

**COSTA RICAN DEMOCRACY;
PLURALISM AND CLASS RULE**

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The article argues that the emergence and maintenance of Costa Rican democracy cannot be attributed to unique economic or social circumstances, but rather to identifiable elite actions that changed the character of political life. The argument is supported by a review of recent political history and an analysis of the functioning of the contemporary political system. This runs counter to a very common argument that attributes Costa Rica's unique democracy to the relative equality of wealth and status that has characterized the country since colonial times. A second persuasion emphasizes the virtual powerlessness of the mass of the population, but sees the maintenance of democracy as an outgrowth of a pluralistic dispersion of power and divergence of interests among the powerful minority. A third viewpoint, essentially the opposite of the first, sees the democratic regime as a continuation of patterns of class domination with deep historical roots. This article stands between the second and third schools of thoughts, attributing the democratic regime to explicit accommodations of interests among rival elites, while emphasizing the persistence of class domination in Costa Rican politics.

INTRODUCTION

The recent crisis in Central America has brought renewed attention to the most peaceful and democratic of the countries in the region, Costa Rica. While her neighbors have suffered dictatorship, political violence and revolution, Costa Rica has avoided, thus far, the destabilization of its democratic regime,

in spite of a severe economic crisis and pressures from the United States to involve itself in the counterrevolutionary insurgency against Nicaragua. Such an apparent anomaly needs to be understood, not only for itself, but because the "Costa Rican model" is frequently cited as an aspiration by reformers elsewhere in the Isthmus. (For a comparison with other Latin American democracies, see Peeler, 1983 and 1985.)

It will be the argument of this article that the emergence and maintenance of Costa Rican democracy cannot be attributed to unique economic or social circumstances, but rather to identifiable elite actions that changed the character of political life. This runs counter to a very common argument that attributes Costa Rica's unique democracy to the relative equality of wealth and status that has characterized the country since colonial times (see, e.g., Aguilar Bulgarelli and Araya Pochet, 1970; Monge, 1980; Busey, 1962). A second persuasion emphasizes the virtual powerlessness of the mass of the population, but sees the maintenance of democracy as an outgrowth of a pluralistic dispersion of power and divergence of interests among the powerful minority (Denton, 1971; Ameringer, 1982). A third viewpoint, essentially the opposite of the first, sees the democratic regime as a continuation of patterns of class domination with deep historical roots (Vega Carballo, 1982; Seligson, 1980). The argument of this article stands between the second and third schools of thought.

LAYING THE BASIS OF DEMOCRACY

Costa Rica was poorer than most Latin American territories in colonial times, and had a somewhat more egalitarian social structure. These differences were not sufficient to make Costa Rican politics strikingly different from those of its neighbors. Coffee cultivation began early, in the 1830's, and rapidly came to dominate Costa Rica's exports. By 1850, in the heavily populated *meseta central* which was most apt for coffee, the majority of the rural population were either landless or owned small plots intensively planted in coffee. There were a few larger farms that required extra labor during the harvest, and provided *beneficio* (processing) services and credit to the neighboring smallholders. Economic

power was virtually monopolized by a small number of great *cafetaleros* who were also engaged in commerce and finance, and closely linked to foreign financial interests. The majority of the population was tied to the coffee economy either as landless workers or as smallholders who worked part-time on the larger farms (Cardoso and Perez-Brignoli, 1977).

Such an economic structure provided the larger landowners with political clienteles at election time or on occasions when there were battles to be fought. Moreover, the clienteles would be more reliable, productive and conservative because many were landowners and others might hope to become so. The reality of concentration of land and capital provided the means for such economic development that took place in Costa Rica in the nineteenth century, while the ethic of egalitarianism and self-reliance--actually reinforced by the land tenure pattern of coffee culture--helped lay the basis for democratization of the political system.

Politics consisted essentially of a struggle for hegemony (i.e., control of the government and other centers of power) for the sake of the economic benefits and glory it might bring. There was a discernible hegemonic cycle that, with variations, can be seen in operation as late as 1948. These began at the point when a large coalition from among the elite (each leader with his own clientele) combined to remove an incumbent president or boss (e.g., 1842, 1859, 1902, 1936, 1940). There would typically follow a period of instability characterized by a series of truncated presidential terms, disputed elections, and unrest. Eventually, one person would assemble enough support to impose some stability. The scramble for political control that characterized the preceding stage would be replaced by a scramble for access to the clientele of the new leader. If a leader had enough allies within his personal network he would be able to control the indirect elections that were the norm in the nineteenth century. He could thereby assure himself a docile congress and municipal authorities, and he could place himself or a personal ally in the presidency. He could reward his allies with public office, with access to government contracts, or with favorable legal and administrative action. When the ruling coalition became too narrowly based to sustain itself, when too many powerful people were excluded from its

benefits, they might be able to coalesce and force the hegemonic leader to yield. An economic crisis might weaken the regime by diminishing its ability to deliver benefits. A weak leader might lose the support of the armed forces and be ousted by a coup. The poorer masses of the population were involved in this in only the most peripheral way, as low-ranking members of clienteles, and certainly not through political participation in the twentieth century sense.

