

Costa Rica

Ethnicity in Costa Rica

Group selection

In Costa Rica, we code three politically relevant ethnic groups:

Afro-Costa Ricans, Indigenous peoples and **Whites/Mestizos**.

Afro-Costa Ricans are the descendants of West Indian immigrants and are Costa Rica's largest ethnic minority, settled primarily on the Atlantic coast, in Limón province (¹³⁶⁷, 149). According to the 2010 Census, they constitute 1,1% of the country's total population (¹³⁶⁸). We also include in this group the "mullattoes" and they are 6.7% of the total population (¹³⁶⁹). There are other Afro-Hispanics, descendants of African slaves imported during the colonial period who intermixed with Europeans and indigenous people, but they do not constitute an identifiable ethnic group anymore (¹³⁷⁰, 150, 161 (fn. 11)). **Whites/Mestizos** make up 83.7% of the population (¹³⁷¹, 2). Costa Rica's indigenous population represents 2.4% of the country's total population (¹³⁷²), here called **Indigenous peoples**.

¹³⁶⁷ [Bourgois, 1986]

¹³⁶⁸ [INEC, 2011]

¹³⁶⁹ [INEC, 2011]

¹³⁷⁰ [Bourgois, 1986]

¹³⁷¹ [Putnam, 2002]

¹³⁷² [INEC, 2011]

Power relations

1946-1953

A first period is identified between 1946 and 1953. During this period, Whites/Mestizos held a monopoly on power and Afro-Costa Ricans and indigenous peoples were discriminated.

Although rising from poor, landless laborers to an economically well-off landowning class within their region, (black) West Indians were long socially and politically discriminated in Costa Rica (¹³⁷³), considered "an unwelcome addition" to Costa Rica's "white" society (¹³⁷⁴, 104). Even their permitted working areas were legally restricted by a 1934 decree (¹³⁷⁵, 152; ¹³⁷⁶, 107). To defend their rights and interests many West Indians became affiliated with the global "Universal Negro Improvement Association" (UNIA) whose local division in Limón has survived until today (¹³⁷⁷, 151-2; ¹³⁷⁸, 115). Only after the short civil war in 1948, they became more involved in national politics, and "white" politicians - such as civil war "hero" and later president José Figueres - who manifested interest in including them into the political process. After a public pressure campaign by West Indian political leaders most of all Alex Curling Delisser the government partially abandoned the discriminatory law of 1934, by rescinding the provision for all those West Indians who could prove to be Costa Rican citizens (¹³⁷⁹, 175-7). (Originally,

¹³⁷³ [Bourgois, 1986]

¹³⁷⁴ [Harpelle, 1993]

¹³⁷⁵ [Bourgois, 1986]

¹³⁷⁶ [Harpelle, 1993]

¹³⁷⁷ [Bourgois, 1986]

¹³⁷⁸ [Harpelle, 1993]

¹³⁷⁹ [Harpelle, 2002]

West Indians did not possess Costa Rican citizenship. By 1948, those who had become citizens were still a minority (¹³⁸⁰, 112).)

¹³⁸⁰ [Harpelle, 1993]

At the same time, there was a shift in identity from West Indian to Afro-Costa Rican identity. This change was mirrored in the emergence of new ethnic advocacy groups such as the “National Association for the Advancement of Young Coloured People” (NAAYCP), the “Afro-Costa Rican Youth Uplift Association”, or the “National Association for the Progress of Coloured Costa Ricans” (NAPCCR) who all bore this “black but Costa Rican” element in their names and who promoted the idea of naturalization. They understood Costa Rican citizenship to be West Indians’ salvation because the government continued with its discriminatory policies against non-nationals (¹³⁸¹, 116-7).

¹³⁸¹ [Harpelle, 1993]

1954-1991

During this period, Afro-Costa Ricans were powerless rather than discriminated; Whites/Mestizos were dominant, and indigenous peoples remained discriminated. Real political integration occurred during the 1953 presidential campaign by Figueres who strategically included West Indians with Costa Rican citizenship into the electoral base of his PLN party, which accepted candidates from the Afro-Costa Rican community (¹³⁸², 103, 118-20; ¹³⁸³, 181). Figueres and his party won the 1953 elections, and Curling became the first Afro-Costa Rican to be elected to Congress (¹³⁸⁴, 119).

