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The Transitions to "Electoral" and Democratic Politics in Central America: Assessing the Role of Political Parties

Morris J. Blachman and Kenneth E. Sharpe

As the 1990s opened, the only country in Central America that could claim to hold periodic free and fair elections was Costa Rica. El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua all had held elections, but this inchoate "electoral politics" still fell considerably short of democratic politics. In general, there was little effective participation or broad-based representation and little political accountability between the elected officials and their supporters, and elected officials had limited power vis-à-vis a still-dominant military and, in some cases, a still-powerful oligarchy.

After colonial times in Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Honduras powerful, entrenched classes led by landed interests (but also including commercial and financial elites) and powerful military institutions opposed, often brutally, groups that sought to create democratic political institutions. Following World War II, however, the defense of the existing land tenure system, of related economic interests, and of military power and privilege became more difficult, as important

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national and international changes created new social forces that demanded reform and democracy. When change failed to occur, many turned to revolution. As the structural conditions of the old system, what some have called "reactionary despotism," broke down, the landed and military elites reacted with a mixture of repression and largely cosmetic reforms in an effort to restore order and maintain their power and privilege.¹ The "electoral politics" of the 1980s was part of this response.² Only in Costa Rica, where the post-World War II transformations had an impact on political and class structure, was the pattern different.

In Central America we find three categories of electoral politics: pseudo, limited, and democratic. In pseudo electoral politics, there is a pretense of electoral democracy. The casting of ballots is conducted in a relatively free and fair manner, as is much of the counting of them. But certain segments of the population—particularly those on the left—are systematically excluded from participation (for example, in El Salvador in 1982). The electoral process is truncated by limited and unequal access to the media and the public. Those in power use intimidation and coercion to maintain control. Outcomes are also closely monitored so that ruling groups do not lose control over the political system or major policy decisions. The leadership is not accountable to the citizenry at large. To the extent accountability exists within the system, it does so among factions of the ruling groups.

In limited electoral politics, most groups in the society are permitted to participate. The casting and counting of ballots is conducted in a relatively free and fair manner. Candidates and parties have considerably greater access to the media and to the public. Intimidation and coercion have significantly diminished, but this reduction resulted from a political decision by the ruling groups; that decision, therefore, could be reversed at any time. Outcomes are respected, but the power of those elected to make significant changes in important policy areas is severely restricted. Those who hold office may have little power, and fundamental control of the system is not up for grabs (for example, in Honduras). Accountability of leadership to the citizenry is weakly maintained. Principal accountability is to the ruling groups.

Democratic electoral politics involves open participation in a free and fair electoral process. Voting and tallying the ballots is fair and free. Access to the media and to the public is not hampered by either overt nor tacit political restriction, nor is it limited by intimidation or coercion. Outcomes are respected, and control over the political system and its agenda is up for grabs at election time. The leadership is accountable to the electorate through the regularized periodic holding of elections.³

The Pre-World War II Structure: Reactionary Despotism

Baloyra uses the term *reactionary despotism* to describe the regimes of Central America that were based on landed interest and opposed to political and social modernization—that is, democracy and social reform. At the heart of reactionary despotism was what Weeks describes as a "system of land tenure and labor coercion that emerged during the nineteenth century, itself predicated upon authoritarianism."⁴

It was not the concentration of land that was critical to this system but the coercive use of labor, which developed particularly in Guatemala, El Salvador, and, to a lesser extent, in Nicaragua. The landed oligarchies (concentrated particularly on large estates in Guatemala and El Salvador) relied on the state to ensure the large labor supply they needed in two ways. The state dispossessed peasants from the prime coffee lands, often using liberal land reform laws, which turned inalienable communal lands into private property. This not only provided the coffee growers with prime land, but also with a large, underemployed labor force. Second, the state created various coercive labor systems: debt peonage, labor contracts, and, later, vagrancy laws, as well as the *colono* system, in which landowners assigned plots to families in exchange for field labor when required.⁵

Thus, coffee production for the world market expanded, yet the commercialization of agriculture did not result in modern capitalist labor relations. Instead it resulted in coercive, often feudal, methods of labor control, and the landed interests depended heavily on a necessarily antidemocratic state and military to maintain these systems.

If recalcitrance to reform and democracy among Central American elites was shaped by the perceived need to maintain a coercive labor system supported by state repression, it was also reinforced by two other factors: the growth of a military with institutional interests of its own and U.S. intervention in the area. In El Salvador and Nicaragua, the military played a major role much earlier than in Guatemala or Honduras. El Salvador's oligarchy ceded considerable power to the military for decades following the 1932 massacre. In Guatemala and Honduras, the militaries did not take on a life or interests independent of economic elites until later. But officers in the high commands did assume economic and political interests that were not those of the oligarchies. They became involved in corruption and often practiced or condoned brutality. As a result, many of them developed suspicion, distrust, even fear of democratic reformers who might challenge their position or punish their actions.

