

# Country Brief

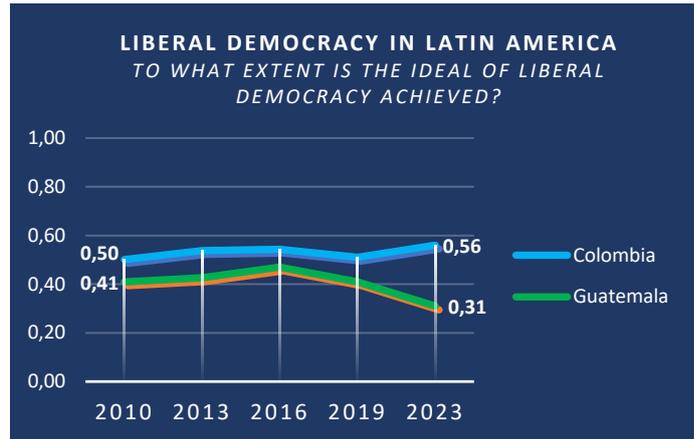
## Colombia

Electoral democracy

### COUNTRY INDICATORS

**Population:** 51.266 million (WB)  
**Urban population:** 82% (WB)  
**Urban population growth (annual):** 1.1% (WB)  
**Access to water:** 97% (WHO-UNICEF)  
**Access to electricity:** 100% (WB)  
**Mortality rate, under-5 (per 1,000 births):** 13 (WB)  
**GDP (current US\$):** 314.322 billion (WB)  
**GDP per capita, PPP (current Int\$):** 16,894 (WB)  
**Presence of Violence:** Government (2020) (UCDP)  
**Global Freedom Status:** Partly free, score 64 (FH)  
**Corruption Perception Index:** score 39, rank 87/180 (TI)  
**Human Development Index:** High (0.752), rank 88/191 (UNDP)  
**Local Government Association:** [Federación Colombiana de Municipio \(FCM\)](#); [Federación Nacional de Departamentos \(FND\)](#); [Asociación Colombiana de Ciudades Capitales \(Asocapitales\)](#); [Federación Colombiana de Autoridades Locales \(FEDECAL\)](#)

Figure 1



Source: V-Dem Institute (2024)

**Clarification:** The liberal principle of democracy emphasizes the importance of protecting individual and minority rights against the tyranny of the state and the tyranny of the majority. The liberal model takes a 'negative' view of political power insofar as it judges the quality of democracy by the limits placed on government. This is achieved by constitutionally protected civil liberties, strong rule of law, an independent judiciary, and effective checks and balances that, together, limit the exercise of executive power. To make this a measure of liberal democracy, the index also takes the level of electoral democracy into account.