¹³⁸² [Harpelle, 1993]

¹³⁸³ [Harpelle, 2002]

¹³⁸⁴ [Harpelle, 1993]

Figueres’ political opening resulted in two crucial changes. West Indians effectively became “Afro-Costa Ricans” and, as a consequence, targeted political discrimination by the Costa Rican state ended. They came to be politically included and began to participate in Costa Rican politics (¹³⁸⁵, 119-20).

¹³⁸⁵ [Harpelle, 1993]

In the 1970s, the Costa Rican state set up a National Commission for Indigenous Affairs (CONAI) in order to improve the socio-economic situation of indigenous people and passed pro-indigenous laws. A national indigenous movement emerged during the 1980s. In spite of everything, according to the World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples (¹³⁸⁶), Costa Rica’s indigenous population did not have the right to vote during this period, so they are classified as “discriminated”.

¹³⁸⁶ [Minority Rights Group International, 2005b]

1992-2018

Costa Rica’s indigenous population obtained the right to vote until 1991. Analyzing a relatively recent period, Van Cott (¹³⁸⁷, 132) places Costa Rica (like, for instance, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua) in the category of countries that provide “modest” recognition of indigenous rights. However, there is still considerable delay in and opposition to concrete measures taken in order to further enhance cultural and territorial rights as well as autonomous development (¹³⁸⁸, 2; ¹³⁸⁹, 155). Indigenous peoples still have almost no influence in politics; not on the national nor on a regional level

¹³⁸⁷ [Van Cott, 2007]

¹³⁸⁸ [CESCR, 2016]

¹³⁸⁹ [IWGIA, 2017]

(¹³⁹⁰); they are still considered “powerless”.

¹³⁹⁰ [USDS, 2016]

It should be noted that there was some progress during this period in order to counter racism and enhance minority rights. In 2015 a constitutional amendment, which declared Costa Rica to be a multiethnic and multicultural nation, was approved by the legislature and signed by the president (¹³⁹¹, 1). A commissioner for Afro-descendant affairs was appointed in the same year (USDS, 2017: 17). While Afro-Puerto Ricans still face challenges to their cultural rights and socio-economic equality (see ¹³⁹², 5/10; ¹³⁹³), although, compared to the indigenous peoples, some of its members regularly manage to gain access to mandates in the political sphere. For example, in 2010, an Afro-Costa Rican woman to the presidency by the second largest party. However, since their influence is still restricted to the legislative branches of politics (see ¹³⁹⁴) the Afro-Costa Ricans are accordingly coded as “powerless”.

¹³⁹¹ [CESCR, 2016]

¹³⁹² [CESCR, 2016]

¹³⁹³ [USDS, 2016]

¹³⁹⁴ [USDS, 2016]

2019-2021

In 2018, General Elections were held in Costa Rica, where the first woman of African descent became Vice-President. Overall, the elections were successful and transparent, despite an environment highly polarized around gender and religious issues (¹³⁹⁵, 3). That being said, there is still no indigenous representatives in the legislature. Moreover, since August 2019 the government has failed to appoint a new presidential commissioner for Afro-Descendant Affairs after the previous commissioner resigned in April (¹³⁹⁶, 13). Nevertheless, the 2018 elections were a success for Women and persons of African descent as they are represented in the government (¹³⁹⁷, 8-9). Thus, since the Afro Costa-Ricans influence is present in the executive power, we code them hereinafter as “junior partners” and whites/mestizos as “senior partners”.

¹³⁹⁵ [Bertelsmann, 2020]

¹³⁹⁶ [USDS, 2019]

¹³⁹⁷ [USDS, 2019]

At last, it needs to be mentioned that violence against indigenous people has increased in the past years. This is in part due to land disputes between indigenous inhabitants and non-native people living in them (¹³⁹⁸, 13). President Carlos Alvarado said in an interview with The Guardian that he was committed to protecting indigenous land rights while making sure non-indigenous people living in protected areas were compensated (¹³⁹⁹).