The United States often mediated or intervened in intra-elite disputes. Yet

because Washington demonstrated a willingness to use force to keep certain groups in power (having put them there in the first place in some cases), the ruling elites felt little pressure to accommodate the demands of the middle and lower classes for reform or even nominal political participation.⁶

Post-World War II: Repression, Revolution, and "Electoral Politics"

Central America entered the post-World War II period with no country experiencing regular, free, and fair elections, let alone democracy. With the exception of Costa Rica, the economic and military elites had at best little interest in democratic reforms (Honduras) and at worst were willing to use force and state repression against those who sought political or social reform (El Salvador, Nicaragua). In addition, aside from Costa Rica, the particular form of economic development they experienced had not created an independent small farmer class, an economically strong or viable urban middle class, or an industrial/entrepreneurial group that might have organized to demand a political voice and social reform.

Yet important internal and world system changes beginning in the late 1940s and early 1950s created a new historical conjuncture. With it came pressures for political and social change from new groups demanding social reform and political democracy. The different reactions of the military and economic elites in each country generated patterns of repression, reform, and insurrection out of which emerged the forms of electoral politics present in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Four interrelated moments can be found in this conjuncture.

1. Transformation of the internal economic and class structure as a response to a changed relationship with the world capitalist system. In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s Central American military and economic elites used state power to change important relations of production. There was a diversification out of coffee and bananas into cotton, sugar, and cattle. The commercialization of agriculture favored those with access to capital or credit; thus, thousands of smallholders, squatters, and tenant farmers were forced from their lands. Concentration of landholding increased in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua as commercial agriculture worsened the problem of land scarcity.⁷

The creation of the Central American Common Market (CACM) in the early 1960s stimulated industrial growth without the major reforms

necessary to redistribute income and create adequate markets in each individual country. CACM helped spur industrialization and growth, and trade among the five skyrocketed from \$32 million in 1960 to \$260 million in 1969.⁸ Such efforts to stimulate growth were pushed along by U.S. economic assistance under the Alliance for Progress. The structural reforms urged by the Alliance, however, were largely ignored.

Light industrialization created jobs but not in sufficient number to counteract rural dislocation and rapid population growth. Thus, years of rapid GNP growth were also paradoxically years of increasing inequality and joblessness.⁹ These economic transformations put forward new social forces. The middle class expanded. The urban labor force grew. Displaced peasants were forced to seek scarce work for low wages and swelled the numbers of underemployed rural wage laborers. Others moved to urban slums.

These new social forces were organized into new associations. Centrist and leftist political parties organized and demanded reforms and civilian government. Sometimes the military and the oligarchy responded with reactionary counterorganizations as they sought to create official parties or rule through existing parties. But in no country except Costa Rica did the reformist parties have the organization and power to play a major role in creating a transition to democratic electoral politics. In fact, it often fell to nonparty associations to organize the new social forces: labor unions, peasant organizations, and popular organizations, often building on *comunidades de base*, Christian base communities.

2. *Transformation of the Catholic church.* These base communities grew out of a revitalization of the church that began in the early 1960s with Vatican II and was reinforced by the conference of Latin American bishops at Medellín, Colombia, in 1968. The bishops denounced communism and capitalism as equal threats to human dignity and located causes for the region's misery and hunger in a social and economic structure dominated by the rich and powerful. Some factions in the church began to weld the poor and dispossessed into a new social force, organizing base communities, and called for a "preferential option for the poor."¹⁰

3. *Short-term cyclical economic trends in the early 1980s.* Beginning in 1979, economic decline engulfed the region. The causes were not limited to the inequalities, joblessness, exhaustion of the import substitution models, and uneven growth generated by the structural problems discussed above. More immediate short-term factors also worsened economic conditions and created severe internal pressures. One was the effect of the civil wars that wreaked havoc in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. A second was regional disintegration, much of it spurred by the civil wars that undermined regional trade and the growth it had

promoted. Finally there were a series of external shocks: "a sharp deterioration in the terms of trade, declines in export volumes, and suddenly rising interest rates on international debt."¹¹

4. *Changing U.S. geopolitical concerns.* Although U.S. hegemony in the international political and economic system has been declining, U.S. policy is still guided by a hegemonic strategic vision. The United States has been, at best, suspicious and, at worst, openly hostile to the popular organizations and parties of the left, driving forces for reform and change without which no large-scale democratic reform would have been possible. As a consequence, the United States neither supports these groups nor helps protect them from repression. At times, the United States even encouraged the forces of repression on the grounds that reformist groups and parties represented the opening wedge of communism. These policies often served to strengthen the very militaries whose opposition to reform blocked democracy in the first place. But there was a contradictory effect as well: the price of getting U.S. military and economic assistance was that the military had to allow some political opening.