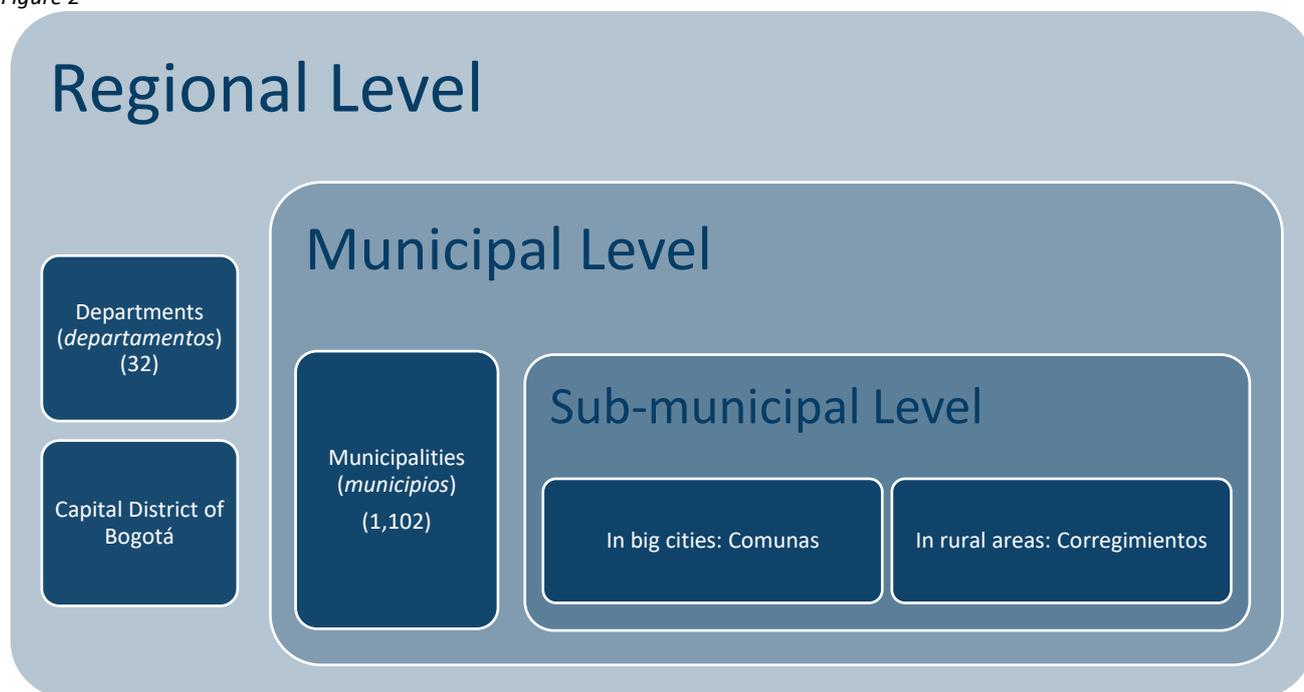
### Decentralisation

Colombia is a unitary State with political, fiscal, and administrative decentralization (Political Constitution, 1991). The country progressed in decentralization until 2001 through General Participation System, regulating transfers to local governments. However, decentralization slowed from 2002 to 2010 due to reduced transfers and budget cuts. Reforms in 2010, including the National Royalties System (SGR) and the 2011 Law 1454 "Organic Law of Territorial Planning (LOOT)", aimed to restore decentralization by rebalancing royalties between central and local governments. The 2016 Peace Agreement also contributed to decentralization efforts, proposing a rural reform to address inequality and land ownership concentration. (SNG-WOFI Colombia, 2022)

Despite many challenges, the increase in the provision of the basic social services of health, education, drinking water and basic sanitation is one of the main accomplishments of the decentralization process, because universal coverage has almost been achieved through regional resources. However, there are still urgent problems to be

resolved regarding the quality of the services provided. Another positive change has been the reduction in poverty, which is the responsibility of not only the nation but also subnational authorities. The country is divided in 32 departments, and 1,102 municipalities (see Figure 2).

Figure 2



Source: SNG-WOFI Colombia (2019)

### Municipalities

Among the 1,102 municipalities, seven are categorised as special districts (*distritos especiales*) due to their particular political, commercial, historical, industrial, cultural or environmental characteristics, among other important factors, which allows them to enjoy certain prerogatives according to a new regime adopted in 2013. Bogota is the most populated city in the country, whereas the municipality of Busbanzá is the least populated, with 1 161 inhabitants in 2021. Municipalities are large with an average of 46 324 inhabitants, especially compared to the OECD average in 2017 (9,700 inhabitants). Municipalities may be further subdivided into sub-districts known as *comunas* (within urban areas) and *corregimientos* municipals (in rural areas), which are administered by a popular elected organ called JAL. Municipalities are classified into seven groups is based on their population and revenue base. 88% of municipalities are currently in the lowest category (class six) but 50% of the population lives in municipalities that are classified in the two highest classes (largest municipalities).

### Departments

The regional level is made up of 32 departments and of the Capital District of Bogota, which has a special constitutional status giving it the powers of both municipalities and departments. Colombia's subnational government, outlined in the 1991 Constitution, consists of departments at the regional level and municipalities/districts at the local level. Governors and mayors, chosen by popular vote for four-year terms, hold executive power at both levels. Each department has a departmental assembly (*Asamblea Departamental*), with members elected by universal suffrage, allocating one representative for every 40,000 inhabitants. Bogota's Capital District has a directly elected Superior Mayor and a 45-member council. (SNG-WOFI Colombia. 2022) The latest local elections for Governors and Mayors occurred in October 2023.