This model of a personal hegemony was approximated--though never exactly--by the dominant political figures named in Table 1. The table also shows a periodization of Costa Rican political history.

The political system underwent some gradual changes during the period depicted. After 1870, the great coffee growers ceased to control the state directly, but remained a very strong interest. Beginning in the 1880's, the State actively promoted popular education, laying the groundwork for the high literacy rates of the mid-twentieth century. The extent of control by the hegemonic figure tended to decrease, though even Jiménez still got his way most of the time. Elections were indirect, though with a broad male electorate at the initial level. In 1913, the first direct national election was held. The development of political parties was slow, beginning only in the 1890s. Parties did not become central to the political process until the 1940s (Monge, 1980; Stone, 1976).

When Jiménez reached the end of his third term in 1936, there was little indication that the political system was about to change. In the time-honored manner, he arranged the nomination, by the governing Republican Party, and election of León Cortés Castro, a prominent coffee grower and conservative. Cortés moved quickly, however, to take over control of the party and to set aside the aged Jiménez. Cortés' policies tended to unify the propertied classes behind him and to accentuate the resistance of the Communists and their working class supporters. In 1940, when Cortés secured the Presidential nomination for Rafael Angel Calderón Guardia, he could deliver overwhelming political support: Calderón's only national opposition was the Communist leader, Manuel Mora (with about ten percent of the vote). The Communists opposed

Calderón because he presented himself as representing continuity with the pro-capitalist, pro-German policies of Cortés, an expectation surely shared by Cortes. But that was not to be.

TABLE 1

Personal Political Hegemony and the Succession of Regimes*

Regime	Hegemonic Figure	Approximate Dates
Founding Republic		1821 - 1849
	Juan Mora Fernández	1824 - 1833
	Braulio Carillo	1835 - 1842
Coffee Republic		1849 - 1882
	Juan Mora Porras	1849 - 1859
	Francisco Montealegre	1859 - 1870
	Tomás Guardia	1870 - 1882
Liberal Republic		1882 - 1948
	Rafael Yglesias	1890 - 1902
	Ricardo Jiménez	1910 - 1936
	Rafael Angel Calderón	1940 - 1948

*Source: Monge Alfaro (1980), Ch. 8-13

THE CRUCIBLE: 1940-1949

The complex and turbulent period from the election of Calderón to the inauguration of Otilio Ulate was the crucible of modern Costa Rica. In less than a decade, the political scene was completely transformed. (Good sources for this period include Aguilar Bulgarelli, 1974; Bell, 1971; Navarro Bolandi, 1957; Schifter, 1979, 1982; Salazar, 1974, 1981; Rojas Bolaños, 1980; Cañas, 1955.) The first stage of that transformation took place under the hegemony of Rafael Angel Calderón Guardia.

A physician and a devout Catholic, Calderón received his education in the progressive environment of Belgium, where he gained exposure to the new social doctrines of the Church. In the course of his medical practice he became widely known as a philanthropist, and in the 1930s pursued a successful political career as a loyal supporter of Ricardo Jiménez and then of León Cortés Castro. It was this record that led to Cortés' support for his presidential nomination in 1940. As Cortés had done before, Calderón moved successfully to take over the Republican party apparatus and isolate Cortés. It was evident that he intended to secure political hegemony for himself and would be willing to use office, patronage, corruption and fraud to do so.

Calderón was more than a traditional politician, though. He showed himself to be a political innovator in his efforts to strengthen his own hand. He was the first President since the early 1880s to have a cordial relationship with the Church. Even more importantly, he sought to mobilize a working class following by means of social legislation benefiting the workers and an administrative posture that favored labor unions. He was able to transform the political system without fundamentally altering the structure of economic power. Mass political mobilization meant the end of the elite monopoly of political power, and the initiation of welfare programs vastly expanded the role of the state (Rosenberg, 1983, Ch. 3).

Calderón soon found himself opposed by virtually every significant political force. The big coffee growers and other employers opposed his mobilization of the workers, his encouragement of unions, and his welfare state schemes. The

Communists opposed him as a demagogic competitor for working class loyalties. An emerging social democratic sector opposed him because of the remarkably obtuse corruption of his administration. From 1942 on, the United States and the Soviet Union were allies in World War II, and it became acceptable for Communist parties in Latin America to support bourgeois governments. With the conservative opposition actively conspiring to overthrow Calderón, Communist leader Manuel Mora offered to support Calderón in return for further programs beneficial to the working class.