¹³⁹⁸ [USDS, 2019]

¹³⁹⁹ [Greenfield, 2020]

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Political status of ethnic groups in C

From 1946 until 1953

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Whites/mestizos	0.837	MONOPOLY
Afro-Costa Ricans	0.078	DISCRIMINATED
Indigenous peoples	0.024	DISCRIMINATED



Figure 270: Political status of ethnic groups in Costa Rica during 1946-1953.

From 1954 until 1991

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Whites/mestizos	0.837	DOMINANT
Afro-Costa Ricans	0.078	POWERLESS
Indigenous peoples	0.024	DISCRIMINATED

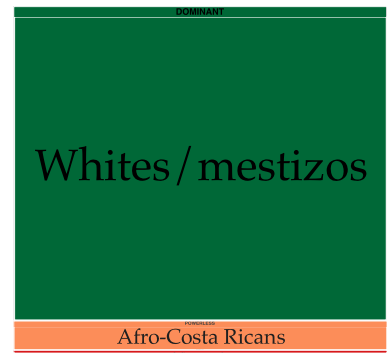


Figure 271: Political status of ethnic groups in Costa Rica during 1954-1991.

From 1992 until 2018

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Whites/mestizos	0.837	DOMINANT
Afro-Costa Ricans	0.078	POWERLESS
Indigenous peoples	0.024	POWERLESS



Figure 272: Political status of ethnic groups in Costa Rica during 1992-2018.

From 2019 until 2021

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Whites/mestizos	0.837	SENIOR PARTNER
Afro-Costa Ricans	0.078	JUNIOR PARTNER
Indigenous peoples	0.024	POWERLESS

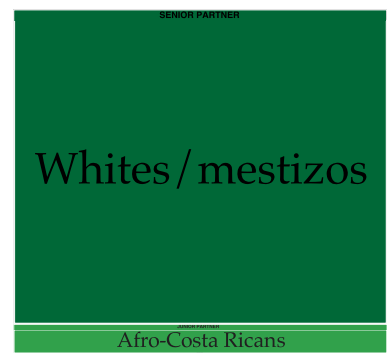


Figure 273: Political status of ethnic groups in Costa Rica during 2019-2021.

Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Costa Rica

From 1946 until 2021

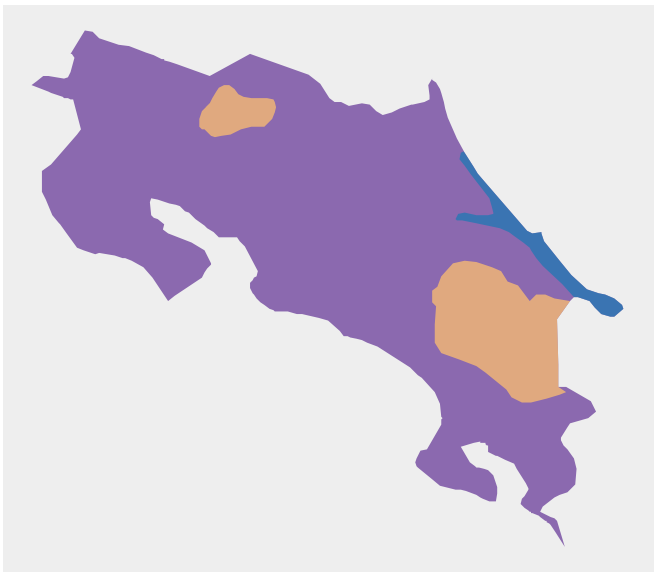


Figure 274: Map of ethnic groups in Costa Rica during 1946-2021.

Group name	Area in km ²	Type
Whites/mestizos	51 052	Statewide
Indigenous peoples	6330	Regionally based
Afro-Costa Ricans	1369	Regionally based

Table 92: List of ethnic groups in Costa Rica during 1946-2021.

Conflicts in Costa Rica

Starting on 1948-03-02

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Costa Rica	National Liberation Army		1948-03-02			