

# Applying the Situational Theory of Publics to the first external voting process for Costa Ricans abroad: Lessons for international public relations and public diplomacy

Aplicación de la Teoría Situacional de los Públicos al primer proceso de voto en el exterior para Costa Rica: Lecciones para las relaciones públicas internacionales y la diplomacia pública

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## Abstract

Using information gathered from 40 interviews with Costa Ricans who live abroad (some who decided to vote in the newly granted external voting right and others who did not vote in the Costa Rican National Elections of 2014), the variables that impacted the voting intention and/or behaviour of these Costa Rican diaspora members were categorized using the independent variables presented by the Situational Theory of Publics: problem recognition, constraint recognition (internal and external constraints), and level of involvement. This theory was used to better understand what is moving these potential external voters to vote or not, in order to suggest what kinds of efforts should the Costa Rican government undertake to increase the number of external voters. The implications for public diplomacy and international public relations are explored.

**Keywords:** International Public Relations, Public Diplomacy, Situational Theory of Publics, Diaspora, Immigration

## Resumen

Utilizando información de 40 entrevistas con costarricenses que viven en el exterior (algunos que sí votaron a la distancia en el recién aprobado proceso de voto en el exterior y otros que no votaron en las elecciones nacionales de Costa Rica en el 2014), las variables independientes de la Teoría Situacional de los Públicos (reconocimiento del problema, reconocimiento de los obstáculos --internos y externos--, y nivel de involucramiento) fueron usadas para categorizar los factores que afectaron la intención de voto de estos 40 costarricenses de la diáspora. La teoría mencionada se utilizó para entender mejor qué es lo que está haciendo que estos votantes externos ejerzan su voto o no, con el fin de sugerir qué clase de esfuerzos se necesitan por parte del gobierno costarricense para aumentar el número de votantes en el extranjero. Las implicaciones para las relaciones públicas internacionales y la diplomacia pública son exploradas.

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**Palabras clave:** Relaciones Públicas Internacionales, Diplomacia Pública, Teoría Situacional de los Públicos, Diáspora, Migración

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this qualitative study, 40 Costa Rican migrants who live in eight different countries (including in the United States) discuss the reasons why they voted –or not– on Election Day, on February 2, 2014, in the first external voting process offered by the Costa Rican government to its diaspora community around the world.

The results are analysed using the Situational Theory of Publics as theoretical framework, with the intention of developing suggestions and guidelines that can be applied in the future by national governments trying to involve its citizens abroad in the political process at home. This study, then, has a practical orientation for international public relations, political communication, and public diplomacy practices, and, in particular, it offers insights to improve transnational communication processes between national governments and diaspora communities.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Costa Rican government offered its diaspora community members the possibility of voting for national president, while abroad, for the first time in the national elections of February 2, 2014. This political achievement, nonetheless, stemmed not from diaspora activism but from an initiative of the *Costa Rican Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones* (Electoral

Supreme Court, TSE Spanish acronym) to keep up with international norms and trends (Bravo, 2011).

The Costa Rican government, through its TSE, started a communications campaign two years ahead of Election Day to inform its diaspora community around the world, and mainly in the United States, about this new political right (Bravo, 2014a). For this purpose, TSE established a dedicated website about absentee vote, developed a newsletter with information about this process, distributed news releases to the media in Costa Rica, and posted messages on its Facebook page about the process.

In summary, this was the process to vote: If you were a Costa Rican (18 years old or older) living abroad, you could vote in the National Elections of February 2, 2014, if the following conditions were met: 1) the voter registered, in person, at a Costa Rican consulate or embassy by the deadline of September 30, 2013; 2) the voter came, in person, to the corresponding Costa Rican consulate or Embassy on Elections Day to cast his or her vote (Bravo, 2013).

Unofficially, it is estimated that there are about 200,000 Costa Ricans living abroad, most of them in the United States. Officially, the U.S. Census indicates that there are about 127,000 Costa Ricans living in the United States (Pew Research Hispanic Center, 2013b). In the United States, there are only seven Costa Rican consulates, which means that for Costa Ricans to cast their vote, they had to register in advance in one of those seven consulates, and then they had to come back on Elections Day to the corresponding consulate to exercise the external voting right.

For the elections of February 2, 2014, a total of 12,654 Costa Ricans registered to vote (in advance), and 2,771 Costa Ricans actually voted while abroad that day (*Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones*, 2014; Ruiz Ramon, 2014). Even using the conservative estimate of having only 127,000 Costa Ricans living abroad, this means that only about 10 percent of Costa Ricans who live abroad registered to vote, and only about 2 percent actually took advantage of the newly extended external voting rights.