Reactionary Despotism to "Electoral Politics"

The impact of these structural conditions depended on the reaction of landed and military elites in each country. There were two basic patterns. In Costa Rica and, to a lesser extent, Honduras the state was less coercive and the economic and military elites less powerful, less reactionary, and more open to elections, reform, and, especially in Costa Rica, democratic electoral politics. In El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua powerful and recalcitrant economic elites, backed by increasingly strong militaries and coercive states, met efforts at reform with brutal repression. The result was the outbreak of insurgencies and revolutions. In El Salvador and Guatemala the transition to pseudo electoral politics was part of the military's and the oligarchy's response to the problems created by civil wars (armed insurrections). In Nicaragua, the failure to respond with a transition to some form of electoral politics fanned the flames of revolution.

Pseudo or Limited Electoral Politics

The transition to democratic electoral politics in Costa Rica came in the late 1940s. It involved dismantling the military and establishing a broadly representative and reformist democratic welfare state. But in the other countries the potential transition, the opening for transition, appeared to come only in the early 1980s and was restricted to pseudo or, at best, limited electoral politics. This highly circumscribed transition resulted

from internal pressure by parties and groups who sought full democracy but lacked the power to force such change. It also resulted from external pressures by the United States that shaped the "willingness" of the military and authoritarian governments to allow the modest change.

In El Salvador the repression of reform efforts in 1979 and 1980 led to full-scale revolution, which the military then had difficulty containing. But the military's continuing desire for U.S. assistance led it to accept limited political changes, pseudo electoral politics, to show enough movement to overcome U.S. congressional reluctance to provide that aid. The role of the United States in creating this alternative was much more direct in El Salvador than in Guatemala.

In Guatemala the military was institutionalized, skilled, efficient, and not personalistic like Somoza's National Guard. It relied on brutal repression to destroy both reformers and mass organizations as well as to bring insurgents under control in the countryside. When order was restored and a military-authoritarian system institutionalized in the countryside, the military was willing to move toward pseudo electoral politics to resolve the severe economic difficulties created by its own policies and worsened by international isolation. Military leaders correctly thought that holding elections would overcome congressional refusal to provide economic or military assistance and gain them a certain legitimacy in Europe and Central America.

In Honduras the transition occurred without great organization or pressure from mass organizations. Parties played a more important role, but the military yielded primarily because of pressure from the Carter administration. In Nicaragua, the Somoza regime refused to yield to internal and external pressures for democratic reform. The consequence was a broad-based revolution. The transition to electoral politics in Nicaragua began in a postrevolutionary context.

With the exception of Costa Rica, one clear pattern emerged amid these variations: the reluctance of the military to allow a transition except as a way to get needed U.S. support, and then only under controlled circumstances that assure its continued dominance. The military allows the aperture because it is worried about its ability to handle increasing pressure from below, from social movements. At the same time it seeks to maintain an economic model that promises growth, legitimizes its rule, and does not disturb its allies among the economic elites. This in turn often demands external economic and military support. If the military's lack of international legitimacy threatens its ability to sustain its political and economic model or if its ability to control emerging social movements seems to be weakening, then it is likely to turn toward some form of electoral politics so as to avoid greater pressure, which might threaten it as an institution.

Once the military decides to allow an electoral process and civilian government, it seeks to control and limit the transition process. The kind of control it seeks and its ability to achieve that control vary depending on the country's history, but we can make some broad generalizations about its intentions.

- The military will seek to exclude from the range of opposition parties any organizations that seek broad or rapid socioeconomic change or that are perceived as wanting to challenge the power and prerogatives of the military. The military will seek to work with those who seek legal-political changes, not structural ones.
- It will favor partial, interim changes—elections for a constituent assembly, elections for an interim president, and a vote on the constitution—rather sweeping reforms that include the election of a president or parliament.¹²
- It will seek to limit the control of elected civilian regimes over the military, such as the power to punish military officers for past human rights abuses, to tame corruption, to end military sinecures, to control military budgets, or to determine military policy. They may do this by making pacts or agreements with those parties they will allow to take office.

In short, there is a pattern in the electoral strategies of the military. The military will define as "democratic" and "legitimate" those parties that do not threaten mass mobilization, demand structural transformation, or challenge military prerogatives. This excludes parties that would want to incorporate or organize the popular sectors and mass organizations and may even exclude democratic socialists. The military may use techniques to exclude these other groups such as refusal to grant them protection, repression (death squads, arrests, harassment, intimidation, disappearance, torture), and limited access to the media. The military will try to control the electoral calendar and slow, delay, or reverse the process if things seem to be getting out of control.¹³ The military might also try to control the balloting.

This permits us to suggest two hypotheses concerning the role of political parties in the transition process.