More recently, the Pact for Decentralization (Law 1962/2019) has strengthened the Administrative and Planning Regions (RAP). RAP, functioning as an associative framework, promotes cooperation among departments, with the potential for districts to also participate. Since 2022 Raps also have an independent legal status (SNG-WOFI Colombia. 2022).

## Indigenous Territories

The 1991 Constitution recognised Colombia as a multi-ethnic nation, giving indigenous territories (resguardos) a special status. There are currently 811 indigenous territories in Colombia, with an estimated population of around 1.5 million (3.4% of the national population). The land area covered by indigenous territories is nearly 30% and in some departments about 70%. A landmark decision in the autonomy of indigenous regions was the Decree 1953 of 2014. It enlarged the autonomy of the indigenous territories, allowing them to manage directly the specific allocation of resources. In addition, while approximately 38% of the Colombian Amazon did not have a formally recognised local government, the Decree 632 of April 2018 further strengthened the autonomy of indigenous peoples of Guainía, Vaupés and Amazonas, which are departments of Colombia's Amazon region (SNG-WOFI Colombia. 2022).

## Local Autonomy

### Mandates

In the Political Constitution of 1991, the municipality is understood as “the fundamental entity of the political and administrative division of the State”, outlining its main functions: to provide public services, build infrastructure for local progress, oversee the development of its territory, promote community participation, improve the social and cultural environment of its inhabitants, as well as other functions set out in the constitution and the law (art. 311). The municipalities are categorized in order of the inhabitant number and their current income of free destination (Special, and from the first to the sixth category). More than 80% of municipalities belong to the sixth category (few inhabitants and few own resources), which generates a high dependence of exogenous sources (National government budget to specific or conditional assignment) for their competency's accomplishment (Contreras et. al, 2021). Additionally, there is a limited institutional capacity by small municipalities (less than 30.000 inhabitants), which is expressed in the inexistent professional and independent of political pressures functionaries' team; limited own resources, and a few own investment capacities to make sustainable municipal and regional strategies, as well as the state authority absence in urban and rural territories (Sanabria, 2019).

Table 1

Main Sectors	Local Government Responsibilities
1.General public services	Civil registers; Building permits; Management of municipal property and enterprises
2.Public order and safety	
3.Economic affairs/transport	Promotion of social, economic and environmental development
4.Environmental protection	Solid waste management; Sanitation
5.Housing and community amenities	Territorial planning; Local infrastructure; Water supply; Housing
6.Health	Public health; Administration of the subsidised scheme; Services for the uninsured poor population
7.Recreation, culture & religion	Sport; Culture; Leisure
8.Education	Early, primary and secondary education; Construction and upkeep of buildings; Canteens and extra-curricular activities; Payment of salaries
9.Social welfare	

