR, CICOM, and PROLEDI, 2024), shows the president’s negative interventions toward the media by month. At the beginning of the administration, the levels are low or medium-low. In January 2023 and June 2023, the number is much higher, reaching around 50 interventions. Subsequently, levels are in a range between 5 and 25 monthly interventions, with some specific variations such as the increase in November 2023 (around 26 interventions) and a downward trend toward the end of the period.

In 2023, the Constitutional Court unprecedentedly condemned the president for offensive language directed at the press and opposition, marking the first judicial resolution of this nature against a president in Costa Rica (Murillo 2023). International scrutiny has also intensified: the US State Department reported on Chaves’s attacks against the press, highlighting verbal aggressions, harassment, and the use of state resources to punish critical media (Campos 2024), while *Le Monde* noted that the Costa Rican president “does not tolerate journalistic criticism” and accuses media of “dark economic or political interests” (Bolaños 2025).

More recently, the Chaves administration launched an auction of radio and television frequencies at costs threatening to force numerous stations off the air, drawing widespread criticism from press freedom organizations, political leaders, and religious groups (Murillo 2025c). The Constitutional Court suspended the process, arguing that two thirds of operating stations risked losing their frequencies (Murillo 2025d). The president defended the auction as an “end to decades of irregular concessions and referred to industry critics as a mafia” (Ruiz 2025).

Institutional Delegitimization

International indicators reflect stable corruption perception levels during the period, ranging between 53 and 59 points (Surcos 2025). The Chaves administration has faced corruption accusations and judicial cases that have generated tensions with control institutions.

The first case involved a conflict with the Attorney General’s Office following the detention of the executive president of the Costa Rican Social Security Fund for Corruption (NCR 2024).

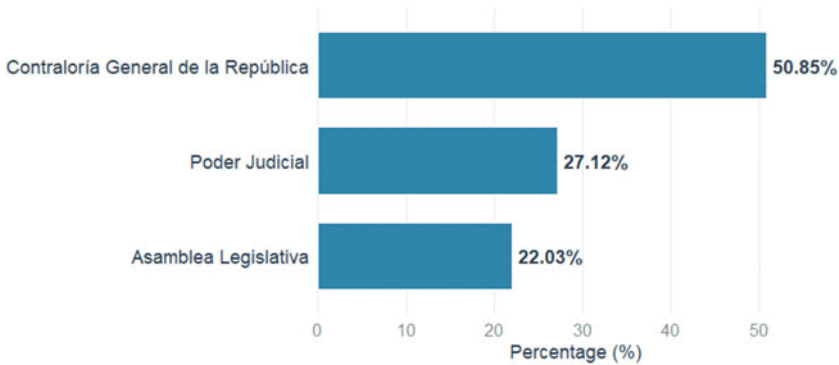


Figure 4. Attacks on Institutions during Rodrigo Chaves's Administration.

Chaves framed these actions as “abuse of power” and a strategy to “intimidate the government.” A second case concerned allegations of extortion related to irregular contracting of government communication services using Central American Bank for Economic Integration (BCIE in Spanish) funds (Murillo 2025a), suggesting that contractual requirements were drafted to benefit the president’s campaign advisor. A third case involves the alleged irregular financing of the 2022 presidential campaign through parallel structures, violating electoral code provisions on transparency (Murillo 2025b). The Public Ministry has requested the lifting of presidential immunity.

The conflict deepened when the president led a public mobilization against the prosecutor, calling him a “neighborhood thug,” while judicial authorities noted that such actions threaten the separation of powers (Benavides 2025). Chaves has framed these cases as “political persecution” and an opportunity to “change the rules of the game.”

Beyond specific cases, there is a systematic pattern of confrontation with control institutions. The General Comptroller’s Office has faced presidential attacks after identifying irregularities in the Costa Rican Institute of Electricity and the Social Security Fund (Miranda 2024). The Comptroller has noted that exposing irregularities remains its historical function, however current attacks are unprecedented in intensity compared to previous administrations.

Figure 4 shows that the highest percentage of attacks made, relates to the General Comptroller’s Office in a period from June 2022 to September 2024 (Programa Estado de la Nación, 2024, based on press conferences).