- Parties do not play a major role in creating the conditions for an electoral transition. But once the military and economic elites decide to allow the transition to take place, certain parties, especially moderate and centrist ones, can play an important role in organizing the electoral process and the transition.
- Because of the restrictions placed on the transition process by the military and dominant groups, parties are severely limited in their ability (1) to articulate a reform program that challenges the

power of the military or threatens the basic socioeconomic structure, and (2) to establish effective working alliances with center-left or left parties or with mass organizations whose support might later be necessary to bring about major structural reforms. This puts the moderate parties in a vulnerable position on taking office. The political compromises these centrist parties must make to be able to participate in the process limits their power and, perhaps, their will to undertake the major socioeconomic changes needed to move to democratic electoral politics.¹⁴

The Transition to Democratic Electoral Politics

In Costa Rica democratic electoral politics had already become firmly rooted in the years following the 1948 Revolution. The transition to pseudo or limited electoral politics in the other four countries in the 1980s thrust reformist, modernizing political parties into new prominence after decades of exclusion and, often, repression. But the transitions left those electoral systems still far from democratic. Further, the parties in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras lacked the power and authority to grapple with the dilemmas they confronted, and even the much more powerful National Liberation Party in Costa Rica and the *Sandinistas* in Nicaragua faced severe constraints.

The traditional yardstick for measuring progress toward democracy emphasizes the processes and procedures of Western democracies—political parties, competitive elections, and a certain consensus about the rules of the game. The absence of these criteria show the serious defects in electoral politics in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The problem has generally not been a lack of opposition parties to compete in elections but a failure on their part to aggregate emergent new interests. This leaves wide sectors among the peasantry, the unemployed, urban workers, and slum dwellers under- or unrepresented.

One reason opposition parties have been unable to represent labor unions, peasant organizations, or other popular organizations is that the parties have been denied the opportunity to develop public support from these groups. The parties have not had adequate access to the press, and their members' ability to assemble, speak, and organize has too often been threatened by unwarranted arrest, torture, assassination, and disappearance.¹⁵

Worse, parties sometimes make pacts with those who have traditionally monopolized power—the military and economic elites—thereby ensuring the continued exclusion of important sectors of the population. These pacts, whether unwritten or written, decide the distribution of

power—who gets what, when, and how. The pact between El Salvador's Christian Democrats and the military immediately following José Napoleón Duarte's election as president is one such example.

Electoral politics is further weakened by the personalism and factionalism so prevalent in many parties in the region. In the Central American context, this "reinforces the tendency toward internal competition and conflict resolution, rather than on purpose and problem solving. In this context, payoffs (political favors, jobs, unequal access to limited resources such as foreign exchange) are related back to groups competing for power, not forward to their consequences to society."¹⁶ Although the elections in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras did lead the military to step down from governmental office, it continues to rule behind the scenes in El Salvador and Guatemala and remains the major force in Honduras.¹⁷

Thus, the elected officials in these three countries are to a great extent figureheads; they are accountable to the military and, to some extent, the oligarchies and economic elites but not to the citizenry at large. Elected officials hold office but little power. They lack the power to carry out land reform or to tax and are often limited in their power to protect the basic freedoms of speech, assembly, and the press necessary for democratic practices. They cannot punish officers who have been involved in crimes; they cannot investigate and have difficulty stopping disappearances, torture, and assassinations. They cannot end military corruption or bring the military under civilian control. The exceptions are Costa Rica, where there is no military, and Nicaragua, where the ruling *Sandinista* National Liberation Front (FSLN) controlled the military before the 1990 election.

A hidden dynamic, however, is built into the present situation. The ability of the parties to sustain their status, let alone be the impetus for a transition toward electoral democracy, is shaped by their capacity to handle demands of their own supporters, who view the transition to pseudo or limited electoral politics not simply as a good in and of itself but as a mechanism for achieving reform. In each country there are demands for land reform, labor reform, and economic recovery. In El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, there are demands to lift restrictions on civil liberties, to end human rights violations, and to bring the military under civilian control. In El Salvador and Guatemala there are also calls to find negotiated solutions to the armed conflicts. In Nicaragua conservatives have been demanding the military be freed from the control of the FSLN.

But the parties all face serious internal constraints in dealing with these often contradictory demands. At the same time the elections in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador have only given the parties

office, not power, they have also created political openings that have enabled popular associations to organize and put forward their demands outside of narrow electoral channels. The parties are constrained in meeting those demands not only by the continued power of the military, but also by the limits the capitalist economy places on state action: failure to ensure an appropriate investment climate will lead to disinvestment and economic deterioration.

In Nicaragua the constraints on the *Sandinista* government were shaped by both the *Contra* War and the need to deliver on reforms. Reforms were difficult to finance and were opposed by economically powerful opposition groups. The Chamorro government, victor in the 1990 elections, is no longer constrained by the *Contra* War, but it is severely limited by economic devastation, created in large measure by that war and by the powerful demands for economic relief by the FSLN and popular organizations.

