

6 Ordinary Elections in Extraordinary Times The Political Economy of Voting in Costa Rica

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Almost all discussions of Central American politics begin with the caveat that generalizations do not apply to Costa Rica. Costa Rican "exceptionalism" emerges in many aspects of its political life; for the purposes of this volume, the differences between Costa Rica and its Central American neighbors can be summarized with reference to the questions John Booth raises in chapter 1. Booth seeks to determine the role of elections in the institutionalization of democracy in Central America. Specifically, he views elections as a potential instrument for democracy building.

In that context, it is legitimate for him to inquire of the impact of elections on the range, breadth, and depth of participation in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. But in Costa Rica, for at least the last four decades, participation has been as wide, broad, and deep as it has been among the most highly developed and institutionalized democracies in Western Europe and North America. Similarly, it is appropriate for Booth to inquire about the fairness of elections in the other countries, whereas Costa Rican elections have been a model of fairness matched by few other systems in the world. Consolidation of stable democracy, so central a question elsewhere in the region, has not been of concern since the 1960s in Costa Rica. In short, whereas recent elections in Central America can be viewed as instruments of democracy building, recent elections in Costa Rica were more of a reaffirmation of the stability and strength of a system that previously had been consolidated.

Recent elections in Costa Rica take on a very different meaning from those held elsewhere in the region. In Costa Rica very few observers would question the achievements of democratization over the past four decades. Recent elections there were not an independent variable to be viewed as an exercise in building democracy. Rather, an appropriate view of the recent elections is that they were a test of the survivability of consolidated democratic rule in a mini-state under conditions of extreme economic stress. This is a relevant, indeed

immediate, question to be answered in the case of Costa Rica, as will be shown in this chapter.

From a regional perspective the analysis presented here would become relevant to questions of the long-term stability of democracy if and when it was consolidated in other Central American nations. As will be shown by the data collected for this paper, consolidated democratic systems are very resistant to economic crisis, especially when a political culture supportive of democracy (Booth's sixth question) has been established.

Economic Crisis and Elections

Electoral results depend heavily upon economic results. This seemingly simple assertion, first systematically tested a little over fifteen years ago (Kramer, 1971), has become a fundamental axiom of modern research on voting behavior. We now have scores of major books and articles that demonstrate with great consistency that economic downturns, inflation, and rising unemployment all have major influences on elections in Western Europe and the United States.¹ Recent research has found the impact of economics on electoral politics to be equally or more important than class, religion, and party identification, the variables that traditionally have been regarded as the principal explanatory factors of electoral choice (Lewis-Beck, 1986). Although the specific form of the equations utilized to model the impact of economics on politics varies, recent studies are consistently able to explain a large proportion of the variance in electoral outcomes as a result of including economic factors.

The success of these efforts to formulate a political economy of elections, as it were, has led some to conclude that this is one area in which the discipline can boast with pride of the cumulative nature of its research; we appear to be approaching a "bottom line." Such pride may be justified, however, only if one's interest in generalizing is narrowly limited to the countries of Western Europe and North America. And even for those countries, one needs to further restrict the generalizability of the findings to those elections that occur in economies experiencing only comparatively small upswings or downswings; the bulk of research on the political economy of elections has been based upon those of the past decade or two when the economies of the nations studied have been relatively stable.² The case of Britain, which is experiencing protracted eco-

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nomie decline, is a partial exception, and not surprisingly studies on that system have uncovered important changes in the structure of the British electorate as a result of that decline.³ But even in the British case the decline has been a gradual one, occurring over several decades, rather than one reflecting a dramatic shift and break with the past.

Notwithstanding the limited attention given them by the scholarly community, regular, competitive elections do occur in a wide range of countries outside of Europe and North America, in countries as populous as India or as tiny as Trinidad, as oil-rich as Venezuela or as poor as Sri Lanka (see Weiner and Ozbudun, 1987). As a group, these and other Third World nations differ in many ways from the cases that have been the central focus of attention; but in terms of the development of a science of the political economy of voting behavior, their most salient characteristic is their greater vulnerability to far deeper, more protracted, and more frequent economic crises than have been experienced in post-World War II Western Europe and North America.

By way of contrast, in their discussion of the British case, Hibbs, Jr., and Vasilatos (1981:32) argue that in the 1970s, "both inflation and unemployment stood at *disastrously* high rates. Inflation actually *soared* to more than 20 percent per annum in 1975" (emphasis added). It is true that unemployment increased—by over 50 percent between 1973 and 1975. But these dramatic increases need to be compared to the rates of inflation and unemployment experienced in the Third World. While the increase in unemployment in Britain may have been "disastrous," it had only increased from 2.6 percent to 4.1 percent.⁴ In developing countries it is not uncommon for inflation to run at over five times the British rate and unemployment to remain at three to four times the British rate, for decades at a time. Indeed, in many Third World countries, achieving unemployment and inflation rates matching the worst performance in Britain would be considered a major victory. In 1986, according to the International Monetary Fund, inflation rates in poor countries averaged thirty-two times the rate in the United States.⁵

There are many reasons why the Third World suffers from more acute economic fluctuations than the West, but this is not the place to discuss them. Suffice it to say that one major factor is that most of these countries are heavily dependent financially and economically on the industrialized countries and that minor perturbations in the economies of the latter usually have greatly magnified effects on the former. In addition, economic policies that have been forged in much of the Third World are designed to achieve major spurts of

growth over short time periods in an effort rapidly to overcome underdevelopment. These policies have, however, turned out to be particularly vulnerable to failure.⁶

How do the generalizations regarding the impact of economic performance on electoral behavior hold up under conditions of far greater variability in the independent variables? According to Fiorina (1981b:74), if relatively small ups and downs of the economy can be shown to substantially influence voting behavior, there is no question of the effects of large shifts: "Who doubts that some part of the electoral outcome reflects voter reaction to economic conditions? The question becomes trivial when one considers extreme cases like the Great Depression, from which the American Republican Party has yet to recover." Applying Fiorina's logic to the Third World, one would anticipate that the linkage between economics and electoral behavior should be readily apparent.