A low participation of diaspora members in these elections was somewhat expected because it was the first time Costa Ricans could vote in absence, so it was understood that some of

them might not be aware of this new political right, or might not be interested in taking advantage of it, but the 2 percent of participation was still lower than expected. What happened? Was there a transnational communication problem? Was it lack of awareness on the part of the diaspora members? Was it lack of interest in exercising this political right? Or were there other problems? This case study of transnational public relations is a contribution to start answering those questions.

To understand the reasons why the percentage of absentee voters was so low, this qualitative study used the well-known public relations' Situational Theory of Publics as its theoretical framework. Grunig and Hunt (1984) developed this theory when they classified an organization's publics into non-publics, latent, aware and active, based on dependent variables such as whether or not the publics process information about a situation, actively seek or not additional information about the situation, and/or react or not to the situation by behaving in a certain way. The independent variables in the Situational Theory of Publics are level of problem recognition, level of constraint recognition (internal and external), and level of involvement (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Level of problem recognition refers to whether the public recognizes that the problem exists and that something has to be done to face it (Grunig & Hunt, 1984: 149). Level of constraint recognition refers to whether the public recognizes that there are factors that limit or restrict their behavior. Regarding level of constraint recognition, it is necessary to explain that constraints can be internal (for example, the psychological perception that the person's actions will not have an impact or will not make a difference, no matter his or her behavior, which is called self-efficacy perception) or external (the existence of real-world challenges or limitations that impede the person to behave in a certain way; for example, lack of time or financial resources to accomplish a certain task). Finally, level of involvement refers to whether the public is invested with the issue at hand; in other words, whether the public cares deeply or not about the problem (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

The situational theory of publics is a well-accepted theory in public relations, and it has been applied to many different communication studies in the last 30 years (Aldoory & Sha, 2007; Sriramesh, Zerfass & Kim, 2013). In a few cases, it has been used to assess the effectiveness

of political communication (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2013; Strömbäck, Mitrook & Kioussis, 2010). The present study follows that lead.

Understanding the communications challenges and the logistical barriers that impacted the Costa Rican external voting process is relevant to the fields of international public relations and public diplomacy in that it helps home governments (such as the Costa Rican) to better communicate and engage with strategic publics located abroad (such as a diaspora community spread all over the world) for political purposes. Recent research in public diplomacy and international public relations has indicated that transnational publics can be strategic supporters of home governments (Golan, Yang & Kinsey, 2014; Fitzpatrick, 2007), and that diaspora communities are one of the most important publics that a home government can engage and build relationships with through transnational alliances, agreements, and cooperation (Bravo, 2014b).

This study also contributes to the literature on external voting rights by adding to the perspective that external voting rights are an expression of political transnationalism and a type of social remittance (LaFleur, 2013), and to the belief that migrants who vote abroad not only impact the political process at home but, in many cases, they also “influence the way others vote, introduce new political ideas and strategies, and fund election campaigns” (Bocaggni, Lafleur and Levitt, 2015: 1)

As a contribution to the literature on external voting rights and public diplomacy, this paper applies the situational theory of publics to a political communication process; in this case, to a transnational political process between a home government and its diaspora members around the world: the first external voting process granted by the government of Costa Rica to its citizens living abroad. This study attempts to answer the following research questions about the first Costa Rican absentee vote process:

RQ1: What variables helped or hindered the voting intention and/or behavior of the Costa Rican diaspora members in this external voting process?

RQ2: What was the impact of problem recognition on these participants?

RQ3: What was the impact of internal constraints on these participants?

RQ4: What was the impact of external constraints on these participants?

RQ5: What was the impact of level of involvement on these participants?

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

A group of 40 participants (all of them Costa Rican adults who live abroad) were interviewed using a semi-structured questionnaire about the reasons why they voted or not, and about the factors that influenced their decision to participate –or not—in this civic process (the Costa Rican National Elections). The interviews with these 40 Costa Rican migrants were conducted between February 3, 2014 and April 30, 2014 (the Costa Rican Elections happened on February 2, 2014).

As this group (formed by members of diaspora communities) is a very specific, but hard-to-reach population, and as the 40 participants were dispersed in eight different countries, the interviews were conducted by email or through the chat feature of Facebook. Of the 40 participants, 18 live in the United States, 11 in Brazil, 5 in Canada, 2 in the Netherlands, 1 in Belgium, 1 in Panama, 1 in Mexico, and 1 in El Salvador.