In addition, there are serious external constraints. Service payments on foreign debt drain much-needed foreign exchange. Restrictions on economic policy placed by the international banks, the IMF, or the U.S. embassy as the condition for more loans force austerity and devaluations, which makes needed reform and growth difficult. The geopolitical strategies of the United States have also imposed serious external constraints on the region. In El Salvador, the U.S. embassy for years vetoed a negotiated solution to the war in favor of continuing the counterinsurgency program. The United States also opposed any significant opening of political space for many popular organizations and the left. In Honduras, U.S. policy was designed to make Honduras a forward base for U.S. strategy against Nicaragua.

Managing demands for reform in the face of such internal and external constraints would be a severe test even for strong, stable Western democracies. The "elected" governments in Central America do not have the remotest ability to handle such difficulties unless they generate the power and authority that only a transition toward greater democracy and more popular support could give them. What then are the prospects for such a transition, and what role might parties play in it?

If we judge electoral politics in Central America using formal procedural criteria drawn from Western European and North American electoral and party systems, we conclude that all countries except Costa Rica and to some extent Nicaragua are far from democratic. Further, the prospects for democracy are not good. Some critics are harsher. They brand elections like those in El Salvador as merely "demonstration elections"¹⁸ and describe Central America as a region of "facade democracies" (*democracias de fachada*).¹⁹

Without question Central American social reality constitutes a harsh environment for the development of democracy. But if our criteria are based on a less formal, less Western European model, the prospects for democracy, while still difficult, appear more promising. We can define democracy in terms of the relationship between citizens and their leaders without specifying a goal or purpose. It is a system in which informed citizens can participate actively and effectively in making decisions that shape their lives and in which they can hold their leaders politically accountable to themselves and to laws made with the effective participation of the citizenry.²⁰ Further, it is a system in which there is an underlying consensus about who is a citizen and who can participate in politics, about the rules of the game for participation and accountability, and some rough consensus on which areas of life can be legislated and which are beyond the authority of the state.²¹ Approaching democracy this way incorporates the concern of the two other major approaches toward democracy: the formal approach, which focuses on having adequate procedures for setting the rules of the game for democracy, and the substantive approach, which recognizes the necessity for citizens to have the capacity to enter and play the game using the same set of rules.

Within our approach, we focus on three key criteria to assess the role of political parties in the transition to electoral democracy: *effective participation*, *civic virtue*, and *accountability*.²² Competitive elections are, therefore, not synonymous with democratic politics. Rather, a country is more democratic the more it allows and encourages such participation, the more widespread the underlying consensus on rules of the game and limits of authority, and the more it fosters accountability. Judged by these criteria, the countries of Central America look varied, from democratic in Costa Rica to much less so in El Salvador or Guatemala.

In this transition to electoral politics, political parties could play a far more significant role than mere participation in competitive elections. To assess their prospects in a transition process to electoral democracy, the student of parties should address the following key questions.

I. How Can Parties Help Create Conditions That Might Enhance Effective Participation?

Effective political participation requires that people be allowed the freedom to assemble and speak, to organize associations, to formulate and press their demands, and to have the freedom of the press necessary to gain and disseminate information. It also requires institutions through which these demands can be heard and considered. Necessary as well is a minimal level of economic resources—money and

time—to allow the parties to make use of the freedom to organize and to utilize effectively the institutional channels for articulating their demands.

Elections are only one such institution, and parties only one kind of organization for effective political participation. Other associations include labor unions, peasant organizations, cooperatives, Christian base community groups, neighborhood groups, women's, students', and teacher and professional organizations—what are often called "popular" organizations in the Central American context. Nonelectoral institutions for effective participation may include legally sanctioned collective bargaining, local development projects directed by local organizations, and self-government of universities.

Honduras and especially Costa Rica have been relatively open to such nonparty modes of participation and have allowed freedom of assembly, speech, the press, and association without much fear of repression. But the social and economic resources to facilitate such participation are often not available to a large majority of the population.

In El Salvador, Guatemala, and Somoza's Nicaragua such popular organizations did, at times, form, but in each case, by the late 1970s, they had been severely repressed and there was little effective political participation. One consequence of the transition to electoral politics in El Salvador and Guatemala and of the revolution in Nicaragua, has been the creation of improved conditions—however limited—for such political participation. In El Salvador and Guatemala the military's willingness to allow a transition to pseudo electoral politics was in large part the result of a broader effort to gain international legitimacy, particularly within the U.S. Congress. This required a reduction in some of the most brutal forms of repression—death squad killings, assassinations, disappearances—and the lifting of certain restrictions on the press, on the freedom to demonstrate, and on the right to strike. This created a political opening that not only allowed party activity but also the reemergence of participation by popular organizations. This participation is still limited and could be closed down again. Nevertheless the growing effectiveness of participation is evident in cooperatives, slum communities, refugee camps, and even prisons.