Unfortunately, we cannot make that assertion, since virtually no research on the political economy of elections has been conducted in other areas of the world.⁷ An investigator interested in broadening our knowledge of the impact of economic performance on electoral behavior to include the Third World might hope to find some guidance in the literature on violence and revolution, a literature that is quite extensive. That literature specifically considers the impact of economic crises on system stability, but largely ignores questions of electoral politics per se. Currently, for example, a wide-ranging debate has emerged over the explanation for coups d'état in Africa.⁸ Unfortunately, elections are largely ignored in that debate, and thus it is of little help. Moreover, the key variables in the political economy of elections research, especially inflation and unemployment, are ignored entirely in this African research.⁹ Similarly, the older literature on the role of crises in development, a literature which was explicitly cross-national and heavily emphasized the Third World, largely ignored economic crises and focused instead on crises of national identity, legitimacy, participation, distribution, and penetration (Binder et al., 1971).

Broad generalizations linking economic crises to political crises emerge from some studies. One such general explanation is embedded in Mancur Olson's well-known analysis of the impact of economic growth on political stability. Olson (1963:543) states that "a severe depression, or a sudden decrease in the level of income, could, of course, also be destabilizing—and for many of the same reasons that rapid economic growth itself can be destabilizing. A rapid

economic decline, like rapid economic growth, will bring about important movements in the relative economic positions of people and will therefore set up contradictions between the structures of economic power and the distribution of social and political power." Olson does not explain, however, how these "movements" manifest themselves in particular political forms.

But Olson is not alone in failing to specify the explicit linkages of economic crisis to political crisis. A review of the literature on the impact of economic crises on electoral behavior, the subject of this essay, offers precious little guidance for hypothesis formulation. Nevertheless, some hypotheses have emerged. The first of these is that economic crises lead to the strengthening of extremist parties (be they of left or right).

In Zimmermann's (1983:189-90) review of the crisis literature he notes that a serious economic downturn during 1966-67 in West Germany "led to a political crisis, one indicator being the simultaneous gaining in strength of the National Democratic Party (NPD, the right extremist party)." A similar relationship between economic crisis and the rise of extremism was apparent during the Weimar Republic in Germany. According to Lepsius (1978:50-51), "The impact of the economic depression on the rise of Nazism and the breakdown of democracy in Germany cannot be overestimated. It has often been stated, and the assumption is very plausible, that without the disruption of the economic situation, the political system would not have entered a prolonged crisis, nor would a large segment of the population have been mobilized by the Nazi movement. The rise of the Nazi movement and the unemployment curve show a close similarity. Germany was hit particularly hard by the world depression. Next to the United States, she suffered most, much more than France, Great Britain, the Scandinavian countries, Holland and Belgium."

But not all economic crises are of the same magnitude. According to Kornhauser's classic study, the more severe the crisis, the greater the likelihood that extremist parties will receive increased support. Kornhauser draws his evidence directly from a study of nine European nations in which elections were held shortly before and after the onset of the Great Depression. In six of those cases the Communist vote increased, but in the other three it declined. Kornhauser (1959:161) concludes that "when the crisis is less severe, the electorate is more inclined to support pragmatic programs of amelioration within the established order. The orientation is less one of destruction and more one of improvement."

Perhaps these milder crises give rise to milder voter reactions. One such political manifestation of economic crisis, presenting the second hypothesis to be tested by the Costa Rican case, may be that of electoral realignment (Burnham, 1970). Voters need not necessarily abandon traditional parties in times of crisis, but as happened in the United States during the Roosevelt years, class-based voting is altered in form but the party system *per se* remains intact.

A third hypothesis of the possible reaction of a polity to protracted economic crisis is voter disaffection with the electoral system and the consequent abstention from voting. A variant of this thesis is argued and tested by Coleman (1976) and found to hold in the case of Mexico. In the Mexican case abstention as a form of protest resulted from the exclusion of some sectors from the overall benefits of several decades of growth enjoyed by the society as a whole.

A fourth hypothesis is that under conditions of economic crisis, politics should become increasingly characterized by violence. While the connection between violence and regime change is not at all clear (Zimmermann, 1983:192-93), severe economic crises have frequently been associated with escalating political violence. One recent illustration is that of Jamaica, a country which is experiencing a protracted economic downturn and in which recent elections have been dominated by violent acts, including widespread murder (Seligson, 1987). An explanation of the link between violence and economic crisis may be found in the impact of economic crisis on increasing income inequality that in turn is linked to violence (Muller and Seligson, 1987).

Our purpose here is to extend understanding of the political economy of elections both generally and with reference to Central America in particular. First, the focus on a Central American case allows us to see if the patterns that emerge there parallel those uncovered in the industrialized nations. Second, given the extraordinary volatility of the economies of Central America (because of their extreme dependence on export agriculture), data from this region allow us to study an economy undergoing a severe economic crisis rather than one experiencing the small shifts characteristic of the European and North American cases studied to date. The goal is to determine if, under Central American crisis conditions, democratic rule in the form of elections can be expected to survive.