This alliance provided Calderón with important support, but also further provoked and unified his opponents. Disastrous financial management by the government during the war years further strengthened the opposition. The conservatives and social democrats probably could agree on very little except anticommunism and the need to get rid of Calderón. The most important opposition element through the presidential elections of 1944 was the Partido Demócrata of Cortés, which tended to represent the more conservative bourgeois sectors, such as the coffee growers. A more moderate conservatism was articulated by newspaper publisher Otilio Ulate and his party, Unión Nacional. In 1945, the reformist, social democratic sector of the opposition coalesced into the Social Democratic Party, formed from the Center for the Study of National Problems (an intellectual "think-tank" dating from the late 1930s) and Acción Demócrata (the former left wing of Cortés' Partido Demócrata, led by José Figueres). The Center provided most of the programmatic ideas while Acción Demócrata provided the organizational drive.

In the 1944 elections, Calderón's candidate, Teodoro Picado, won easily over León Cortés (though not as overwhelmingly as Calderón had done in 1940). Allegations of government electoral fraud were widespread and the opposition remained unreconciled. After 1944, the Picado government and its Communist allies were too weak to do more than try to survive and defend their social programs. With the end of the war, United States policy became steadily less tolerant toward the alliance with the Communists as the cold war emerged (see especially Schifter, 1982). Still, even though both the calderonistas and the Communists were embarrassed by the

alliance, a split would have put them and their programs at the mercy of their conservative opponents. So they stuck together to the end.

The governing coalition again won the midterm elections of 1946, again with charges of fraud. The political climate continued to deteriorate. Remarkably, though, shortly after the elections Cortés offered to throw his support to the government if Picado and Calderón broke completely with the Communists. But Cortés' sudden death ended the possibility of a bourgeois coalition (Aguilar Bulgarelli, 1974, pp. 158-162).

It was apparent that Calderón intended to seek another term as President in 1948. The three opposition parties agreed to support Ulate. In July and August of 1947, a strike of merchants and employers induced Picado to agree that the Electoral Tribunal, responsible for supervising the electoral process, would be composed of persons having the confidence of Ulate. The government would retain control of the police, but the opposition would nevertheless control the electoral process. Both sides were then to agree in advance to respect the ruling of the Electoral Tribunal. Calderón reluctantly did so, but the Communists did not.

The election returns showed a substantial victory for Ulate over Calderón, while the congressional results showed a victory for the Republicans. Calderón refused to recognize the victory of Ulate, accusing the opposition of fraud. The Electoral Tribunal decided that whatever irregularities had occurred, they were not sufficient to invalidate the election (but cf. Schifter, 1979, p. 82). The calderonista-controlled Congress then voted to annul the elections. José Figueres, already waiting with armed forces at his farm, declared that the revolution had begun.

In six weeks, Figueres' Army of National Liberation reduced the government to the necessity of surrender. Between 14 and 24 April, Figueres negotiated settlements with the government and with the Communists on the basis of maintenance of the social legislation and respect for the persons, property and political rights of those associated with the government. In these negotiations, both Archbishop

Sanabria and the United States ambassador played critical mediating roles.

Interestingly, these same two figures had also worked actively at the end of March to promote an agreement between Ulate and Calderón that provided for an interim President for two years, followed by new elections. It indicates the two bourgeois leaders' distrust of Figueres and the Social Democrats and was, in effect, the beginning of the durable--if perpetually fragmented--antiliberationista coalition that has remained a feature of Costa Rican politics ever since. However, Figueres refused to be bound by the agreement. The Army of National Liberation entered San José on 24 April and set up a provisional junta. On 1 May Figueres signed a pact with Ulate providing that the latter should assume office within 18 months, that until then a constituent assembly would be elected to draft a new constitution, and that Ulate would be the first President under that new constitution. In the interim, the Junta would rule by decree.

The Junta decided to continue the major social and labor legislation of the Calderón period, to nationalize banking and electrical power, to create mechanisms and authority for state guidance of the economy, to abolish the army, and of course to sponsor a draft constitution in the Constituent Assembly. The proposed constitution envisioned a social democratic state empowered to act in defense of the common interest even when this might conflict with individual interests.

To the surprise of the Social Democrats, the Constituent Assembly was completely dominated by Ulate's Unión Nacional (33 of 45 seats; the Social Democrats received 3) (Aguilar Bulgarelli, in Zelaya, 1981, pp. 66ff). Although the old liberal constitution of 1871, rather than the Social Democratic draft, was made the basis of discussion, several amendments did move the country in the direction of social democracy. These included full political rights for women, creation of a fully independent Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) charged with supervision of the electoral process, and the prohibition of immediate reelection for members of Congress as well as presidents. Moreover, the abolition of the army was confirmed in the Constitution.