In Nicaragua, the revolution increased the ability of some popular organizations to participate and limited the effectiveness for others. Many of these were organized before the *Sandinista* party came to power and thus maintained an independence of the party organization; new ones were formed subsequent to the revolution. Still others, mostly on the right, ceased to exist. Organizations of small peasants and producers (UNAG), of growers (like the rice growers association), and of women (like ANMALAE), originally closely directed by the FSLN, grew

increasingly independent and often participated effectively in decisions that affected the lives of their members. Other groups (both the communist and noncommunist opposition unions) were allowed to organize, but until the 1990 election their participation was limited by such actions as government efforts to prevent strikes and the state of emergency imposed during the *Contra* War.

Given the importance of such nonparty participation in democratic politics, it is important to ask how parties have helped expand conditions for effective participation? Parties face two different tasks in this respect: first, incorporating new groupings into the political system and, second, expanding the political space for themselves and others to create a well-functioning system. It is important to examine the role parties play in bringing popular organizations and mass movements. Do these relationships provide for representation of the interests of these groups, or are they cooptive and controlling like Mexico's ruling Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI) or Argentina under Perón?

Trying to incorporate emerging sectors into the ongoing political fabric is difficult. With the exception of the *Sandinistas*, few parties have had the skill or the wherewithal to mobilize large groups of people.²³ As we pointed out earlier, some of the parties, including "modernizing" ones like the Christian Democratic Party (PDC) in El Salvador, have been willing to accommodate other dominant power groups at the cost of excluding these newly emerging sectors.

Moreover, some members of society are significantly restrained from effective participation as a result of the structures, values, and behavior prevalent in other societal institutions—family, religion, and so on—that carry over into the political system. Class analysis will address some aspects of this problem, but attention should also be paid to the ways the society incapacitates social groupings such as women in their ability to participate, to overcome the institutionalized biases that may inhibit or prevent these social groupings from participating effectively.²⁴ Are the parties even exploring these issues? Do they have programs to address them?

What role do the parties play in helping expand the necessary conditions of effective participation—ensuring freedom of assembly, organization, and the press; taming the military and death squad abuses of human rights; ensuring access to the media and the safety of persons who want to organize; overcoming institutionalization biases? Although it is important to examine how parties seek to make it possible to establish broad center-left coalitions that could bring excluded leftist parties into the political system, it is also important to note their contribution to the establishment of a system in which opposition and dissenting parties and coalitions are, at minimum, permitted.

In El Salvador in late 1980 attempts were made to broker an agreement between the *Frente Democrática Revolucionario* (FDR) and PDC, but these collapsed when the military assassinated the FDR leaders in November of that year. In 1981, Washington sought to promote a PDC-ARENA (*Alianza Republicana Nacionalista*) coalition to modernize the right-wing/death squad oligarchy and ally its party with the Christian Democrats. More recently, the *Convergencia Democrática* has tried to bring together center-left parties and popular organizations in a united front to push for reforms and a negotiated solution to the war. In Nicaragua, the FSLN helped mobilize the involvement of formally excluded groups in politics. It will be interesting to see how the *Unión Nacional Oposición* and its constituent parties will function under current conditions.

Finally, the parties must work to expand the base of empowered participants. This requires releasing the tight grip on leadership positions and changing the old, ineffective rules of the game. Parties must develop mechanisms for recruiting and training followers and leaders.

II. How Effectively Do Parties Foster Values and Attitudes Supportive of Democratic Civic Virtues?

A key facet of the transition to electoral democracy is the promotion of values and attitudes that sustain and expand democratic institutions and practices. Among them are the creation of a climate of trust and honesty, respect for the rule of law, tolerance of opposing views, and reliance on peaceful means for resolving political conflict, especially the use of negotiation and compromise.²⁵ A student of political parties must explore the contribution parties might make to fostering such democratic civic virtue.

Honesty is essential to promoting effective participation and accountability. As Kalman Silvert wrote,

Lying is the most nefarious political offense....Untruths....destroy the possibility of creating common perceptions of political events, and therefore can fracture a political community at all levels of participation....Political falsehoods create many social events out of one empirical occurrence, threaten community cohesion by opening up the possibility of value conflicts...tend to produce erratic politics, and this...impoverishes individuals and societies.²⁶

To what degree do political parties promote honesty in both their own behavior and in that of other politically relevant actors? In a situation where the government or ruling class elite lies to the citizenry, political parties can provide a reliable alternative source of information, giving the

public a way to judge the validity of what they are told. Further, by encouraging honesty and integrity in the system and among their own members, they can help pass these values on to party members and to the rest of the society.