To initiate this explorative research we have selected Costa Rica, the one Central American country that has held free, open, and competitive elections uninterrupted since 1953, and is frequently held up as a model Latin Ameri-

can democracy (Peeler, 1985). Indeed for most of the twentieth century Costa Rica has held regular elections, but a civil war in 1948, largely fought over an attempted violation of the integrity of the electoral system, interrupted the series (Seligson, 1987).

The Costa Rican Election of 1986

On 2 February 1986 Costa Rica held national elections for president, vice-president, the legislative assembly, and municipal councilmen.¹⁰ The election took place while Costa Rica was undergoing its most severe and protracted economic crisis of the century. As a result of seriously misguided economic policies, coupled with an unfavorable international environment during the administration of President Rodrigo Carazo (1978–82), the Costa Rican economy went into a tailspin. Details of the causes and manifestations of the economic crisis have been recounted elsewhere and will not be repeated here.¹¹ The 1982 elections, not surprisingly, saw the defeat of the incumbent party and a definitive victory for the challengers, led by Luis Alberto Monge and his Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN). During the administration of President Monge the decline of the economy was stabilized and inflation and unemployment were reduced markedly, but the damage done to the economy was not repaired and the underlying problems seemed worse than ever. As President Monge left office, interest payments on the foreign debt were suspended and the country went into technical default.

The most notable manifestation of the economic crisis has been the foreign debt: standing at \$1.1 billion in 1978, it had more than tripled to \$3.8 billion by 1984, exceeding the GDP (which hovered around \$3.1 billion). But individuals do not directly experience the weight of these debts and could have safely excluded them from their voting calculus if it had not been for the wide variety of other factors that did directly affect the Costa Rican voter. In concrete terms, between 1979 and 1984 the GNP per capita declined 13 percent, open unemployment increased by 69.5 percent, consumption of basic food items declined by 37.4 percent,¹² the currency was devalued by some 550 percent, and imports declined by 48.3 percent and exports, by 11.6 percent (Céspedes et al., 1985:80).

Perhaps more important than the impact of the crisis on current economic

conditions was the widespread consensus among economists that the crisis, which had already lasted for six years, was not going to be resolved for the foreseeable future. Costa Rica relies upon agricultural exports for the bulk of its foreign exchange earnings. World commodity markets are depressed and will probably remain so for some years to come. Moreover, even if those markets were to take a dramatic upswing, the magnitude of the foreign debt and the cost of servicing it are so large that it would take years of unprecedented high prices for Costa Rica's commodity exports to generate sufficient funds to pay off the bulk of the debt. Other sources of income traditionally have included trade within the Central American Common Market, but conditions in the region, especially the protracted conflicts in El Salvador and Nicaragua, have been and continue to be very unfavorable for a significant turnaround in what have been, since the beginning of the decade, severely depressed levels of intraregional commerce. The crisis is a long-term phenomenon, not subject to a "quick fix."

Costa Rican voters have not escaped the economic hardships implied by these figures. Yet an examination of the overall voting figures would not have revealed that such a severe crisis was underway. Indeed, none of the expectations regarding the impact of an economic crisis that were hypothesized above has been realized.

Let us look first at voting for extremist parties. Since the 1930s parties of the left have presented the main challenges to the traditional parties.¹³ For many years the Communist party, known as Vanguardia Popular, led the left but was frequently banned from running candidates for office.¹⁴ Since 1970, however, leftist parties have been continually allowed to compete for office and have consistently won at least two seats in the legislative assembly.¹⁵ Votes for the left are summarized in table 6.1.

Voting for the left peaked in 1982, as a reflection of voter dissatisfaction with the administration that was held responsible for the crisis. At its high point, however, the left received only a tiny proportion of the vote; and even though the economic crisis continued through the 1986 elections, votes for the left declined to their lowest point since 1970. Dissatisfaction with economic conditions, at least at the macro level, is not in evidence from these figures.

If voters did not cast their votes for extremist parties, perhaps an electoral realignment occurred among the major parties. Evidence of that at the macro level likely would be revealed in a sudden major shift of voters away from one traditional party and toward another. In fact, as the data in table 6.2 show,

Table 6.1. Votes for the Left, 1962–1986

Year	Votes for Deputies (percent)	Votes for President/V.P. (percent)
1962	2.4	0.9
1966	Communists excluded from election	
1970	5.5	1.3
1974	4.4	2.9
1978	7.7	2.9
1982	7.2	3.3
1986	5.1	1.3

Source: Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones.

Table 6.2. Votes by Party, 1953–1986

Year	National Liberation Party	Opposition
1953	64.7	35.3
1958	42.8	58.3
1962	50.3	48.8
1966	49.5	50.5
1970	54.8	43.9
1974	43.4	53.7
1978	43.8	53.3
1982	58.8	37.9
1986	53.4	45.1

Sources: 1986, Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones, and Jiménez (1977).

Table 6.3. Abstentions, 1953–1986

Year	Percent Abstention
1953	32.8
1958	35.3
1962	19.1 ^a
1970	16.7
1974	20.1
1978	18.7
1982	21.4
1986	18.1

a. Voting made mandatory beginning with this election. Another factor producing a decline in abstention since 1962 is that in that year the losing side in the 1948 civil war initiated a complete return to electoral politics. Dr. Calderón Guardia, who had lost the civil war, ran again for president in 1962.

Source: 1986, Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones, and Jiménez (1977).

although the party elected to office in 1978 lost much ground in 1982, the election of 1986 was relatively close, with the incumbent party losing a good share of the lead it had accumulated in 1982.