The promulgation of the new constitution in 1949 and the inauguration of Ulate mark the birth of the democratic regime in Costa Rica. Many conditions may have permitted or assisted the establishment of a democratic regime after 1949, but none determined it. Economic and social conditions such as a relatively egalitarian land tenure or income distribution or a relatively high literacy rate are scarcely sufficient in themselves to account for the emergence of democracy in Costa Rica. The Costa Rican export economy is fundamentally indistinguishable from those of its neighbors. The political tradition of Costa Rica prior to 1940 weakened clientelism and established the norm of universal suffrage, but its establishment did not of itself constitute the establishment of democracy.

The emergence of the democratic regime occurred in four phases beginning in the early 1940's. First, the mass of the working population was incorporated into the system by Calderón, to an extent never before achieved. Participation was democratized. Second, in response to this development and to other circumstances discussed above, the political elite polarized into pro- and anti- Calderón camps, and fought the civil war of 1948. Third, the anti-Calderón forces, triumphant in the war, excluded their opponents from the system and agreed to establish democratic competition among themselves for the votes of the people. Fourth, in the course of the period 1949-1970, first the calderonistas and later the Communists were reincorporated into the democratic political system.

Each of these four stages was defined by a political choice: Calderón's decision to mobilize the working class as a base for his own hegemony, the opposition's decision to drive Calderón from power, the agreement between Ulate and Figueres, and finally, the decisions to accept the return of the former opponents and their corresponding decisions to accept incorporation into the democratic regime. None of these decisions was inevitable, and the latter two were certainly made with the conscious intent of fostering a democratic regime by reducing the likelihood of the sort of conflict that had brought the country to civil war in the 1940's.

ECONOMY, STATE AND SOCIETY IN CONTEMPORARY COSTA RICA

As a small, underdeveloped country, Costa Rica remains dependent on coffee and banana exports, has seen its program of industrialization falter, suffers rapid population growth and urbanization, and has high unemployment. Like most countries in the Third World, it is presently suffering a prolonged and severe economic crisis. Its high literacy rate distinguishes it from many neighbors (Carcanholo, 1978; Acosta, 1969; Soto Badilla, in Zelaya, 1979, V. I; Lizano, in Zelaya 1979, V. I; Stone, 1976; Vega Carballo, 1981; Bogan, in Zelaya, 1979, V. II).

Costa Rica must deal with these growing economic and social problems through a combination of a strong state and a weak government. The State has had an important role in the economy and society since the 1840s, and it has indeed been central since the 1940s. It promotes, participates in, directs and guarantees economic activities (Cerdas Cruz, in Zelaya, 1981, p. 146). It absorbs the social costs of capitalism through its many social programs and manages the economy through diverse mechanisms.

If we look at the government that administers the state, however, we find checks and balances, decentralization and bureaucratization carried to the point of virtual immobility (Denton, 1971, pp. 34-44). The unicameral Legislative Assembly under the 1949 Constitution has substantial powers vis-a-vis the President. On the other hand, the Assembly suffers the disadvantages of being a collective body elected for the same term as the President, so that on most major issues it responds to executive initiative. Because it has been common to have the Assembly controlled by the President's opposition, the response has not always been favorable. The Assembly is also weakened by a constitutional prohibition, since 1949, of the immediate reelection of legislators, which makes it difficult for the institution to build up a core of experienced and expert leaders. The judiciary, although not activist to the same degree as the federal judiciary in the United States, is nevertheless relatively independent of political pressure.

The President is the dominant figure within the government, but he is nevertheless set about by a variety of limits on his effective power. Many of his responsibilities constitutionally require the concurrence of the Assembly or of cabinet ministers. The President has no role in the appointment of Supreme Court justices. The numerous and diverse autonomous institutes are essentially beyond the control of the President and may have independent or earmarked sources of funding. The President does not have extensive decree powers.

Since the 1950s the rapidly growing public bureaucracy has been governed by a civil service system that tends to insulate public officials not only from political pressures but from effective control. This is true even within the ministries; in the autonomous institutes the situation is even more acute. These are structures whose size cannot be effectively limited, and whose policies cannot be centrally controlled. The civil service and the complex governmental structure that it staffs are both creature and creator of the urban middle class whose importance has grown vastly since 1950 (Vega Carballo, 1981, pp. 219ff).

Denton (1971, pp. 43-44) has pointed out that the pattern of a government with divided and mutually checked authority reflects a conscious preoccupation of the framers of the 1949 constitution who wanted to prevent the concentration of power. Both Ulate's conservatives and the Social Democrats thought Calderón had abused power. Moreover, the conservatives and the Social Democrats did not trust each other. The army was abolished by Figueres at least in part because he did not want Ulate to have access to such an instrument. The Ulatistas wrote the same prohibition into the Constitution at least in part because they did not trust Figueres. The autonomous institutes were intended to eliminate the possibility of the sort of rampant political favoritism characteristic of the Calderón government. It is, then, clear that the formal structure of democratic checks and balances was set up quite intentionally.