The events of the past two decades in Latin America have led to a renewed commitment to the rule of law by those who seek to move away from authoritarianism toward a democratic order. Arbitrariness and inequity in the application of power and the great difficulty of stopping military and vigilante forces from regularly taking the law into their own hands underline the importance of an effective legal system for electoral democracy.²⁷

The law sets the rules defining the nature of legitimate participation and the mechanisms through which leadership can be held accountable. To what degree do the political parties actively support the rule of law, even in the face of strong opposition or a losing decision? To what degree do they demonstrate their commitment and support for the rule of law by their behavior within the party itself? How do the parties seek to transmit this value to their own adherents as well as to other members of the nation?

In democratic electoral politics diversity and dissent are to be celebrated, not suppressed. As Kalman Silvert argues, democratic politics "should be seen not as the art of guiding the use of legitimized force, but as the art of promoting and synthesizing difference."²⁸ Dissent not only permits the consideration of alternative policy options, it can also provide correction in the system for inaccurate or misleading information—whether the inaccuracies or misinformation were purposeful or not. In this latter sense, dissent is important to accountability. In the former sense it is a key to effective participation. In both cases, the valuing of dissent is a critical civic virtue.

To what degree then are parties supporting the presentation of dissenting views? To what degree do they encourage this within the deliberations of the party itself? How, if at all, are they attempting to pass on the importance of tolerating, if not encouraging, dissent?

Conflict among differing ideas is essential to accountability. Indeed, conflict is a normal part of democratic processes. What is important about conflict is not that it occurs, but that it is bounded by an acceptance of the rules of the game, which require settling disputes peacefully, through the political process. Many Chileans learned this lesson during the Pinochet years. Members of parties that had engaged in conflict with other parties to the point of political homicide began to realize that although the struggle was important, having an arena in which such conflicts could take place was even more important than the outcome of a particular fight.²⁹

Respect for the rights of others to hold different views and to seek different policies means accepting victory without trying to destroy the opposition and accepting defeat knowing that other opportunities to compete will not be denied. The presence of an arena for the resolution of political conflict through negotiation and compromise must be more highly valued than victory on any specific issue.³⁰ Students of parties need to examine the efforts parties make to stimulate the peaceful resolution of conflicts; to support a process of negotiation and compromise as opposed to arbitrary rule, the use of force, or the political extinction of opposition; and to promote the use of an open political process to resolve disputes within the party.

III. How Can Parties Help Create Conditions That Enhance Political Accountability?

Accountability is more difficult for political parties to effect than is participation or the promotion of civic virtue. Nonetheless, political parties are central actors in political life and their role is a crucial one. Throughout much of Central America's history, governments have either been the province of the relatively few privileged members of society or caretakers accountable "to either the military, the oligarchy, the private external financial interests with investments in the country, or some combination of these groups."³¹

Attempting to hold regimes accountable in the Central American context may be not only dangerous, but in some cases may also be futile. The "lack of internal structures for promoting and fostering open discussions about political issues" has been a persistent problem. "Few of the region's countries have allowed for ongoing debate and discussion among moderates and the non-revolutionary left."³² In some cases political actors have turned to the international arena to bolster their efforts to hold regimes accountable.³³

Finally, the issue of accountability cannot be resolved without considering the role of the United States. As the preeminent, most powerful external actor in the region, the United States has had a profound impact in each of the Central American nations.³⁴ Traditionally the U.S. embassy has been such a major player that it has, all too often, inhibited the development of internal political accountability of the government to the local citizenry and nation. As Rosenberg observes,

In Central America, the United States has unrivaled political power and resources and represents one of the largest economic enterprises in each country....The U.S. ambassador is one of the most studied figures in each country. The embassy itself, its staff, programs, and aid activities, are

analyzed, scrutinized, and then hustled by locals who specialize in "working" the U.S. institution....National politicians and military officials inevitably spend as much time cultivating U.S. embassy clientele and visiting dignitaries as they do with their own nationals.³⁵

To maintain the integrity of a nation's electoral democracy, accountability to the United States must be substantially subordinated to accountability to the citizens of the country.

Conclusion

We have endeavored to accomplish two tasks in this chapter: first, to show the significant changes that have taken place in the context in which political parties operate in Central America in the past several decades and, second, to provide a framework and series of questions by which one can assess the role parties can play in a transition from pseudo or limited electoral politics to more fully democratic politics. Answers to the three overarching questions—concerning effective participation, civic virtue, and accountability—will help us understand that phenomenon.

As the transition from pseudo to limited to democratic politics occurs, greater numbers of individuals and groups participate and accountability grows. Therefore, the closer one comes to democratic electoral politics, the more social forces there are with which to compete, and all political participants, including political parties, become more empowered.

Any reasonable assessment of the role of political parties in promoting a transition to democracy must recognize the limited impact they can have. Parties are only one of many actors, and they are not autonomous and are composed of a relatively small number of adherents. Finally, their power to act in the system is also circumscribed by the broader, external socioeconomic and political context, which includes actors such as the United States.

Notes

1. Enrique A. Baloyra, "Reactionary Despotism in Central America," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 15, 2 (November 1983). Much of the following analysis draws from John Weeks, "The Central American Crisis," *Latin American Research Review* 21, 3 (1986):31-53.