According to the theory we have reviewed, another mechanism for manifesting discontent with the political system is abstention. This would be a particularly viable alternative for those voters who perceive no real choices among the parties. The abstention rates, however, reveal no evidence of rising discontent among Costa Rican voters.¹⁶ As is shown in table 6.3, abstention in the 1986 elections was at its lowest level in over thirty years.

Finally, the election campaign in Costa Rica was conducted almost without violence. There were a few reported incidents of shoving at some campaign rallies, but nothing of any serious nature occurred.

In sum, the 1986 elections appeared to be merely another in the long series of normal elections that Costa Rica has experienced since 1953. There has been no rise in voting for extremist parties, no evidence of major party realignment, and no increase in abstention. None of the expected impacts of the economic crisis on the electoral system seems to have occurred.

An examination of these results might suggest that we may need to revise our theory of the political economy of elections. One possibility is that Costa Rican election results imply that the voters in a developing country are immune to the economic "facts of life." Perhaps their view of the culpability of elected public officials in determining economic outcomes differs from the views of voters in industrialized nations. Certainly not all voters are equally sensitive to economic conditions. In Europe, as Lewis-Beck (1986:340) notes, the link between economics and politics is not the same for each of the nations he studied: in Britain they were far more "tightly joined" than in Italy. Lewis-Beck points to the work by Putnam (1973:9) that suggests that the British view their government as more effective and responsive than do the Italians. If Costa Ricans hold similar or more unfavorable views of their government than do the Italians, then the apparent absence of a linkage between politics and economics would help explain the results presented above. Another possibility is that, contrary to Fiorina's assertion that under extreme economic conditions voting decisions must obviously reflect economic conditions, voters in crisis conditions respond to other stimuli more familiar to them, such as traditional partisan appeals.

Further examination of the macro data is unlikely to prove fruitful because in order to understand voting behavior under the conditions described here, one needs to look into the mind of the voter, a procedure perhaps best accomplished with survey data. Survey data gathered during the period of the crisis alone, however, will not help unravel the puzzles posed above. For example, if we were to find that voters in Costa Rica during the crisis did not hold their elected officials responsible for economic conditions, we would not know if they had held them responsible *prior* to the onset of the crisis. Survey data for the crisis period alone, therefore, do not allow us to attribute to the extreme economic conditions themselves the alteration of the well-established linkage of voting to economic conditions. What is needed is survey data of a sample of Costa Rican voters interviewed prior to the onset of the crisis and later during the crisis, as described below.

The 1978 and 1985 Surveys

The two surveys analyzed in this study are drawn from an ongoing comparative investigation of public opinion in which the authors have

been engaged since the early 1970s.¹⁷ One was drawn in 1978, the high point of Costa Rica's prosperity prior to the onset of the economic crisis, and a second in 1985, some months prior to the February 1986 elections.

Both surveys are multistage, stratified probability samples covering the Metropolitan Region of greater San José and its surrounding suburbs and towns. This is the principal urban area of the country, incorporating 80 percent of the nation's urban population and 40 percent of the population of the country as a whole. The minimum voting age in Costa Rica is eighteen; hence the surveys cover only those eighteen years of age and older. Both questionnaires were administered in the homes of the respondents.

The 1978 survey included 201 respondents. In the 1985 survey an effort was made to reinterview those who had responded to the earlier interview, thereby establishing a panel design. However, since the initial study was not conducted with a panel design in mind, relocating the respondents was a difficult task, one that met with only partial success. Of the 201 respondents from 1978, a total of 75 were relocated and reinterviewed. In terms of basic socioeconomic characteristics, the panel differs little from the cross-section survey of 1985 except that it does not contain anyone who was younger than eighteen years of age in 1978. Hence, the reinterviewed panel comprises respondents twenty-five years of age and older. An examination of the cross-section data did not reveal any significant age-related associations among the variables analyzed in this study. Reference will be made to this panel at several points in the discussion.

The 1985 sample was not limited to the reinterviews. Rather, it was also designed to form a cross-section of the 1985 population and hence be directly comparable with the entire 1978 cross-section. In total, the 1985 sample contains 506 valid cases, including the 75 reinterviews from 1978.

Voter Evaluation of Government Performance

At the level of the individual, nearly all research on the linkage between the economy and voting behavior adheres to some form of a theory of retrospective voting first postulated by Key (1966) and refined by Fiorina (1981b), among others. At its most basic level, this theory simply says that before casting a ballot the voter considers the incumbent's success in dealing with the economy, and if that evaluation is positive, the incumbent (or his

party) is rewarded with a vote.¹⁸ On the other hand, if the evaluation of the economy's performance is negative, the voter punishes the incumbent and casts his ballot for the opposition. A more general elaboration of this theory is suggested by Linz and Stepan (1978), who argue that beyond the narrower question of voting is the larger question of democratic stability itself, and that the stability of democracy rests heavily upon the efficacy of the government in dealing with the problems of the day. After all, as Gurr (1974) has found in studying his sample of 336 polities in the 170 years between 1800 to 1970, the average life expectancy of historical polities has been only thirty-two years. Ineffectual governments may not only lose the next election but they may also be responsible for insurrection, revolution, and a total collapse of the system of government.

Advances in formulating instruments for measuring voter retrospection on economic issues have been occurring for several years. Comparative research by Lewis-Beck (1986) has found that there is little predictive power in asking voters how the economy has fared in recent months. Rather, the use of a "mediated retrospective" set of questions, ones that focus on the impact of the government on the economy, is far more powerful.¹⁹ We used a battery of items similar to, but more specific and more finely graduated than, the mediated retrospective items utilized by Lewis-Beck in his European research.