CONTEMPORARY INTEREST GROUPS

Costa Rica has a very active interest group life: most sectors of the society are ostensibly represented by organized groups. Nevertheless, within each sector most people are not effectively organized and do not participate actively in the groups that supposedly represent them. The influence of the groups, of course, varies widely. Those representing more privileged economic sectors tend to be more influential (Arias 1980; Carvajal, 1978; Denton, 1971, pp. 44-52; Stone, 1976, Ch. 5). We will examine economic, ideological, and official interests.

Among interests that are specifically *economic*, those who control productive property--the bourgeoisie--are organized at multiple levels, ranging from narrow sectors such as coffee growers or dairy producers to broader groupings such as the vigorous and powerful National Economic Development Association (ANFE), which includes a few hundred important businessmen who support its neoliberal, laissez faire economic policies. ANFE is the key bourgeois interest group concerned with economic policy.

Among mass organizations, the general pattern shows organizational fragmentation and a low level of popular participation. Total union membership is well under ten percent of the economically active population and is divided into competing, partisan confederations (Backer, 1975, pp. 19-20).

Several sources confirm the low propensity of Costa Ricans to participate in organized groups (Costa Rica, Casa Presidencial, 1978, p. 47; Gómez, 1977, V. II, p. 72; Carvajal, 1978, pp. 153-154). The lower one's social status, the less likely one is to participate. This pattern, almost universally valid cross-nationally, has the effect of freeing the elites from interference by the population as a whole, and specifically by the poorer sectors.

To be sure, economic interests may also be defended by less formal means. Frequently, the people in a neighborhood or community spontaneously organize to put pressure on the

government to correct an unsatisfactory situation (e.g., inadequate bus or water service.) Still, it appears unlikely that more than a small proportion of people actually get involved in such efforts.

Organized *ideological* interests, dedicated to the advocacy of a set of political ideas rather than the defense of economic interests, are of much less importance than the economic groups. The most important group in this category is the Movimiento Costa Rica Libre (MCRL), a far-right anticommunist paramilitary group that is dedicated to preparing for civil war between communists and anticommunists. Since the Sandinista triumph in Nicaragua in 1979, MCRL has had a prominent role in pressing the government to adopt an anti-Sandinista policy.

The sector against which MCRL is directed has been numerically very weak. The universities and progressively oriented sectors of the Church have provided the main thrust and leadership for left groups. None of these groups has attracted significant mass support and even in the current context of revolutionary and counterrevolutionary violence in the Isthmus, only a few infinitesimal cells have engaged in leftist political violence.

In the context of a discussion of organized political interests, the Church must be given special attention (Backer, 1975; Denton, 1971; Richard and Meléndez, 1982). About ninety percent of Costa Ricans are nominally Catholic and the Church is constitutionally established. Nevertheless, most governments except for Calderón's have not been proclerical. The Church has occasionally involved itself directly in the political process. Still, the Costa Rican Church has not approached the political impact of its counterparts in Nicaragua and El Salvador.

The Church is a highly pluralistic institution within which a wide variety of individuals and groups pursue various political and social ends, even when their goals and methods are not approved by the hierarchy. The dominant tone of the hierarchy and most of the clergy is conservative at present, but there are active sectors committed to liberation theology.

Also, there are numerous evangelical denominations active in Costa Rica in both proselytizing and social action, with theological and political positions covering a very wide range.

A final, very important category of interest groups in addition to those with economic and ideological motivations, is composed of *official institutions* (Denton, 1971, pp. 41-45).

The autonomous institutes previously discussed function in some ways as interest groups, defending their programs, pressing for more funds, articulating the interests of their clients. The universities are a special sort of autonomous institution because their very nature makes them seedbeds for various autonomous and semiautonomous interests, ranging from the schools and institutes to ad hoc ideological groups that use the university as shelter and recruiting ground. Finally, local governments function fairly effectively as defenders of local interests, demanding action from the government on roads or schools, for example (Denton, 1971, p. 39).

The armed forces, in contrast with the rest of Latin America, have not been politically important in Costa Rica. Since the Tinoco dictatorship (1917-1919) they were kept small, poorly armed and poorly trained. Since the abolition of the armed forces in 1948, the country's internal security functions have been served by the Civil Guard and the Rural Guard, separate forces reporting to different ministries, and even less well armed and trained than the old army. Furthermore, they are completely subject to patronage turnover at all levels with each change of government (*Mesoamerica*, April 1984). There has been, in short, little chance of military intervention in Costa Rican politics up until the current international crisis in Central America. Now the United States government, in alliance with MCRL and other anticommunist forces within the country, has been actively pressing for an upgrading of Costa Rica's armed forces and a more direct involvement in the anti-Sandinista effort.