Each interview was used as the unit of analysis. The data collected from the interviews was coded and analysed to determine core themes that explain the reasons why these migrants participated –or not—in this new transnational political right (including, but not limited to, factors related to the communication strategies and tactics developed by the Costa Rican government to promote this absentee voting process). The constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was then followed to look for thematic patterns and peculiarities in the interviews. The emerging core themes were grouped into categories of analysis.

### **4. RESULTS**

#### **4.1 Problem Recognition (Awareness)**

Among these 40 participants, there is an almost unanimous perception that voting is necessary to change the future of Costa Rica, no matter where the voter is located (within the territory or abroad). Most of the participants recognize that the home country has problems to overcome, and they think that the absentee vote is a mechanism to have their voice heard. They also consider themselves part of the home country, even if circumstances have them living outside Costa Rica. Some of the participants expressed that they were interested in voting to try to instil change at home (they wanted the ruling party to be

defeated, or to support a non-traditional political force). For instance, Marisol Mayorga expressed the following:

*Even though, for logistical reasons out of my control, I ended up not voting, I really wanted to do so for several reasons: 1) It was a historical vote. 2) I have always voted, and I am convinced that it is a citizen duty to do so. 3) It was necessary any effort to impede [name of one political candidate] from becoming president. Every vote is needed to help change things there (Marisol Mayorga, in Kansas, USA, email/Facebook communication).*

Other participants were interested in voting to try to prevent a change deemed too dramatic for the political landscape in Costa Rica. They said they wanted the ruling party to be defeated, but not by the party considered the third political force for Elections Day, because this emerging party was described, by a couple of participants, as being “too far away,” ideologically speaking, from both the ruling party and the possible runner up. That was Ulises Chacón’s motivation to vote while abroad, in the Costa Rican consulate of New York:

*When I was in Costa Rica, I worked with youth groups and with my political party in the electoral process. Now that I live here, I realized that it was my civic duty to vote. Also, I felt that our strong but --at the same time-- fragile democracy in Costa Rica was under threat by political forces that do not benefit the countries where they establish themselves, so I knew that I had to vote to defeat those forces. I wanted my party to win, but, more than that, I wanted my country to win with this process (Ulises Chacón, in New Jersey, USA, email/Facebook communication).*

#### **4.2 Level of Involvement**

The previous findings are related to the levels of involvement found among these participants. Except for a few cases, most participants expressed that they are highly interested in the topic of politics, in voting while abroad, and in offering Costa Rica a brighter future. They called the possibility of voting while abroad a “duty,” a “right,” a “privilege,” and an “opportunity,” regardless of whether they were able to vote or not in the first absentee voting process. Even though they are living in a host country, these participants said they feel invested in the political life at home, and they want to be part of the decision-making process that they feel they can help delineate, as the following quotes show:

*For us, the ticos [Costa Ricans], having the privilege to vote is a national celebration. It is important, through our vote, to help preserve the democracy we have. I, personally, feel proud of being Costa Rican, and of the peace and liberty we have (Merlyn Valerio, in Florida, USA, email/Facebook communication).*

*When I was in living in Costa Rica, I always voted on Elections Day, even though I knew my candidate was going to lose. In 2014, I thought it was twice as important to vote than usual because our country seems to be in a transitional moment, moving toward a new political model that walks away from the historical bipartisanship. There were real possibilities for new sectors that did not have the favour from voters in the past to reach the Presidency, or at least to try to fight for it in a second round. I wanted to be part of that process (Marco Sibaja, in Brasilia, Brazil, email/Facebook communication).*

*This year's election [of 2014] was crucial for the political life of our country. It is the end of bipartisanship, and it is the expression of the feeling that the population has: We are sick of the same people being in power all the time. We want change. (Iris Pérez, in Montreal, Canada, email/Facebook communication).*

Strikingly, even though these participants have a high level of awareness about the potential power of their vote, and a high level of involvement regarding how much they care about the political future of Costa Rica, 25 out of the 40 participants ended up not voting in this absentee process, but the reasons seem to be related to the presence of strong external constraints rather than to the variables of problem recognition or level of involvement, as the next section details. Among the 25 persons who did not vote, there was almost absolute consensus that voting was important, both as a political right and as a civic duty. Of them, 22 expressed that they would have definitely voted if the logistics had been different. This indicates a high level of involvement, meaning that a large majority of the persons who did not vote perceived that their vote was valuable and capable of changing things at home. It was just not possible for them to exercise this right, due to logistical barriers (external constraints).