In both our 1978 and 1985 surveys we asked the respondents to evaluate the performance of the incumbent administration on six specific dimensions, three of which were explicitly related to the performance of the economy, while the others dealt with various aspects of the administration's performance.²⁰ In each case we asked the respondent to evaluate the impact of the government on the basis of a seven-point scale. According to the studies conducted by Rosenstone, Hansen, and Kinder (1986), the three-option wording ("better, worse or about the same") used in much of the research on economic voting is inferior to scales that offer a wide range of options.²¹ We do not claim our measure is necessarily better than the others, but we do believe it is sensitive enough to register the expected decline in evaluation of administration performance resulting from the economic crisis. Indeed, this is precisely what we found. Table 6.4 compares the mean scores on each of the six administration performance items for the 1978 and 1985 cross-sections.

Examination of table 6.4 shows quite clearly that Costa Ricans are not insensitive to the performance of their incumbents. On every one of the six

Table 6.4. Evaluation of Administration Performance, 1978 and 1985 Cross-Section Samples

<i>Item</i>	<i>1978 Mean^a</i>	<i>1985 Mean</i>	<i>Sig. of t</i>
On a scale of 1 to 7, to what degree would you say that the administration ^b of President _____:			
1. Controlled the problem of the cost of living.	4.7	3.8	<.001
2. Helped the needy classes.	5.5	4.0	<.001
3. Increased national production.	5.5	4.7	<.001
4. Guaranteed the protection and security of individuals.	5.6	4.9	<.001
5. Demonstrated strong, capable leadership.	5.8	4.6	<.001
6. Combated crime.	4.9	4.2	<.001
(Maximum N: 1978 = 201; 1985 = 506)			

Note: The 1978 survey was conducted shortly after the new government had taken power, and hence the respondents were asked to evaluate the performance of the prior government.

a. A score of 1 indicates the poorest level of performance while a score of 7 indicates the highest.

b. It should be noted that in Spanish the word used in this item is "el gobierno," which some have incorrectly translated directly into English to mean "the government." The correct meaning of the term in Spanish, however, is equivalent to the English "the administration."

items respondents rated the precrisis administration as more effective than the administration in power during the crisis. One might suspect, however, that this finding may be merely an artifact of the partisan preferences of the respondents. This suspicion can be laid to rest in two ways. First, the administration's performance being evaluated in the precrisis survey was controlled by the same party as that evaluated during the second survey.²² Second, an analysis of individual opinions through an examination of the data from the

panel sample reveals that the lowered opinion of administration performance is not produced by sampling error in the cross-section design. As shown in table 6.5, those reinterviewed in 1985 had a lower opinion of the administration's performance than they did in 1978. Indeed, close comparison of the panel results on these items with the cross-section reveals that they are remarkably similar.

A final doubt about the interpretation of these data is that they may not directly reflect an evaluation of the effectiveness of a given administration but rather may reflect the personal popularity of the incumbent president. An examination of presidential popularity shows that President Monge in 1985 was actually more popular than was President Daniel Oduber in 1978. In December 1977, three months prior to the election of 1978, President Oduber's administration was evaluated favorably by 53 percent of the electorate. In January 1986, a month before the 1986 election, President Monge's administration was evaluated favorably by exactly the same proportion of the electorate. The proportion of those evaluating Oduber negatively, however, was higher than for Monge (18 versus 11 percent). The percentage difference score (positive support minus negative support) of Monge was +44, compared to +33 for Oduber.²³

Further evidence is contained in a recent Gallup International poll of 1,215 adult Costa Ricans, which found President Monge to be more popular than any living president and more popular than any other living political figure in Costa Rica. Former president Oduber was rated favorably by 69.1 percent of the respondents, compared to 83.9 percent for Monge.²⁴ Therefore, if presidential popularity had contaminated the items on the administration's effectiveness, the effect would be to further widen the gap in the evaluation of the effectiveness of the two administrations. That is, one would expect that the somewhat lower popularity of Oduber may have been responsible for a lowering of the effectiveness scores for 1978, whereas the greater popularity of Monge may have helped raise the effectiveness scores for 1985. This expectation is confirmed by the strong correlation between presidential popularity and the evaluation of administration performance, as shown in table 6.6.²⁵ In sum, there is ample evidence that presidential popularity is not responsible for the perceived higher effectiveness of the precrisis government; therefore the lower perceived effectiveness of the 1985 government is a response to the conditions of the day and not the personal popularity of the president.

Table 6.5. Evaluation of Administration Performance, 1978/1985 Panel

<i>Item</i>	1978 <i>Mean^a</i>	1985 <i>Mean</i>	<i>Sig. of t</i>
On a scale of 1 to 7, to what degree would you say that the administration of President _____:			
1. Controlled the problem of the cost of living.	5.1	3.6	<.001
2. Helped the needy classes.	5.7	4.2	<.001
3. Increased national production.	5.9	5.0	.003
4. Guaranteed the protection and security of individuals.	5.9	4.8	<.001
5. Demonstrated strong, capable leadership.	6.2	4.5	<.001
6. Combated crime.	5.0	4.1	<.001
(Maximum N = 75)			

a. A score of 1 indicates the poorest level of performance while a score of 7 indicates the highest.