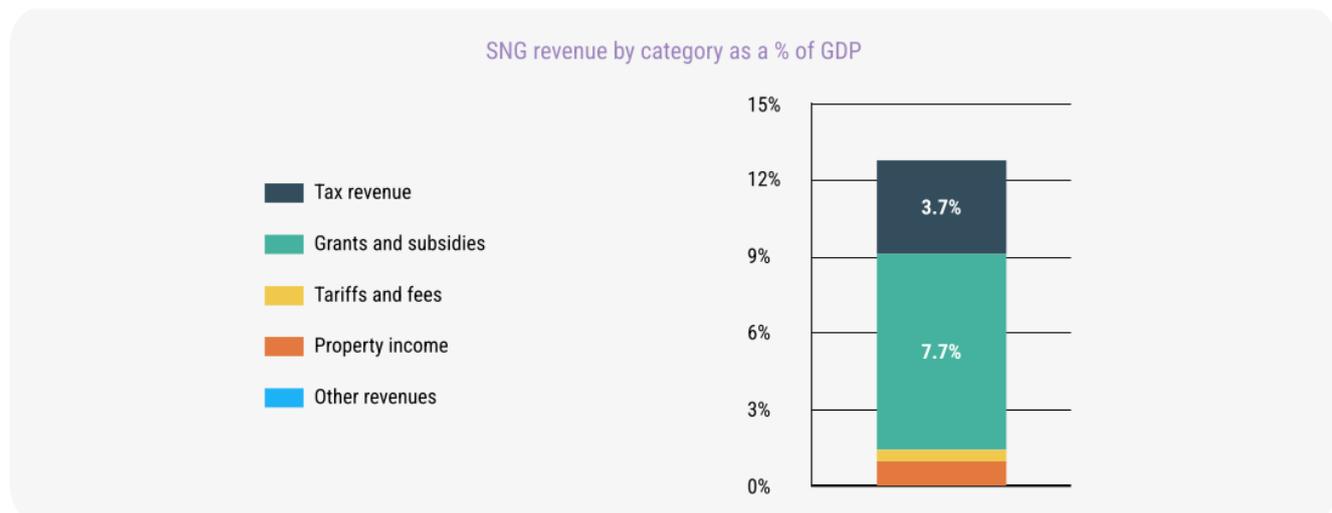
Source: SNG-WOFI Colombia (2022)

## Local Government Finances

The fiscal decentralization framework in Colombia (Laws 60/1993 and No. 115/1994) dictates resource distribution among departments, municipalities, and districts. Despite being highly decentralized compared to other Latin American unitary countries, Colombia's decentralization levels remain lower than those in OECD nations. Subnational governments, while holding significant resources and spending responsibilities, face vertical imbalance, with broad competences but limited fiscal autonomy, resembling a devolution system. Introduced in 2011, the General System of Royalties reform and recent strengthening of Administrative and Planning Regions (RAPs) aim to improve regional coordination and reduce disparities. (SNG-WOFI Colombia. 2022)

Most of the tax revenue is collected by the national government (income tax and VAT) while municipalities can collect the property taxes, commerce and industry taxes (an income tax), as well as the gasoline surcharge. The following is the total distribution from tax revenue for 2015: Nation 80.6%, municipalities 14.4% and departments 4.9%.

Subnational governments (SNG) in Colombia heavily depend on intergovernmental transfers, making up over 60% of their total revenue, exceeding the OECD average for unitary countries. Tax revenue contributes nearly 29%, while income from assets, including oil and mining royalties, and tariffs and fees each account for approximately 11% of subnational government total revenue. (SNG-WOFI Colombia. 2022)



## Budgets

Subnational governments SNGs in Colombia depend heavily on intergovernmental transfers, which represented slightly more than half of their total revenue, above the OECD average (37.2% in 2016). Tax revenue accounted for less than 30% of SNG total revenue. Property income (including oil and mining royalties) is a significant source of revenue for SNGs. SNGs play a key role as public service providers, however most expenditures are earmarked by the central government. Education is the biggest budget item, accounting for 32.7% of SNG budget in 2016, as SNGs are responsible for almost half of total public spending in this sector. Indeed, SNGs are responsible for the management of educational services of pre-school, basic primary and secondary school and high schools. Departments are responsible for paying and training teachers, while municipalities are responsible for the construction and maintenance of school buildings. The number two budget item is health (20.6% of SNG budget and 33% of total public spending), for which they receive earmarked funding. Other important spending items are economic affairs and transport, general public services and housing and community amenities (water supply). (SNG-WOFI, 2019).

## Local Democracy

## State of Elections

Local councils are elected by popular vote. The last election was on the 29<sup>th</sup> of October 2023. Each department has a governor and a regional assembly both elected by popular vote. Despite important advances, there are still some cases of fraud and violence in local elections. In Colombia the *Misión de Observación Electoral (MOE)* monitors the elections. This is a civil society organization platform that promotes the citizen civil and political rights exercise, through incentive the active participation of civil society in democratic processes and perform processes of monitoring and observation of electoral processes.