Support for Democracy

To analyze the decline in support for democracy, I used datasets from the “Latin American Public Opinion Project” at Vanderbilt University, which cover the years 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2021,⁵ and 2023. I estimate a multiple linear regression model with year fixed effects. According to Wooldridge (2020), multiple linear regression is a model that allows evaluating the relationship between a dependent variable and multiple explanatory variables, while fixed effects help control for unobserved characteristics that are constant over time within groups of observations. The dependent variable is based on the question: “Changing the subject again, democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?” (scale from 1 to 7).⁶

Figure 5 shows the evolution of the dependent variable from 2006 to 2023. The overall average was 5.5; however, in 2016, a slight decline begins, covering three presidential periods, Luis Guillermo Solís (2014–18), Carlos Alvarado (2018–22), and Rodrigo Chaves (2022–present),

⁵Although the survey is conducted biennially, due to the COVID-19 crisis, the survey could not be conducted in 2020.

⁶The variable will be treated as a discrete quantitative variable.

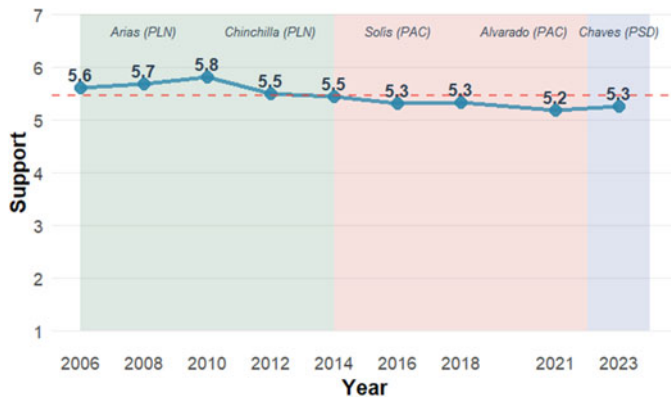


Figure 5. Citizen Support for Democracy in Costa Rica, 2006–23.

defined by party system fragmentation, limited cross-sector negotiation, the emergence of religious leaders, the COVID-19 crisis, and rising insecurity (Casas-Zamora 2024; Ovarés-Sánchez 2021).

What explains the decline in support for democracy? Drawing on previous studies, I focus on three types of explanations. For the economic dimension, I include the variable “Do you consider that your current economic situation is better, the same, or worse than twelve months ago?” For the social dimension, I include security perception, measured by “Speaking of the place or neighborhood where you live and thinking about the possibility of being a victim of an assault or robbery, do you feel safe or unsafe?” and corruption perception, measured by “Taking into account your experience or what you have heard mentioned, is corruption of public officials in the country widespread or not widespread?” For the political dimension, I include political participation through “Did you vote in the first round of the last presidential elections?”; confidence in news media through “To what extent do you have confidence in news media?” (1–7 scale); respect for institutions through “To what extent do you have respect for Costa Rica’s political institutions?” (1–7 scale); and presidential approval through “Speaking of the current government, would you say that the work the president is doing is good, fair, or bad?”

Figure 6 shows the evolution of the qualitative variables previously mentioned: economic situation, security perception, presidential approval, corruption perception and past electoral participation in Costa Rica from 2006 to 2023.⁷

In the economic dimension, the graph shows mixed results. In general terms, citizens consider their economic situation has worsened or stayed the same; less than 25% report improvement. Notably, the proportion perceiving their situation as worse increased from 2014 through 2021, before declining slightly in 2023. Macroeconomic factors such as low wages, high cost of living, inflation, and inequality may explain this pattern. In the social dimension, regarding security perception, more than half of the population feels safe; however, in 2006, 2014, and 2018, security and insecurity perceptions were similar. About corruption, 75% or more, consider that corruption is widespread in the country.

Regarding the political dimension, the variable with greatest changes is presidential approval. During 2006, 2014, 2018, and 2021, between 30% and 50% of the people disapproved of the government. These years relate to the administrations of Partido Liberación Nacional and, predominantly, Partido Acción Ciudadana. In 2022, with tRodrigo Chaves, we can observe a substantial improvement in presidential approval. On the other hand, past electoral turnout remains stable throughout the period.