To this point in the analysis, a comparison of the macro and micro data presents an unexpected disjuncture. The brief review we presented of the 1986 election suggested by its normalcy (lowered voting for extremist parties, lowered rate of abstentions, absence of realignment, and absence of violence) that Costa Rican voters were somehow immune to the political effects of an economic crisis. If this had indeed been the case, then we would need to begin to reexamine the assumed universality of the theory of the political economy of voting behavior because either it might not apply to developing countries or it might not apply under conditions of crisis. The survey data, however, reveal quite clearly that the Costa Rican voters are sensitive to the economic crisis and that they hold their elected officials responsible for it. That is, their mediated retrospective evaluation of administration effectiveness seems to clearly reflect their awareness of the economic crisis and the government's inability to resolve it. The disjuncture lies in the fact that this awareness was not translated into

Table 6.6. Correlation of Evaluation of Administration Performance (1985) and Presidential Popularity

Item	<i>r</i>
On a scale of 1 to 7, to what degree would you say that the administration of President Monge:	
1. Controlled the problem of the cost of living.	.52 ^a
2. Helped the needy classes.	.47 ^a
3. Increased national production.	.39 ^a
4. Guaranteed the protection and security of individuals.	.30 ^b
5. Demonstrated strong, capable leadership.	.40 ^a
6. Combated crime.	.47 ^a
(Maximum N = 506)	

a. = sig. at < .001.

b. = sig. at < .01.

behaviors consistent with the theory. In extraordinary times Costa Rican voters have acted in ordinary ways. We need to know why this has been so.

The "Deep Structure" of the Political Economy of Voting Behavior

Research on the political economy of voting behavior has focused heavily upon short-term forces. At the macro level, economic cycles are correlated with election results. At the micro level, individual perceptions of national and personal economic situations, sometimes coupled with overall measures of incumbent popularity, are used to predict individual votes. But probably because the studies that have been conducted to date have not examined elections during crisis conditions, they have not generally probed deeper factors underlying voting decisions. In other words, the research on the political economy of voting behavior has largely been content to make successful predictions of individual election outcomes. It has not concerned itself with

Table 6.7. Approval of Violent Political Protest, 1978 and 1985 Cross-Section Samples

I am going to read you a list of some actions that people can take to achieve their goals and political objectives. I would like you to tell me (on a scale of 1 to 7) how firmly you approve or disapprove of people taking these actions:

Action ^a	Mean	Mean	Sig. of <i>t</i>
	1978	1985	
Taking over factories, offices, and other buildings.	2.12	1.50	<.001
Participating in a group that wants to overthrow the government by violent means.	1.63	1.29	.003
Participating in demonstrations that damage buildings, vehicles, or other property.	1.29	1.27	NS
Participating in fights with the police or with other demonstrators.	1.62	1.41	.015

a. Scale position 1 indicates lowest support while 7 indicates highest support.

voters who decide not to vote, who abandon traditional politics and move on to support extremist parties, or who engage in political violence.

The crisis conditions facing the Costa Rican voter have not (at least not yet) been translated into extraordinary behavior. An examination of the survey data we have collected gives us two very clear indications why this is so.

First, Costa Ricans, in spite of the economic crisis, reject violent behavior as a means to achieve their political goals. In both 1978 and 1985 we asked our respondents a series of five questions on the extent to which different forms of violent actions would be justified as a means to achieving a political objective (see tables 6.7 and 6.8).

Table 6.8. Approval of Violent Political Protest, 1978/1985 Panel Sample

I am going to read you a list of some actions that people can take to achieve their goals and political objectives. I would like you to tell me (on a scale of 1 to 7) how firmly you approve or disapprove of people taking these actions:

<i>Action^a</i>	<i>Mean</i> 1978	<i>Mean</i> 1985	<i>Sig. of t</i>
Taking over factories, offices, and other buildings.	2.06	1.45	.017
Participating in a group that wants to overthrow the government by violent means.	1.56	1.28	NS
Participating in demonstrations that damage buildings, vehicles, or other property.	1.27	1.41	NS
Participating in fights with the police or with other demonstrators.	1.70	1.45	NS

a. Scale position 1 indicates lowest support while 7 indicates highest support.

The level of support for violent protest activity is very low in both 1978 and 1985. On the seven-point scale used for this study, the means hover close to the lowest scale point (i.e., 1). Equally important, the level of support for violent activities has not increased between 1978 and 1985. Indeed, the cross-section samples show some significant decreases, but that pattern is not repeated in the panel sample.

Second, high levels of support for the basic institutions of government seem to protect the system from extreme reactions to economic crisis. In both 1978 and 1985 we asked our respondents about their support for the basic institutions of government.²⁶ We asked them seven questions, each rated by a seven-point scale, as shown in tables 6.9 and 6.10. What we found is that there was

Table 6.9. Support for Institutions, 1978 and 1985 Cross-Section Samples

<i>Item^a</i>	<i>Mean</i> 1978	<i>Mean</i> 1985	<i>Sig. of t</i>
To what degree . . .			
1. do you believe that the courts in Costa Rica guarantee a fair trial?	5.3	5.1	NS
2. do you have respect for the political institutions of Costa Rica?	5.9	6.1	NS
3. do you believe that the basic rights of citizens are well protected under the Costa Rican political system?	5.2	5.7	<.001
4. are you proud to live under the Costa Rican political system?	6.3	6.5	NS
5. do you believe that the Costa Rican political system is the best possible system?	5.7	6.2	<.001
6. do you believe that one ought to support the Costa Rican political system?	5.9	6.5	<.001
7. do you believe that you and your friends are well represented in the Costa Rican political system?	5.0	5.3	.007

(Maximum N: 1978 = 189; 1985 = 505)

a. A scale of 1 to 7 was used, with 1 indicating lowest support and 7 highest support.

no decline in support for the basic institutions of government in spite of the crisis. In the cross-section sample, four of the seven items did show significant differences between 1978 and 1985, but in each case the 1985 means were slightly higher (i.e., more supportive) than in 1978. The panel results were even more consistent, with only three of the seven items showing significant differences, but again the direction was in terms of slightly *higher* support in 1985. Hence, the survey data show that despite the crisis, levels of system support remained high in Costa Rica.

