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The Politics of The Dominican Republic

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Introduction

The Dominican Republic, situated on the eastern two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola, possesses a vibrant and complex political history that continues to shape its present and future. From its colonial past and turbulent journey to independence, through decades of authoritarianism, to the emergence of democratic governance, the Dominican experience offers a fascinating lens through which to study the dynamics of political change, institutional development, and societal resilience in the Caribbean and Latin America.

This book, *The Politics of The Dominican Republic: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in The Dominican Republic*, aims to provide readers with a comprehensive and accessible overview of the country's political landscape. It covers not only the formal structures of the state—executive, legislative, and judicial—but also the many informal practices, party dynamics, and cultural factors that influence how power functions in society. The Dominican Republic's move towards democracy has been hard won, with progress uneven and challenges ongoing, making the study of its political system both timely and essential.

Understanding Dominican politics requires situating today's realities in historical context. The legacies of colonialism, occupation, dictatorships, and foreign intervention have all left their imprints on the institutions, political behaviors, and party systems that characterize the modern Republic. The shadow of the Trujillo dictatorship, perhaps the most notorious period in Dominican political life, has loomed large over subsequent developments, impacting everything from political parties to civic trust. Only in recent decades has the country experienced relative stability, competitive elections, and gradual reforms aimed at strengthening democracy.

Institutions alone do not tell the full story. The Dominican Republic's political culture is marked by clientelism and personalism, often reflected in the strength of individual leaders over parties or platforms. Issues such as corruption, police violence, and strained Dominican-Haitian relations consistently challenge efforts to deepen the rule of law and broaden citizen participation. At the same time, Dominican society grapples with pressing economic and social questions, including economic growth, inequality, access to public services, and the struggle to make democracy meaningful for all citizens.

This guide goes beyond simple descriptions of constitutional structures to analyze the critical junctures, reforms, and policy debates shaping the country today. It examines the evolving party system, electoral processes, the interplay between national and local government, gender and minority participation, and the contested terrain of civil

rights, security, and social well-being. Special attention is paid to the factors that foster trust (or its absence) in public institutions and the possibilities for greater accountability and responsiveness.

Through twenty-five chapters, this book seeks to illuminate both the achievements and the ongoing challenges in the Dominican political sphere. Designed for students, scholars, travelers, policy practitioners, and anyone interested in understanding the workings of a dynamic yet often misunderstood political system, this volume offers a clear roadmap for engaging with one of the Caribbean's most important—though at times paradoxical—democracies.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Historical Roots of Dominican Politics

To truly grasp the political landscape of the Dominican Republic today, we must first journey back in time, to the very beginnings of the island's recorded history. This story doesn't begin with presidents and political parties, but with indigenous peoples and the arrival of European powers. The island of Hispaniola, which the Dominican Republic shares with Haiti, was originally inhabited by the Taíno people, an Arawak-speaking group who had developed complex societies long before Columbus stumbled upon their shores in 1492. They were, by many accounts, a peaceful and organized people, living in cacicazgos, or chiefdoms, across the island.

Columbus, however, wasn't looking for peaceful societies; he was looking for riches. His arrival marked the beginning of a brutal era for the Taíno. European diseases, to which the indigenous population had no immunity, coupled with forced labor in mines and agriculture, led to a catastrophic decline in their numbers. Within a few decades, the Taíno population was decimated, a stark reminder of the devastating impact of colonization. Those who survived intermixed with the arriving Spanish and later, African slaves.

Hispaniola became the site of the first European settlements in the Americas, including La Isabela and the eventual capital, Santo Domingo, founded in 1496. This city would serve as a crucial base for Spanish expansion into the New World. The Spanish crown controlled the entire island for a significant period, but their attention gradually shifted to the more lucrative conquests on the mainland. This left the western part of Hispaniola vulnerable to other European powers.

Enter the French. In the 17th century, French buccaneers and settlers began to establish themselves on the western part of the island, initially on Tortuga Island off the northwest coast, which the Spanish had previously abandoned. This foothold grew, and eventually, in 1697, the Treaty of Ryswick formally ceded the western third of Hispaniola to France. This division of the island into Spanish-controlled Santo Domingo in the east and French-controlled Saint-Domingue in the west is a critical point in understanding the divergent paths the two future nations would take.

While the Spanish colony in the east stagnated somewhat, the French colony of Saint-Domingue blossomed, albeit through immense human suffering. It became an incredibly wealthy colony, the "Pearl of the Antilles," fueled by the brutal labor of hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans on vast sugar and coffee plantations. By the late 18th century, Saint-Domingue was one of the most profitable colonies in the

world, producing a significant portion of Europe's sugar and coffee. The enslaved population vastly outnumbered the white colonists, creating a highly volatile social structure.

This volatile situation exploded in 1791 with the start of the Haitian Revolution, a large-scale slave revolt against French rule. This was a truly momentous event, the only successful slave uprising in history to lead to the formation of an independent state. The revolution was a long and brutal struggle, with shifting alliances and interventions by European powers. Meanwhile, the eastern Spanish colony of Santo Domingo also experienced upheaval.

In 1795, Spain ceded its portion of the island to France through the Treaty of Basel, temporarily uniting the island under French rule. However, this French control was short-lived and met with resistance in the east. By 1809, the Spanish had regained control of Santo Domingo. This period of French control, though brief, further complicated the identity of the eastern part of the island.

Following their revolution, Haiti declared independence in 1804. The new Haitian state, under leaders like Jean-Jacques Dessalines and later Jean-Pierre Boyer, viewed the entire island as one entity that should be free from European colonial rule. This led to the Haitian invasion and occupation of the eastern part of Hispaniola in 1822.

The Haitian occupation lasted for 22 years and was a period of significant hardship for the inhabitants of Santo Domingo. The occupation government implemented policies that were often unpopular, including the abolition of slavery (which had been re-established by the Spanish), the suppression of the Spanish language and customs, and the imposition of heavy taxes. This experience would leave a lasting mark on the collective memory of the eastern population and heavily influence their desire for their own independent nation.

The desire for self-determination festered, and underground resistance movements began to form. One of the most significant of these was La Trinitaria, founded by Juan Pablo Duarte. This secret society advocated for a sovereign and independent Dominican nation.

The opportunity for independence arose in 1844 when political instability in Haiti provided the window needed for the Dominicans to act. Led by figures like Duarte, Francisco del Rosario Sánchez, and Matías Ramón Mella, the Dominicans declared their independence on February 27, 1844, establishing the Dominican Republic. This date is celebrated as Dominican Independence Day and marks the formal birth of the nation.

The declaration of independence, however, did not immediately lead to lasting peace and stability. The nascent republic faced the immediate threat of Haitian attempts to

reclaim the territory, as well as internal power struggles among various factions. The political scene in the newly independent Dominican Republic was characterized by a lack of established institutions and a prevalence of personalismo, where loyalty was often to individual leaders rather than to political parties or ideologies.

The decades following independence were marked by frequent coups, civil wars, and a succession of short-lived governments. The economy remained largely agrarian and vulnerable to external market fluctuations. The lack of strong national institutions and the constant threat of external interference created an environment where strongmen, or caudillos, could rise to power and maintain control through force and patronage. This pattern of political instability and the rise of caudillos would become a defining feature of Dominican politics for much of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The stage was set for a turbulent future.

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