

Costa Rica looks a little less exceptional after its heated election

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Leer en español.

Carlos Alvarado Quesada has won the Costa Rican presidency with 61 percent of the vote, an overwhelming victory for a progressive candidate who entered election day in a dead heat with his conservative rival.

Alvarado Quesada, a 38-year-old former labor minister under the unpopular outgoing President Luis Guillermo Solís, ran on an “agenda of equality” that included support for same-sex marriage, public education and renewable energy. In Costa Rica, this is a rather classic political platform.

But his opponent, Fabricio Alvarado Muñoz – an evangelical senator and former Christian musician who opposes gay marriage, secularism and sex education in schools – won the first round of Costa Rica’s election in February. The April 1 runoff was widely viewed as a referendum on social values in a country historically seen as stable and progressive.

In a region where nearly every other nation faces extreme violence and a history of political upheaval, peaceable Costa Rica is sometimes called “the Switzerland of Central America.” Many commentators will tout Alvarado Quesada’s triumph as a confirmation of Costa Rica’s reputation for stability and growth.



Marriage equality was a big winner in Costa Rica's presidential election. Juan Carlos Ulate/Reuters

Guatemala's outsider candidates

Alvarado Quesada's victory does not erase these fissures. Watching him lag behind a religiously conservative, tough-on-crime political outsider with pop culture roots during most of the 2018 campaign, I was actually reminded of neighboring Guatemala.

In 2015 comedian Jimmy Morales won a surprise bid for that country's presidency. Competing against a former first lady, he ran on the slogan "Neither corrupt nor a thief."

Political parties in Guatemala are traditionally weak, so an outsider candidacy was not surprising there. In fact, many saw the Morales win as a positive sign for Guatemalan democracy.

Morales was elected a month and a half after President Otto Pérez Molina stepped down to face trial on corruption charges. Molina is one of hundreds of ~~o o~~ ~~oooo~~ io