Table 6.10. Support for Institutions, 1978/1985 Panel Sample

Item ^a	Mean 1978	Mean 1985	Sig. of <i>t</i>
To what degree . . .			
1. do you believe that the courts in Costa Rica guarantee a fair trial?	4.9	5.4	.015
2. do you have respect for the political institutions of Costa Rica?	6.2	6.2	NS
3. do you believe that the basic rights of citizens are well protected under the Costa Rican political system?	5.4	5.4	NS
4. are you proud to live under the Costa Rican political system?	6.6	6.3	NS
5. do you believe that the Costa Rican political system is the best possible system?	6.2	5.9	<.001
6. do you believe that one ought to support the Costa Rican political system?	6.6	6.1	.005
7. do you believe that you and your friends are well represented in the Costa Rican political system? (Maximum N = 69)	5.3	5.3	NS

a. A scale of 1 to 7 was used, with 1 indicating lowest support and 7 highest support.

Conclusions

In marked contrast to the other Central American nations, Costa Rica has a deeply entrenched system of democratic rule. No other nation in the region has a history of widespread participation, regular free and competitive elections, institutionalized parties, and respect for civil and human rights. The economic crisis of the 1980s has shaken the economic foundations of the system, however, leading some to question the resilience of its democracy. This chapter has shown that although Costa Ricans are keenly aware of

the economic crisis and hold their leaders accountable for it, those feelings have not spilled over into a more generalized dissatisfaction with the basic system of government. Hence, in spite of the economic crisis, Costa Ricans still express a degree of pride in and support for their political system undiminished from the precrisis period. In addition, they continue to express strong opposition to violent political actions. In short, Costa Ricans have developed a political culture supportive of democracy, a culture that, according to the other chapters of this book, is embryonic at best in the other nations of the Central American region.

There are, of course, limits of tolerance for poor economic performance even in systems as deeply democratic as Costa Rica's. Like all new administrations, the administration elected in February 1986 was given a "honeymoon" of immunity from criticism, but never in recent Costa Rican history has that honeymoon period lasted for such a brief period. Indeed, in the weeks prior to the installation of the new president in May 1986, critical voices were already being heard in the press as rumors surfaced regarding acceptance of new "structural adjustment packages" imposed by the International Monetary Fund. Labor groups were particularly sensitive to potential threats from reduction of public-sector jobs.

But perhaps the most serious concern was the potential reduction of U.S. foreign assistance. The closing of *contra* bases near the Costa Rican border with Nicaragua, along with the leadership role Costa Rica has taken in promoting the "Arias Plan" for peace in the region, has caused friction between the U.S. State Department and Costa Rica. Foreign assistance in the period 1981-84 totaled slightly more than \$3 billion (Céspedes et al., 1985:124). A sharp decline in that assistance would probably precipitate a collapse of the Costa Rican economy.

Under those conditions, Costa Rican voter reaction might well follow the more extreme formulas described earlier in this essay. The first months of the Arias administration were punctuated by a dramatic increase in strikes. One sign that Costa Ricans are clearly linking economics and politics is that the most recent demonstrations for the first time have shifted from their traditional locus, the Legislative Assembly, to the front door of the Central Bank. Farmers were protesting the reduction of price supports for several agricultural products and apparently saw the direct connection between the externally imposed financial adjustments and domestic economic policy. If a massive economic collapse were to occur, one could predict that a far larger proportion of the

electorate would move toward lower support for the political system as they seek new alternatives to rescue them from the pain induced by economic collapse. As the illustration of the collapse of the Weimar Republic discussed earlier demonstrates, not all alternatives chosen under circumstances such as these are necessarily democratic ones.

Notes

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1. Initially there appeared to be a contradiction between macro- and micro-level studies. Those studies found that the economy had a strong effect on the outcome of elections, but did not uniformly find that the economy had similar effects on the individual voter (Hibbs, Jr., and Vasilatos, 1981). However, the use of more refined survey questions has found that individuals are indeed sensitive to economic conditions when deciding for whom to cast their ballots. Currently the debate centers on which factor, the general state of the economy or personal economic well-being, is more important (Rosenstone, Hansen, and Kinder, 1986).

2. Important historical voting behavior research has been conducted, especially on the United States, but much of that work (and debate) has focused on the causes of partisan realignment and low voter turnout (see Burhnam, 1970, 1982; Rusk, 1978).

3. Some of the key work on the impact of economic decline on voting behavior is found in Crewe, Särilvik, and Alt (1977), Franklin and Maugham (1978) and Finer (1980). Hibbs, Jr., and Vasilatos (1981:34) have modeled the impact of economic performance on party popularity over the period 1960–79, but they avoid dealing with the Depression because of their assertion that a single model ought not to hold in both the “pre- and post-Keynesian eras.”