POLITICAL PARTIES AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The contemporary party system might be classified as a one party dominant system in the sense that the Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN) has been the only continuously organized party and has been consistently able to attain or approach an absolute majority in both presidential and legislative elections. However, the party has only exceeded 60% of the vote once, in Figueres' 1953 victory. The PLN has tended to lose when conservative opposition elements have been unified (1958, 1966, 1978). But the opposition has been consistently unable to forge a durable union. (On parties, see Trudeau, 1971; Jiménez, 1977; Jiménez, in Zelaya, 1979, V. I; Schifter, in Zelaya, 1979, V. I; Denton, 1971; Romaro Perez, 1979; English, 1971; Araya Pochet, 1968; Delgado, 1980; Monge, 1976; Salazar, 1981, 1974; Castro Esquivel, 1955; Ameringer, 1978, 1982; Vega Carballo, 1982; Aguilar Bulgarelli, in Zelaya, 1981; Aguilar Bulgarelli 1977; Stone, 1976; Arias, 1978; Fernández, 1974; Wells, 1970; Rosenberg, 1977, Cerdas Cruz, 1978.)

The victory of Ulate's Unión Nacional in the Constituent Assembly elections of 1948 impelled Figueres and the Social Democrats to organize a truly mass-based party, which became the PLN in 1951. The party drew on the social democratic thinking of its predecessor, but also sought to set up a network of organizations for popular mobilization and to establish the principle that party organization should remain in being between elections. These goals have been quite imperfectly realized, but PLN has become by far the best organized mass party in Costa Rica. That organization carried Figueres to victory in 1953 and in five elections thereafter (1962, 1970, 1974, 1982, 1986) and PLN has held the majority in the Legislative Assembly in every term except two (1974 and 1978).

The continuation of diluted versions of the Junta's reformist policies in Figueres' government of 1953-1958 tended to consolidate the opposition in defense of propertied interests. But personal rivalries between Calderón and his former opponents impeded formation of a stable anti-PLN party. Even when an alliance could be formed, the constituent parties were careful to maintain their own identities and organizations.

Only after their devastating loss to PLN in 1982 was an opposition party (Social Christian Unity) formed that explicitly did away with its constituent parties (*Mesoamerica*, January 1984). It remains to be seen whether this new party will be any more durable than its predecessors.

Tables 2 and 3 summarize electoral results at presidential and legislative levels. The durability of PLN strength is evident from these tables, as is the fragility of its majority. A unified opposition has usually been able to capture the presidency, except against Figueres in 1953 and 1970. The persistent fragmentation of the opposition is evident in the legislative results. Seats are allotted by proportional representation so the parties are not hurt in the legislative races. However, PLN has gotten a legislative majority except in 1974 and 1978.

The 1986 election tended to reinforce the domination of PLN and the consolidation of the Social Christian Unity Party (PUSC) and the main opposition. The victory of Oscar Arias (PLN) over Rafael Angel Calderón Fournier was widely interpreted as a mandate for a less belligerent policy toward Nicaragua.

The emergence of modest leftist strength can be seen with the emergence of *Acción Socialista* in 1970 and 1974, and *Pueblo Unido* in 1978 and 1982. This leftist emergence reflects legal changes. In 1949, the constitution ratified a Junta decree prohibiting parties whose programs, means of action or international links tended to undermine the democracy or threaten the sovereignty of Costa Rica. This provision was of course directed against the Communist Party, and was used to prevent it, or any front, from competing in the elections, though the party was never forced completely underground. In 1970 and 1974, the restriction was tacitly ignored, and in 1975 the constitutional prohibition was repealed.

In 1959, a constitutional amendment made voting a legal obligation. From an average of 34% for 1953 and 1958, abstention declined to an average of about 20% in subsequent elections. This is evident in the increase in vote totals between 1958 and 1962.

There is no definitive study of the social bases of the parties, but some tentative generalizations can be made (Trudeau, 1971; Schifter, 1979; Schifter, in Zelaya, 1979, V. I; Carvajal, 1978). While there are sociological patterns in the sources of support of the parties, the demonstrable patterns are much weaker than the stereotypes and in some cases contradict the stereotypes. All organized parties are weaker in the metropolitan area than outside of it. PLN draws more support from the less educated and lower income groups; Unidad and Pueblo Unido show the opposite tendency. PLN is strong in all provinces, but weakest in Limón, Puntarenas and San José, where Unidad and Pueblo Unido are stronger. Pueblo Unido and the left in general are weak everywhere, but perhaps growing stronger. Neither the middle class nor the working class can be associated in any reliable way with any particular party.