#### **4.3 External Constraints**

Among the 25 participants who did not vote, the main reasons given were that it was too time-consuming and/or too expensive to do so. To vote in this external voting process, the person had to register first in the closest consulate or embassy, and then he or she had to travel again to the consulate or embassy to cast the vote on Elections Day.

In the case of the United States, the country with the largest number of Costa Rican diaspora members, there are only seven consulates (plus the Embassy) throughout the U.S. territory. This means, for example, that a person who lives in North Carolina has to travel to Atlanta to visit the nearest consulate. Or a person who lives in rural Texas has to travel 10 or more



hours to reach the consulate in Houston. In a big country like Brazil, for example, only the Costa Rican embassy in Brasilia was habilitated as a voting center.

In all these cases, not only the number of hours to be invested in the process of voting was a limitation. With long distances, many expenses arise: gas bills or airfare, lodging, meals, and, for some, time away from work (either because they work on Sundays or because the person needs at least one or two additional days to go and come back from the voting center). The following are examples of the situations described above:

*I did not vote for financial reasons. I did not have enough money to pay a trip to Brasilia. I would have had to spend about \$600 to fly there, just thinking of myself, not even considering the expenses for my wife and daughter, who can also vote. And I would have had to spend similar amounts to register to vote, in advance. If there was a simpler method, for instance, registering using the Internet or if I had a voting center that was no more than two hours away, I would have voted, for sure, but this is way too complicated (Guido Carballo, in Castanhal, Brazil, email/Facebook communication).*

*I would have loved to cast my vote, but it would have taken me 12 hours to drive to Houston, and then coming back. I could not leave my husband, who is American, in charge of the children and the household because he had to work. The distance was too overwhelming (Victoria Rodriguez, in Texas, USA, email/Facebook communication).*

*I registered to vote in Houston, some months before Elections Day, but I was unable to go back on Elections Day, because my son got sick, and I had homework to finish for my PhD., and considering that it would have taken me 22 hours to go and return from the consulate, I had to give up on the idea of voting. Flying would have been ideal, but it would have been too expensive (Marisol Mayorga, in Kansas, USA, email/Facebook communication).*

**4.3.1. Voting, in spite of the external constraints.** Of the 15 participants who voted in the absentee voting process (among 40), six voted even though the logistical conditions were “unreasonable” or “very difficult” to overcome. For example, Tania Quesada casted her vote, *in spite* of the strong barriers to do so:

*I traveled from Gainesville to Miami. It took me 10 hours to go and 10 hours to come back, plus spending the night in Miami, because I traveled with my baby, who is six months old, so we had to stop frequently. It was a good experience, but next time I will drive alone because it is not fair to bring a child to a trip so tiring (Tania Quesada, in Florida, USA, email/Facebook communication).*

In a case like this, governments such as the Costa Rican need to understand that these persons who overcome the logistical barriers are going to be the exceptions, not the norm,

and for absentee voting processes to be really successful, the logistical barriers have to be levelled off. Otherwise, international public relations campaigns and other communications efforts are not going to be enough. Only six participants voted because they thought that casting their vote was important *and* because the Costa Rican consulate was in close proximity.

Other three persons thought that it was important to vote, but they decided that traveling to the consulate in the host country was so time-consuming and expensive that they opted for combining their civic duty of voting with their vacations, and they ended up traveling all the way to Costa Rica to vote in the home country.

**4.3.2 When the external constraint is lack of information.** Of the 25 persons who did not vote, only six cited lack of information as the main reason for not registering to vote, although a couple mentioned that if they had had the information necessary to do, they might have ended up not voting because of how costly it would have been. This is one exemplary quote:

*I did not know that we could vote while in the United States. I was not aware that the registration process was going on. To be honest, the consulate in this area is not good at providing information, even though they have all my contact information because I have visited the consulate for different reasons. My two sisters, who also live in Miami, had the same situation: They could not vote because they lacked the information needed to do so. And it is a shame, because the consulate is just 30 minutes away from my home (Rosibel M., in Florida, USA, email/Facebook communication).*

#### **4.4 Internal constraints: Self-efficacy in doubt**

Only three of the 25 non-voters said that even though they were informed about the process, they decided not to vote on purpose. They said that their vote was not going to be useful, that it was not going to change the problems in Costa Rica (in other words, only 3 participants expressed having no self-efficacy). For example:

*I decided not to vote while abroad because corruption is killing Costa Rica. Corruption is the cause that living expenses have gone up and unemployment has become so high. Poverty levels have become misery levels. I know I should have voted, it is a civic duty, but I thought that by voting I would have contributed to a system that only creates wealth for the same politicians that rule the country time and time again (Mario Mata, In Quebec, Canada, email/Facebook communication).*

Table 1 summarizes the results presented in this section, with each category followed by a exemplary quotes. The categories are organized in the following descending order of importance: 1) external constraint recognition, 2) level of involvement 3) problem recognition, and 4) internal constraint recognition.