2. Although we are emphasizing the domestic conditions and responses to change inside Central America, we are aware of the tremendous importance international pressures played in shaping the response of the elites to the demands emanating from the broader publics. In particular, the policies of the United States affected the use of some form of "electoral politics" by these regimes to allow them to generate external legitimacy while maintaining internal control.

3. One could argue that there is a fourth category. That would be a system in which elections are held but in which opposition is simply not permitted and the outcome is a foregone conclusion well before any balloting. In this system there is little pretense that the process is a democratic one. Such was the case, for example, in the 1976 presidential election in El Salvador. This was essentially the situation in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua at the end of the 1970s. See Mario Solorzano, "Centroamerica: Democracias de Fachada," *Polemica* 12 (November-December 1983).

4. Weeks, "Central American Crisis," p. 35.

5. For a fuller discussion, see Weeks, "Central American Crisis," pp. 38-39, and the analysts he cites. See also John A. Booth, *The End and the Beginning* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1982), for the Nicaraguan case.

6. Weeks, "Central American Crisis," p. 35.

7. Richard Newfarmer, "The Economics of Strife," in *Confronting Revolution: Security Through Diplomacy in Central America*, ed. Morris J. Blachman, William M. LeoGrande, and Kenneth E. Sharpe (New York: Pantheon, 1986), pp. 209-12.

8. Peter Smith, "The Origins of the Crisis," in *Confronting Revolution*, p. 9.

9. Newfarmer, "Economics of Strife," p. 214.

10. Smith, "Origins of the Crisis," p. 12.

11. Newfarmer, "Economics of Strife," p. 215.

12. James Petras, "The Redemocratization Process," *Contemporary Marxism* 14 (Fall 1986):1.

13. See a similar discussion of electoral strategies in Petras, "Redemocratization Crisis," pp. 8-9.

14. Note that Petras makes a similar point in describing the different situations of transition in Peru, Bolivia, and Argentina. See *ibid.*, pp. 10-14.

15. For two case studies that emphasize these obstacles to party organization, see Frank Brodhead and Edward Herman, *Demonstration Elections* (Boston: South End Press, 1985); and Martin Diskin and Kenneth Sharpe, "El Salvador," in *Confronting Revolution*.

16. Mark Rosenberg, "Obstacles to Democracy in Central America," in *Authoritarianism and Democrats: Regime Transition in Latin America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987), p. 204.

17. The impact of U.S. policy bolstered the power of the military with respect to all other institutions in the society. See, for example, Phillip Sheppard, "Honduras," in *Confronting Revolution*.

18. See Brodhead and Herman, *Demonstration Elections*.

19. Solorzano, "Centroamerica."

20. For one recent discussion of effective participation and political accountability as constitutive of democracy, see Richard Fagen's article in Richard Fagen, et al., eds., *The Politics of Transition* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1986). Also see Kalman H. Silvert, *Man's Power: A Biased Guide to Political Thought and Action* (New York: Viking, 1970).

21. Robert Dahl emphasized this point, though perhaps a bit too narrowly, when he wrote:

What we ordinarily describe as democratic "politics" is merely the chaff. Prior to politics...is the underlying consensus on policy that usually exists in a society among a predominant portion of politically active members.

Preface to Democratic Theory (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), pp. 132-33.

22. We have chosen to focus on these three criteria because we believe they provide an adequate way of examining the role of parties in the construction of democracy—its institutions, practices, and values. We are not suggesting that these three constitute a full explication of a theory of democracy.

23. Rosenberg, "Obstacles to Democracy," p. 205.

24. Morris J. Blachman, *Eve in a Democracy: The Politics of Women in Brazil*, Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1976.

25. Silvert, *Man's Power*.

26. *Ibid.*

27. For a solid and important treatment of this issue, see Tom J. Farer, "Democracy in Latin America: Notes Toward an Appropriate Legal Framework" (a revised version of a paper originally delivered at the conference on "Transition from Military to Civilian Rule in South America" at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, S.C., in March 1987).

28. Silvert, *Man's Power*, p. 162.

29. This point was forcefully made by some Chilean political party leaders at the conference on "Transition from Military to Civilian Rule in South America" at the University of South Carolina in March 1987.

30. "Power should shed its meaning related to the imposition of will, and assume the broader meaning of having to do with increasing man's ability to control the consequences of choice." Silvert, *Man's Power*, p. 162.

31. "Only in Costa Rica has some tradition of accountability been established, largely through the electoral system, and to a lesser extent through the courts." Rosenberg, "Obstacles to Democracy," p. 208.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 199.

33. *Ibid.*

34. See Blachman, LeoGrande, and Sharpe, eds. *Confronting Revolution*.

35. Rosenberg, "Obstacles to Democracy," pp. 197-98.