

<b>Area:</b>	51,100 sq km (19,730 sq mi)
<b>Population</b>	(2002 est.): 3,960,000
<b>Capital:</b>	San José
<b>Head of state and government:</b>	Presidents Miguel Ángel Rodríguez Echeverría and, from May 8, Abel Pacheco de la Espriella

Costa Rica's national election, held on Feb. 3, 2002, proved to be one of the country's most unusual. For decades Costa Rica had enjoyed a stable two-party system in which the parties regularly alternated in power. In this election, however, the incumbent Social Christian Unity Party (PUSC) succeeded itself in office—something that had happened only occasionally in the past—and, for the first time ever, no party achieved the necessary 40% plurality. A strong third-party movement siphoned away votes from the PUSC and its rival, the National Liberation Party (PLN); although in the past third parties had won no more than 8% of the vote, they garnered nearly 28% in 2002. A runoff election took place on April 7.

PUSC candidate Abel Pacheco de la Espriella emerged as the victor in the presidential race. The 68-year-old Pacheco, a nationally known psychiatrist and television personality, overcame opposition from the entrenched elite of his own party to claim 58% of the vote against Rolando Araya of the PLN.

In office Pacheco was faced with a divided 57-seat legislature, in which his party won only 19 seats. Observers expected him to try to form a coalition with other parties; in the election the PLN secured 17 seats and the upstart Citizen Action Party 14 seats. Two other parties together won a total of 7 seats. The economic challenges confronting the new government were formidable, especially with respect to reducing Costa Rica's fiscal deficit and overcoming sluggish growth, made all the more difficult by the post-Sept. 11, 2001, economic slowdown in the U.S.

Mitchell A. Seligson