Table 1. Variables that impacted the voting intention/behavior of Costa Rican diaspora members in the external voting process of Feb. 2, 2014, in descending relevance.

Variable	Explanation	Exemplary Quote
External constraint recognition	Whether the public's members recognize that there are external factors that limit or restrict their behavior.	"I could not go because traveling from Vancouver to the consulate in Ottawa would have taken five hours and a lot of money. It is very expensive. But I hope TSE in Costa Rica understands that this opportunity to vote while abroad is very important for us. I hope it will maintain it in the future. The low number of voters could be misinterpreted by TSE and by the Costa Rican government as lack of interest on the part of the diaspora members, but that is not the case. The problem is the financial cost to vote, the logistical barriers that exist right now. I hope absentee vote continues to be offered. I fear that the government might want to suspend this initiative" (Alfonso Lara, in Vancouver, Canada, email/Facebook communication).
Level of involvement	Whether the public is personally invested with the issue at hand	"I had to travel about 200 kilometers [124 miles] to cast my vote, and I spent more than \$150 in doing so. Still, it was one of the most valuable investments I have done. It was important to vote because it is a political right, a civic duty and a privilege, because very few people in the world can participate in an absentee voting process, and because our home country put a lot of effort and invested a lot of money so that we could be involved in the political life and political decisions at home" (Iris Pérez, in Montreal, Canada, e-mail/Facebook communication).
Problem recognition	Whether the public recognizes that the problem exists and that something has to be done to face it	"I believe that the saying is true: 'Every nation has the government it deserves.' If I don't vote, I deserve the ethical decay and the lack of vision that the country is suffering. If I vote, at least I am doing the minimum I can, while being abroad, to achieve change. Besides, I am gay, and I have a partner who is not Costa Rican. One day, I would like to have the option of moving back with him to Costa Rica, and I wish for him to have the right to legal residency or even citizenship. In other words, there are many issues, many aspects in which our country can do better. It is not lack of potential, it is lack of political will and of citizen involvement to make things

		happen” (Alex B., in The Netherlands, e-mail/Facebook communication).
Internal constraint recognition	Whether the public’s members recognize that there are internal (psychological) factors that limit or restrict their behavior.	<b>Self-efficacy:</b> “Many years ago I stopped trusting any politician. It is worthless to spend time and money to do something [ <i>cast a vote</i> ] that is not going to change anything in the political situation at home” (Boris Morales, in Rio Grande de Norte, Brazil, e-mail/Facebook communication).

Source: Grunig & Hunt, 1984; exemplary quotes selected from the 40 interviews with Costa Rican migrants conducted between February 3, 2014, and April 30, 2014.

### 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Findings indicate that, as explained by the Situational Theory of Publics, the outcomes of an external voting process, even in the presence of good communication strategies and tactics, can be affected by independent variables such as problem recognition, internal constraint recognition (i.e., self-efficacy perceptions), external constraint recognition (i.e., real-life constraints), and level of involvement (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

For these 40 participants, external constraint recognition was clearly the variable that most strongly impacted the process adversely (in other words, this was the variable that most strongly deterred potential voters from voting). In these conditions, not even the best transnational public relations campaign would have been able to achieve success. In the presence of a transnational communication/public relations campaign --like the one started by TSE in 2012 through traditional and social media to inform Costa Ricans abroad that they could vote while away from the home country starting in 2014--, the communications campaign was not enough to achieve the desired outcomes, even though Costa Rican media outlets published news stories about the process frequently (for instance, news website [www.nacion.com](http://www.nacion.com), the most important news site about Costa Rica, published 10 stories about the external voting process in the two years before Elections Day, and 12 more during or the day after Elections Day). The communication strategies and tactics implemented by TSE to inform --directly or through media relations-- potential voters about the external voting right failed, thus, because most persons received the information necessary but many of them could not act to take advantage of this newly granted political right. This indicates that communication campaigns are useful, but not enough, if other factors are not dealt with as well, such as logistical barriers that constitute real external constraints for voters.