4. For unemployment data for Britain, see Hughes and Perlman (1984:12).

5. As reported in the *New York Times*, 5 August 1986, p. 34.

6. Beginning in the 1930s many Latin American governments embarked upon programs of massive state investments in order to spur industrialization (Hirschman, 1963). In the 1970s neoconservative policies were attempted (Foxley, 1983; Ramos, 1986). Although much was achieved in some of these countries, especially in the improvement of infrastructure, triple-digit inflation, double-digit unemployment, and massive foreign debts have remained an almost constant feature throughout the region.

7. But readers should note Joel D. Barkin's paper (1987) in a new book on African elections.

8. See the extended exchange of views in the March 1986 (vol. 80) issue of the *American Political Science Review*, pp. 225–49.

9. The economic variables included by Johnson, Slater, and McGowan (1984) include growth in GNP, growth in industrial jobs, the ratio of exports-imports to GNP, and changes in commodity concentration. It should be noted that reliable measurements of inflation and, especially, unemployment are particularly hard to come by for many of the African countries under study.

10. Costa Rica has a unicameral legislature, with representatives (*diputados*) elected from each of the nation's seven provinces. Provinces are further subdivided into cantons, each canton electing its municipal government officials.

11. See Seligson (1983a) and Céspedes, DiMare, and Jiménez (1985).

12. This is based upon per capita consumption of the “canasta básica,” or basic food basket.

13. The right has been organized into the Movimiento de Costa Rica Libre, but has not had any significant electoral presence.

14. Article 98 of the Constitution of 1949 prohibited participation in elections by parties that were linked to international movements and viewed as being antidemocratic. This provision was applied to the Communist party of Costa Rica.

15. In 1982 they won four seats, the highest number since the 1940s.

16. In Costa Rica registered voters are given a “cédula,” or identification card, which serves not only to allow them to vote but is also required identification for a wide variety of formal transactions, such as cashing a check, obtaining a passport, or applying for a job. Abstention rates are calculated as the proportion of registered voters who do not actually vote. Small fines may be levied against nonvoters, but are rarely collected.

17. In 1978 Edward N. Muller began participating in this collaborative effort as well.

18. Key's theory is broader than a focus on the economy, but much of the empirical testing of the theory has been concerned primarily with the economic dimension. Other factors, such as foreign policy during the Vietnam War, have influenced the voter, but such issues are not often very salient when compared to economic issues. Edward Tufte's (1978) seminal (and prize-winning) volume, *The Political Control of the Economy*, makes only one passing reference to the Vietnam War.

19. In a multiple regression equation, Lewis-Beck found that the simple retrospective evaluation of the economy tended to shrink to insignificance when mediated retrospective items were introduced. He also found that mediated prospective evaluations (i.e., the opinion of the voter as to the government's probable future success in dealing with the economy) played a key role in determining the vote.

20. The questionnaires contained additional items in this battery that were not identical in both surveys and therefore are not analyzed here. Specifically, in 1985 respondents were asked to evaluate how well the government was doing in promoting “democratic principles” generally speaking, whereas in 1978 that item was broken

down into three separate questions, one focusing on business, another on unions, and a third on universities.

21. But note that Lewis-Beck (1986:325) used a five-point scale in his measurement of the impact of the economy upon the individual and found no improvement over previous studies. In both his mediated retrospective and mediated prospective items he uses a three-point coding scheme.

22. That is, the 1978 survey respondents evaluated the performance of the government in power from 1974 to 1978, whereas the 1985 respondents evaluated the government in power from 1982 to 1986. In both cases the Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN) was in power.

23. These data come from surveys conducted by Gómez in the Metropolitan Area, the same area covered by the 1978 and 1985 surveys of public opinion analyzed in this paper. The 1986 survey, however, was limited to the Alajuela region.

24. This poll was conducted by Consultoría Interdisciplinaria en Desarrollo (CID), the Gallup affiliate in Costa Rica. The results were reported in *La Nación*, 13 April 1986, p. 8a. These data, however, are retrospective with regard to Oduber and hence do not reflect popular views toward Oduber near the end of his period in office. The survey conducted in 1977 reported above, therefore, is a more accurate guide. In any event, both studies show the greater popularity of Monge.

25. No correlation is presented for the 1978 data since the popularity question asked in that survey focused on the newly elected president, whereas the evaluation data focused on the previous administration.

26. The development and cross-national validation of the items used to make up this scale have been discussed in Muller, Jukam, and Seligson (1982), Seligson (1983b), and Booth and Seligson (1984).

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7 Democracy and Elections in Central America Autumn of the Oligarchs?

John A. Peeler

Everything had come to an end before he did, we had even extinguished the last breath of the hopeless hope that someday the repeated and always denied rumor that he had finally succumbed to some one of his many regal illnesses would be true, and yet we didn't believe it now that it was, and not because we really didn't believe it but because we no longer wanted it to be true, we had ended up not understanding what would become of us without him, what would become of our lives after him. . . .—Gabriel García Márquez, *The Autumn of the Patriarch*

The Reagan administration, like many before it, has proudly claimed credit for the emergence of democracy in Central America, as well as elsewhere in Latin America.¹ The contributors to this volume have demonstrated that such a claim is unfounded: Central American political evolution has indeed been decisively shaped by the United States, but the regimes established and the elections held under strong U.S. pressure cannot by any reasonable standard be called democratic, and their prospects for long-term stability are minimal. This chapter attempts to synthesize the arguments and evidence presented in the preceding chapters by investigating the political and economic constraints on democracy in Central America and by examining the nature of electoral experiences in the region. It concludes with a discussion of prospects and problems in Nicaragua's revolutionary approach to democracy.

International Constraints:

The Impact of the United States and the World Economy

As small countries deeply embedded in the U.S. sphere of influence, the Central American nations cannot be adequately understood