⁷Corruption perception was not asked in 2018 or 2021 or was asked differently. Political participation was not asked in 2021. Confidence in news media was not asked in 2014 and 2021.



Figure 6. Perception of Economic, Social, and Political Dimensions in Costa Rica 2006–23.

Figure 7 shows the quantitative variables: institutional respect and confidence in news media (1–7 scale). Both show a stable trend over the period. Respect for institutions scores is higher than confidence scores in news media across all years, evidencing institutional resilience. Notably, confidence in news media experienced a drop in 2018, reaching its lowest point at 3.98, before partially recovering in 2023.

Based on the literature review, I propose the following hypotheses:

1. When perception of the economic situation improves, support for democracy increases.
2. When security perception improves, support for democracy increases.
3. When corruption perception improves, support for democracy increases.
4. When respect for institutions improves, support for democracy increases.
5. When confidence in news media improves, support for democracy increases.
6. When presidential approval improves, support for democracy increases.
7. Prior electoral turnout is positively associated with support for democracy.

Table 1 shows evidence of the results of the estimated models. Model 1 includes fixed effects and all explanatory variables, excluding corruption, turnout in past elections, and confidence in news media. Model 2 adds the corruption variable and includes fixed effects, except for years 2018 and 2021. Model 3 uses turnout in past elections as an explanatory variable and fixed effects, except for 2021. Model 4 draws on confidence in news media as an explanatory variable and fixed effects, except for 2014 and 2021. All models control for variables: gender, age, education level, and locality type. The reference categories used are: “Male” for gender, “None” for education level, and “Rural” for locality type.

Regarding economic variables, the economic situation presents mixed results. Perceiving the economic situation as the same—compared to perceiving it as worse—has a positive and significant effect on support for democracy across nearly all models, except for model 3. Perceiving the situation as better, however, only yields a positive and significant effect in model 4. These results offer partial support for the hypothesis.

The perception of security demonstrates a robust and positive effect on support for democracy, remaining statistically significant across all models, thereby supporting the hypothesis.

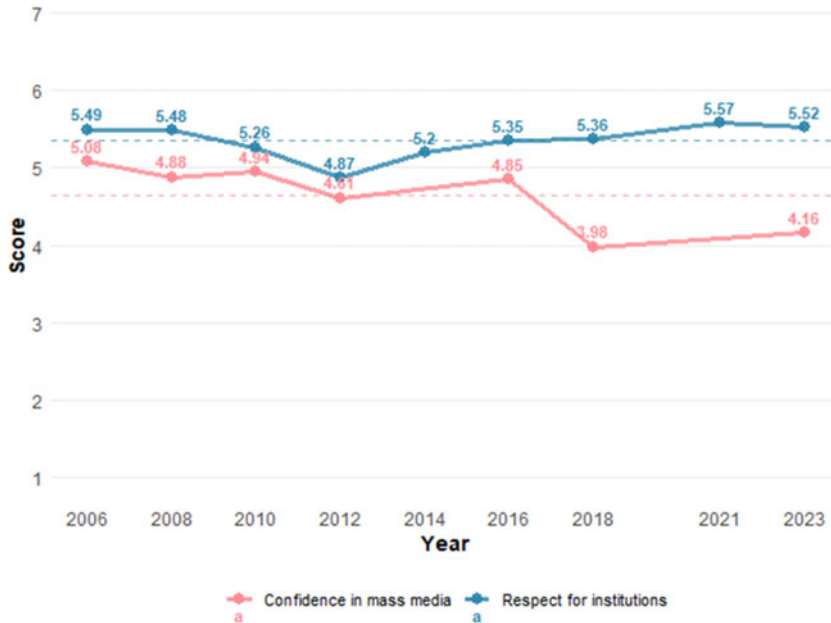


Figure 7. Respect for Institutions and Confidence in News Media, Costa Rica 2006–23.

Corruption, by contrast, presents a negative effect: perceiving corruption as little or widespread—relative to very/somewhat widespread—associates with a decrease in support for democracy, a finding that contradicts the hypothesis.