For most of these 40 participants, lack of information was not the problem. Only six did not vote because they did not receive the information necessary, on time, to register to vote. A large majority of these participants received the information on time, either through TSE

information channels or through online newspapers and social media. Nonetheless, external constraints (in other words, real-life limitations such as distance and lack of financial resources to afford the expenses related to casting the vote) impeded them to participate in the process.

Even fewer did not vote because they thought their vote could not make things different or better at home (only three persons mentioned an internal constraint). A large majority of the interviewees, instead, mentioned logistical challenges as the reasons why they did not vote (external constraint recognition). The majority of the persons who did not vote said, consistently, that it was important to do so, that they wished they could have participated, and that they considered it was their duty and their right to vote while abroad (in other words, for the most part, the level of involvement of these participants was strong).

Most of them also indicated that their vote could help change things back in Costa Rica, that through their vote they could instil change at home (in other words, self-efficacy perception was strong among most of the participants). Only 3 participants mentioned distrust and the feeling of not being able to change things with their vote as the reason for not voting.

### **5.1. Limitations and Further Research**

The recruitment of participants for this study happened through social media. Thus, it is likely that this particular group of participants was more aware about this absentee voting process than the average population of diaspora members, as these participants were self-selected, definitely interested in this topic, and quite eager to offer their opinions. The persons in this group of 40 participants were probably also more educated and affluent as well, compared to the average diaspora member, as they had access to computers, the Internet, and social media, which is not necessarily the case for all Costa Ricans who live abroad. For that reason, the variables of level of involvement and problem recognition might be stronger in this study than what it possibly is in reality.

Besides that, the results of this study cannot be generalized to all Costa Ricans living abroad, or even less to other diaspora communities from other countries who participate in external voting processes. Still, this is a rigorously developed study, conducted with the aim that it will help researchers and practitioners alike to start realizing the kind of challenges that home governments face when trying to communicate with publics located abroad.

Transnational communication processes are not easy ones, given that they occur in long-distance situations, and the effectiveness of these communication processes can be lowered or damaged for good if other factors, besides communication strategies and tactics

themselves, are not analysed and addressed in the process. For instance, in this particular case, the Costa Rican government can try to improve its communication efforts to better reach its diaspora community, but even the best communication strategy will not be enough to succeed if external constraints are not solved as well. The current logistics of the external voting process are complicated and unfriendly, and this logistical issue needs to be addressed.

Regarding further research, it is possible to use the case of Costa Rica to compare it to other cases in the region and around the world. A starting point could be to compare Costa Rica with El Salvador, another Central American nation that also granted external voting rights to its citizens, for the first time, in early 2014. Interestingly, the process was much more challenging for El Salvador than for Costa Rica, because only 1909 persons voted in absence in the Salvadoran elections of February 2014 (Tribunal Supremo Electoral, 2014).

The total number of external voters for El Salvador (1909 persons) was similar to the total number of external voters for Costa Rica (2771 persons), but the percentage of absentee voters was significantly lower, considering that while Costa Rica has about 127,000 persons living in the United States, there are, officially, 2 million Salvadorans in the United States (Pew Research Hispanic Center, 2013a).

In other words, only about 0.1 percent of Salvadorans abroad voted in the 2014 elections (compared to 2 percent of Costa Ricans living abroad), even though the Salvadoran process of external voting is easier than the Costa Rican, because absentee voters from El Salvador mail their votes using traditional mail. What happened in the case of El Salvador? How did political contexts and historical reasons shape this result?

One interesting inquiry would be to analyse the self-efficacy perceptions that Salvadorans have about their democratic electoral process. Do they feel they can change things with their vote? Or are they so disappointed with the political process at home that they think that their vote does not matter anymore? The comparison with the Costa Rican case could be rich, because while Costa Rica has had political stability since the late 1940s (Lijphart, 2012), El Salvador suffered a violent civil war between 1979 and 1992 (White, 2009), and it was not until 2009 that FMLN, the opposing party to the traditional ruler party (right-wing ARENA) was defeated in the national elections.

These and other comparisons can be developed for El Salvador, for other Latin American countries joining this trend (for example, Chile just granted, in April of 2014, the right of absentee vote to its citizens for the elections of November 2017) (El Mercurio, 2014), and for other nations around the world. These comparative analyses can be developed not to

generalize results, but to highlight similarities and differences among the different processes, with the intention of explaining why those similarities and differences exist.

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