Several studies of public opinion and political participation provide substantial information of perceived efficacy and activity (CID, 1979-1981, Carvajal, 1978; Gómez, 1977; Costa Rica, Casa Presidencial, 1978; Booth, 1976; 1978; Booth and Seligson, 1978; Seligson, 1978; 1979; 1980a; 1980b; Seligson and Booth, 1979). The picture that emerges is of people who do not think their potential political power is very great, and who seldom test the limits of that power by actions beyond voting. There is of course a tendency for the lower strata, whether urban or rural, to participate less. Seligson and Booth (1979) have shown the countervailing role of organization in promoting the participation of peasants and workers. But the problem, as noted above, is that no part of the mass population is very well organized. In consequence, this population makes few demands on the political system. The normal Costa Rican response to problems is not to complain or to demand solutions from the government, but rather to cope with them on an individual or family basis. One side of this cultural trait is self-reliance; the other side is the tendency of people to passively accept problems not of their own making. That they do so of course reduces demands on a political system which would otherwise have to deal more effectively with the problems.

TABLE 2

Presidential Election Results, 1953 - 1982

Party	Percent	N
1953		
Liberación Nacional	65	190,768
Demócrata	35	
1958		
Liberación Nacional	42	221,549
Unión Nacional	46	
Independiente	11	
1962		
Liberación Nacional	50	383,433
Republicano	35	
Unión Nacional	13	
Accion Demócrata Popular	2	
1966		
Liberación Nacional	50	441,400
Unificación Nacional	50	
1970		
Liberación Nacional	55	540,045
Unificación Nacional	41	
Other	4	

TABLE 2 con't.

Presidential Election Results, 1953 - 1982

Party	Percent	N
1974		
Liberación Nacional	44	
Unificación Nacional	30	
Nacional Independiente	11	
Renovación Democrática	9	
Other	6	678,157
1978		
Liberación Nacional	44	
Unidad	51	
Pueblo Unido	3	
Other	2	831,141
1982		
Liberación Nacional	57	
Unidad	33	
Movimiento Nacional	4	
Pueblo Unido	3	
Other	3	991,679
1986 (approximate)		
Liberación Nacional	52	
Social Christian Unity	46	
Other	2	1,026,000

Source: Costa Rica, Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones (1953 - 1982) *Cómputo de votos y declaratorio de elección*. (San José: Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones). Approximate figures for 1986 calculated from *Mesoamerica*, February 1986, p. 10, and *Facts on File*, Feb. 7, 1986, pp. 83-4.

TABLE 3

Legislative Election Results, 1953 - 1982

Party	Percent	N
1953		
Liberación Nacional	65	
Demócrata	21	
Unión Nacional	7	
Republicano Independiente	7	176,130
1958		
Liberación Nacional	42	
Unión Nacional	21	
Republicano	22	
Independiente	10	
Other	5	206,516
1963		
Liberación Nacional	49	
Unión Nacional	13	
Republicano	33	
Acción Demócrata Popular	2	
Other	2	376,937
1966		
Liberación Nacional	49	
Unificación Nacional	43	
Other	8	414,637
1970		
Liberación Nacional	51	
Unificación Nacional	36	
Acción Socialista	5	
Other	8	530,425

TABLE 3 con't.

Legislative Election Results, 1953 - 1982

Party	Percent	N
1974		
Liberación Nacional	41	
Unificación Nacional	25	
Nacional Independiente	10	
Renovación Democrática	8	
Acción Socialista	4	
Other	12	664,964
1978		
Liberación Nacional	39	
Unidad	43	
Pueblo Unido	8	
Other	10	820,560
1982		
Liberación Nacional	55	
Unidad	29	
Pueblo Unido	6	
Movimiento Nacional	4	
Other	6	955,990
1986 (approximate)		
Liberación Nacional	50	
Social Christian Unity	43	
Left	3	
Other	3	1,026,000

Source: Costa Rica, Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones, (1953 - 1982), *Computo de votos y declatorias de eleccion*. (San Jose: Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones). Approximate figures from 1986 calculated from *Mesoamerica*, February, 1986, p. 10; and *Facts on File*, Feb. 7, 1986, pp. 83-84.

CONCLUSIONS

The democratic nature of the regime that has existed in Costa Rica since 1949 is clearly limited. Economy and society remain profoundly unequal in the distribution of resources and power, so that the degree to which genuine democratic equality could be realized in the polity is quite restricted. While democracy presupposes effective popular control of the government and public policy, power in the Costa Rican polity is highly concentrated in the hands of a socioeconomic elite that is able to lead and manipulate the mass base of the parties and pressure groups, rather than being controlled by the masses. Further, the elite that holds power is highly pluralistic, divided by divergent interests that check the ability of any one party or group to carry through a coherent program. The separation of powers of the democratic constitutional structure reinforces this tendency to ad hoc, unsystematic policymaking. Costa Rican "democracy" is not fully democratic, but it is liberal in the sense of maintaining individual liberties and political competition among parties and pressure groups, with periodic competitive elections that are frequently won by the opposition. What we have, to use Robert Dahl's term, is a polyarchy.