Concerning political variables, good presidential approval—compared to bad approval—has a positive and significant effect that holds consistently across all models. In a similar vein, respect for institutions, confidence in news media, and prior electoral participation also display positive and statistically significant effects, providing consistent support for the hypotheses. Among the control variables, only gender, age, and university-level education reach statistical significance: being a woman is negatively associated with support for democracy, while being older and having attained a university degree are both positively associated with it.

DISCUSSION

Results from qualitative and quantitative strategies reveal the process of democracy under strain in Costa Rica. Regarding press freedom, decreases in international indexes show that attacks extend beyond discourse and create conditions that restrict journalistic work, confirming Van Belle’s argument that communicators require a secure environment to question political elites. The narrative framing the press as “enemy of the people” undermines the democratic functions identified by Cook, particularly accountability. The Costa Rican case shows that current obstructions operate through public attacks, disinformation operations, and indirect economic pressures, such as the frequency auction, ultimately contained by the Constitutional Court. This institutional resilience distinguishes democracy under strain from backsliding: institutions have not been dismantled, but pressure on them is systematic and unprecedented.

Citizen reaction suggests an additional tension: although 82.4% reject presidential attacks against the media, Chaves gained power by employing this anti-media rhetoric during the campaign. This dynamic illustrates Benedek’s anti-pluralist framing of populism: hostility toward the press may generate electoral returns in the short term, but foster gradual erosion in quality of democracy over time.

Table 1. Economic, Social, and Political Factors Associated with Support for Democracy in Costa Rica

| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 |
|--|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| Intercept | 4.190*** (0.14) | 4.277*** (0.175) | 4.190*** (0.148) | 3.872*** 0.156 |
| Economic Situation (Ref: Worse) | 0.101*** (0.036) | 0.192*** (0.046) | 0.069* (0.039) | 0.157*** 0.039 |
| Better | 0.062 (0.045) | 0.138** (0.055) | 0.053 (0.048) | 0.101** 0.048 |
| Perception of Security (Ref: Unsafe) | 0.093*** (0.033) | 0.105** (0.041) | 0.095*** (0.035) | 0.089** 0.035 |
| Corruption (Fef: Very/Somewhat Widespread) Widespread/Little Widespread | | -0.100** (0.049) | | |
| Presidential Approval (Ref: Bad) | 0.024 (0.039) | 0.048 (0.053) | -0.015 (0.043) | 0.065 0.043 |
| Fair | | | | |
| Good | 0.215*** (0.045) | 0.215*** (0.057) | 0.153*** (0.050) | 0.217*** 0.049 |
| Respect for Institutions | 0.151*** (0.009) | 0.142*** (0.011) | 0.151*** (0.010) | 0.131*** 0.010 |
| Confidence in News Media | | | | 0.066*** 0.010 |
| Vote in Last Election (Ref: No) | | | 0.272*** (0.036) | |
| Yes | | | | |
| Female (Ref: Male) | -0.089*** (0.031) | -0.085** (0.038) | -0.108*** (0.033) | -0.086*** 0.033 |
| Age | 0.006*** (0.001) | 0.005*** (0.001) | 0.005*** (0.001) | 0.006*** 0.001 |
| Education (Ref: None) | 0.093 (0.117) | 0.085 (0.149) | 0.037 (0.124) | 0.106 0.129 |
| Primary | | | | |
| High School | 0.246** (0.118) | 0.157 (0.151) | 0.166 (0.124) | 0.235* 0.130 |
| College | 0.643*** (0.122) | 0.570*** (0.155) | 0.525*** (0.129) | 0.710*** 0.133 |
| Graduate | 1.697 (1.150) | 1.747 (1.177) | 1.558 (1.154) | 1.731 1.155 |
| Urban Area (ref: Rural) | -0.027 (0.033) | -0.039 (0.041) | -0.031 (0.035) | -0.006 0.035 |

Note: Standard error in parentheses, $p < 0.001$ ***, $p < 0.05$ ** , $p < 0.1$ *.