## Electoral Outcomes

Table 3

Elections	2015	2019
Electoral turnout	59,4 %.	60,6%
Female Councillors	16%	17.9%
Female Mayors	12%	11%
Female Governors (regional executive)	15%	6%
Female members of Parliament	9.1 % (Elections 2018)	28% (Elections 2022)

Source: ONU Mujer

## Women's representation

Women remain severely underrepresented in the political arena. In the 2019 election, the proportion of women in political office was only 17,9% of local councillors and 11 % of mayors. An important improvement was seen in the 2022 elections with 28% of Members of Parliament were female (see Table 3).

Elective Position	2017		2022	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
President	8	0	4	0
Deputy President	7	1	1	3
Senator	236	20	292	47
Women Representatives National Assembly		298		360
National Assembly	1,761	131	1,899	234
Governor	202	9	243	22
Deputy Governor		30		62
County Assembly	10,957	900	11,638	1,292

## Barriers and Opportunities for Local Democracy

The most common citizens' needs toward the local governments are focused on topics as security, exclusion, and urban segregation with the effects of inequality, and basic rights. In the case of the most rural municipalities (despite more than 75% population in Colombia live in urban areas, more than 80% of national territory is rural) the demands are associated with more state presence, drug trafficking problems, and support for agricultural development.

Currently, despite the Peace Agreement signature, there are important barriers to overcome associated with violence, drug trafficking, political links with urban and rural territorial owners; imposition of mining and hydrocarbons national projects above the communities and local competencies needs, among others. Some

relevant topics require deeper visualization and evaluation, such as the assassination of environmental leaders, the impacts of the recent and massive migration from Venezuela, and the social mobilization of young people due to the country's political and institutional situation.

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## About ICLD

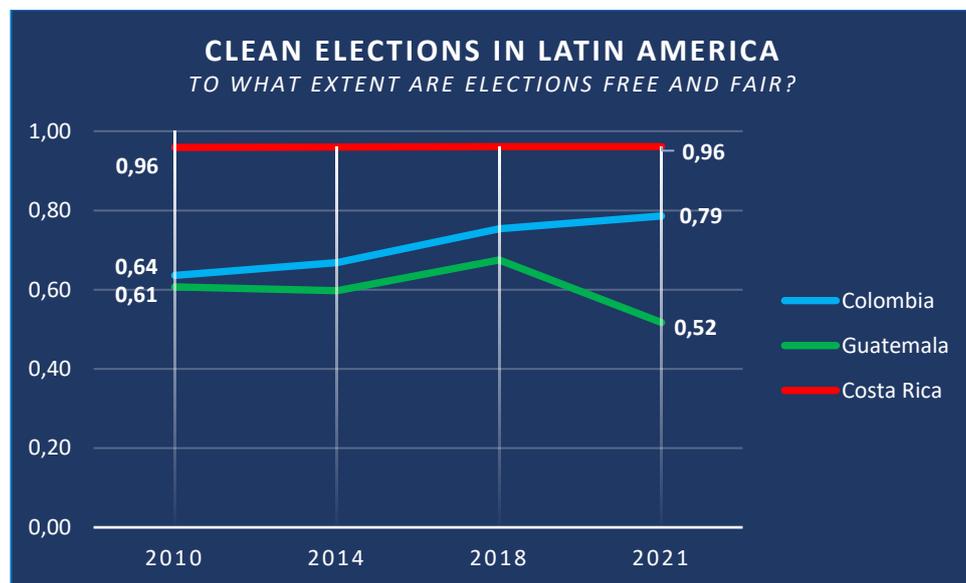
The Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is part of the Swedish development cooperation. The mandate of the organisation is to contribute to poverty alleviation by strengthening local governments. This Country Brief is part of a publication series that investigates the state of decentralisation and local democracy in countries where ICLD programmes operate.

This Country Brief covers events up to October 2023.

## Appendix 1: Clean Elections Index

**Research Question:** To what extent are elections free and fair? (Low to High; 0-1)

**Clarification:** Free and fair connotes and absence of registration fraud, systematic irregularities, government intimidation of the opposition, vote buying, and election violence



Source: V-Dem Institute (2022)