Poor and isolated in colonial times, Costa Rica never developed the huge *latifundia* and the massive landless peasantry that evolved in many other Latin American countries. With the rise of coffee in the 1840s the landed elite was able to enrich itself and concentrate capital, but not to the point of eliminating the small landowners, who also benefited from the coffee boom. By 1900, the country was controlled by a diverse but still quite small ruling class; yet the mass of the population did not suffer exploitation as intense as occurred in many other countries of the region.

Gradual political transformations were already well under way by 1900. The basic education of the mass of the population was given decisive impetus beginning in the 1880s. The autonomy and the capabilities of the state were progressively enhanced. The legitimacy of unadorned personal or family rule was eroded. The norm of tolerating opponents and respecting their civil liberties was strengthened. The idea

of popular participation in elections gained increasing acceptance, the notion of political parties as instruments for mobilizing that participation emerged and developed, and the legitimation derived from popular consent became increasingly indispensable. It came to be widely accepted that popular consent ought not to be manipulated, but rather be freely given on the basis of meaningful alternatives. Active state intervention in economy and society to provide for the well-being of the population became increasingly legitimate.

By 1949 the country was ready for the establishment of democracy. Much of the groundwork laid during the preceding century was built by people who had no conception of democracy, much less any intention of establishing one. Beginning in the 1920s we find some elite members explicitly calling for democratization, and correspondingly we find increased mobilization and participation of the mass of the population. A stable democratic regime could not have emerged if it had not been built on the liberal norms established by the preceding elitist political system. However, there was nothing inevitable about the democratic regime. The 1948 decision by the triumphant rivals, Figueres and Ulate, to subsume their rivalry in a democratic political process, was critical because it ended in struggle for political hegemony. The later expansion of that self-conscious accommodation to take in the calderonistas and the left has brought the democratic regime to a high level of maturity.

In an increasingly complex society, those who hold economic power find their interests diverse and often divergent on specific policy issues. The political structure of polyarchy makes it almost impossible for any one interest or party to monopolize power, and tends to allow every significant economic interest some political power. The system structures and stabilizes the complex interplay of established interests so that no one risks losing everything. Since the society is too complex now for anyone to hope for stable hegemony (Calderón was the last to try) polyarchy provides all vested interests a piece of the pie.

The conservatism built into the delicate balance among established interests tends to retard the emergence of new

interests (e.g., leftist parties). Lacking bargaining resources, as long as they remain within the pluralist system they will find it difficult to get more resources from the already powerful who control the system. The system's delicate balance virtually assures that there will be no radical changes in policy that might prejudice the interests of some recognized sector.

The built-in conservatism of pluralist democracy is only one face, though. Within the range of its established alternatives it is flexible. This feature has been of great importance in enhancing the system's stability. The alternation of parties in the presidency, shifting power balances and alliances have provided a safety valve when things have not gone well, permitting changes of personnel and policy within the context of the constitutional structure. The opportunity to choose between PLN and anti-PLN alternatives under the effective guarantee of electoral honesty gives people a sense of input and some hope for change if they are not happy with the current state of affairs. The availability of participation within the pluralist system of interest groups has provided an outlet for the activist minority, while making known to the nonactive majority that if they wanted to, they could participate with reasonable hope of achieving some of their goals. For the most part, that seems to be all the majority expect.

The elites worry constantly and publicly about the viability of the democratic regime and devote considerable energy to maintaining enough civility and cooperation between government and opposition to keep the regime functioning. Indeed, the idea of democracy as a national patrimony is intensely propagated in the schools and the press. When Costa Ricans contemplate the tribulations of their neighbors, it is not hard to convince them that they are fortunate. A regime that does not torture and murder its own people is no mean achievement in Central America today.

Much injustice remains in Costa Rican society. Still, neither the times nor the people have yet demanded more than the democratic regime can produce. Up to now, the Costa Rican democratic regime has cushioned the injustices and delivered enough benefits to keep most people below the threshold of resistance. Pressures from the Reagan

Administration for remilitarization, active support of the Nicaraguan *contras*, and confrontation with Sandinista Nicaragua, have imposed grave strains on the political system at a time of economic vulnerability. But the Monge Government (1982-1986) blunted those pressures while avoiding direct defiance of the United States. Whether the new Arias Government and the democratic regime as a whole can continue the balancing act is a question asked anew each day.

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