On the other hand, evidence on institutional delegitimization confirms the strategies described by Köker et al.: systematic campaigns that operate as “norm saboteurs” rather than constructive criticism. Conflicts with the Attorney General’s Office and the General Comptroller’s Office target institutions with the greatest capacity to control, hold accountable, and veto executive decisions. The presidential response to corruption accusations illustrates what Recio and Vidal call “instrumentalization”: labeling judicial cases as “political persecution” reframes institutional oversight as elite conspiracy, providing ideological cover for attacking the mechanisms designed to ensure accountability.

Furthermore, leading a public demonstration against the prosecutor and using phrases like “neighborhood thug” represents what Monsiváis calls an innovation in the authoritarian repertoire: an escalation from rhetorical confrontation to direct mobilization against judicial authority. The contrast between stable Transparency International indices and the intensity of these conflicts suggests a gap between aggregate corruption perception and the specific institutional conflicts generated by the executive. Yet control institutions continue to operate, indicating that Costa Rica’s democratic framework preserves its capacity to resist.

In turn, the results from the statistical model yield both confirmatory and mixed findings. Security perception reduces democratic support, confirming the hypothesis. The counterintuitive result on corruption reflects context dependency: in a setting where roughly 75% of citizens consider corruption endemic, marginal improvements in perception may not translate into greater democratic support. The economic variable shows inconsistent results, suggesting the possibility of an alternative hypothesis: different economic indicators or specific contextual conditions may better capture the relationship between economic perceptions and democratic support in Costa Rica.

The most significant finding, however, concerns the political dimension. Presidential approval, respect for institutions, electoral participation, and confidence in news media all show consistent positive relationships with democratic support. The result draws on a question: Why does Chaves hold comparatively high presidential approval while simultaneously pursuing institutional delegitimization strategies that erode the conditions under which democracy functions? This can be interpreted through Sendra and Bohigues’s framework: presidential approval may operate as a source of group belonging, generating in-group and out-group divisions that sustain political support independently of, or even despite, democratic decline. This result suggests that political polarization, not included in the current models, may be a key moderating variable that future research should address.

Taken together, the three indicators—declining press freedom, systematic institutional delegitimization, and decreasing democratic support—confirm that Costa Rica is experiencing a moment of democracy under strain. Institutions have shown resilience: the Constitutional Court has intervened, the Public Ministry has advanced corruption cases, and citizen disapproval of anti-press attacks remains high. Yet the pressure is sustained, coordinated, and without historical precedent in a country long regarded as a regional democratic benchmark.

CONCLUSION

This article asks how we can explain the democratic tensions observed in Costa Rica under the Chaves administration. The argument is that Costa Rica represents a democracy under strain: a theoretically distinct condition in which systematic executive pressure on democratic conditions coexists with institutional resilience.

Press freedom has declined, with attacks extending beyond rhetoric to create restrictive conditions for journalistic practice, yet the Constitutional Court has intervened and citizen disapproval of anti-press aggression remains high. Institutional delegitimization has reached unprecedented intensity, with conflicts and mobilization against judicial authorities that extend

the authoritarian repertoire beyond conventional verbal attacks, yet institutions have not been dismantled and corruption cases against the executive continue. Democratic support shows a sustained declining trend since 2016, shaped primarily by political variables: respect for institutions, presidential approval, and confidence in media.

The findings also raise questions. A president who maintains high approval ratings while systematically undermining the institutional conditions that sustain democratic support suggests that political polarization and ingroup/outgroup dynamics may decouple citizen support for leadership from support for democratic institutions in ways that existing models do not fully capture. More broadly, the Costa Rican case demonstrates that longstanding democratic stability does not confer immunity against authoritarian pressure: it may instead generate a false sense of institutional invulnerability that makes gradual strain harder to detect and counter. Whether Costa Rica's institutional resilience proves sufficient or whether sustained executive pressure eventually tips the balance toward erosion remains an open question. The 2026 electoral victory of Laura Fernández, Chaves's former Minister of the Presidency and political heir, represents continuity with the current political project in a system that still bans consecutive reelection. The answer will carry significant implications for the study of democratic change in Latin America.

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