

What are the differences between the left and right in Central America today? A debate about the attitudes of political elites and the nature of democracy in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the opinions and attitudes of the main parliamentary groups in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala on two crucial subjects: democracy and its institutions; and, the relationship between the market and the State. With regard to democracy and its institutions, the paper explores the current perceptions/opinions of political elites on the left and the right with regard to these issues, in countries that recently achieved democracy after suffering bloody civil wars. Secondly, the paper outlines the agreements, disagreements, as well as the changes that have taken place within these political factions which, up to today, continue to claim opposing views.

Key words: parliamentary elites, democracy, State, market, Central America.

Resumen: El presente trabajo analiza las opiniones y actitudes que los principales grupos parlamentarios de Nicaragua, El Salvador y Guatemala tienen con respecto a dos temas cruciales: la democracia y sus instituciones, y la relación entre Estado y mercado. Con ello, se persigue un doble fin. Primero, descubrir cuáles son las percepciones que, con respecto a ambos temas, tienen en la actualidad las elites políticas de izquierda y derecha que en estos tres países alcanzaron la democracia tras sufrir cruentas guerras civiles. Y segundo, reseñar las discrepancias y convergencias, así como los cambios que se han producido en unas opciones políticas que, todavía hoy, se siguen autoproclamando antagónicas.

Palabras claves: Palabras Clave: elites parlamentarias, democracia, Estado, mercado, Centroamérica.

Introduction

The aim of this text is to analyse and compare the differences and similarities in the perceptions/opinions of parliamentary elites about the political systems in which they are involved. The elites studied here belong to the most relevant left- and right- wing groups in the parliaments of Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala¹: the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) and the Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC) in the case of Nicaragua; the Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional (FMLN) and the Alianza Republicana Nacional (ARENA) in El Salvador; and, lastly, in Guatemala the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG), the Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN) and the Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG). We believe that this study is relevant for two reasons. Firstly, none of these three countries had experienced liberal democracy until the 1990s. Secondly, just two decades ago these political groups, which today share the same institutions, were fighting each other in ruthless civil wars.

The revolutionary uprisings in Nicaragua and El Salvador during the 1970s were the result of the confrontation between traditional agrarian societies and popular demands for social justice. In Guatemala, the return of guerrilla insurgence in the same decade (although noticeably less intense and more isolated than in the two neighbouring countries) was the result of the growth of the left in the region. The rapid social changes that took place during the 1960s and 1970s coincided with an extraordinary u-turn in the role of the Catholic Church, which went from being a pillar of the established order to an agent of popular mobilisation. Reformists demanded a democratic renovation of authoritarian political systems which were dominated by the landholding elite. However, in El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala this reformist wave was dismantled by repression which led to a polarisation of politics, the rise of the revolutionary left and the outbreak of guerrilla warfare. When the wars ended, at the start of the 1990s, Central America had undergone a political transformation. Although the revolutionaries were only victorious in Nicaragua (and only for a short period, due to the implacable hostility of the United States), the region's traditional elites were forced to accept democratic political institutions in exchange for the demobilisation of the armed left. In exchange for democracy, the armed groups sought social reform via the ballot box rather than through armed revolution. The transitional pact in El Salvador was explicit and took the form of agreements negotiated between the State and the revolutionary left. In Nicaragua, the situation was the other way round but the result was similar: the revolutionary government of the Sandinistas was forced by the armed counter-revolutionary forces to make democratic concessions² (LeoGrande, 2001).

Perceptions about a “democracy” that arrived by mistake

Before observing and analysing the perceptions held by the political elites of El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala about democracy, it is important to note that this was not the real cause for which they fought. For the left - grouped around the FSLN, the FMLN and the URNG respectively – the desired goal had always been revolution and social, economic and political transformation. In general, these groups were more enthusiastic about the Cuban regime than about any other established in the subcontinent. On the other hand, the right – led by the Creole oligarchy and supported unconditionally by the US administration – stuck to an authoritarian and elitist mindset,

without ruling out (until the end of the 1980s) a somewhat renovated return to the “old order”. Bearing this situation in mind, it is no exaggeration to state that the new liberal democratic regimes that were born out of the respective wars did not completely satisfy any of the groups that had formerly been involved in these wars. However, after the 1990s, things seem to have changed, as can be seen in the data presented here from interviews conducted with parliamentarians in all three countries

Table 1. Evaluation of Democracy as a Form of Government * Political Party

	<i>Nicaragua</i>		<i>El Salvador</i>		<i>Guatemala</i>		
	PLC	FSLN	ARENA	FMLN	PAN	FRG	URNG
Democracy is preferable to other forms of government	31	21	24	22	12	38	3
	100%	84%	100%	100%	92.3%	86.4%	75%
In contexts of crisis, an authoritarian government can be preferable	0	2	0	0	1	6	0
	0%	8%	0%	0%	7.7%	13.6%	0%
Don't know/don't answer	0	2	0	0	0	0	1
	0%	8%	0%	0%	0%	0%	25%
Total	31	25	24	22	13	44	4
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Representative democracy as a form of government has been accepted unilaterally by the majority of the political elites of the three countries, as can be seen in Table 1 (above). This is the case in Nicaragua, where there are no significant differences between the positions of the Liberal and Sandinista deputies in terms of rating democracy as the preferable form of government. The same is true in the case of El Salvador, with even more convincing evidence, as none of the interviewees thought that an authoritarian government could be preferable. Only in the case of Guatemala, and more specifically within the FRG, is there a minority which questions democracy in times of crisis, which underlines the existence of sectors within Ríos Montt's party which still have reservations about representative institutions despite the fact that, when the interview was carried out, having achieved power thanks to these very institutions.

Although the reasons that can explain such a complete agreement among the different political groups are often different in nature, it is clear that in the three countries there is a practically unanimous consensus about democracy as a desirable political regime. This consensus, as can be seen, includes both the left and the right. This is particularly important as it guarantees that - at least amongst the main political forces - there aren't any “conditional authoritarians” (Maravall, 1995); that is, groups that support authoritarian regimes given certain political, economic or social conditions.

Yet the fact that democracy is seen to be the only legitimate form of government among the party elites does not guarantee its consolidation. If anything, it just increases its chances of survival. The commitment of political elites and parties to democracy is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the stability of a democratic regime (Mainwaring, 1992: 311). Furthermore, it is necessary that its institutions are solid and

efficient and, perhaps more importantly, that they are perceived as such by the principal political actors.

Therefore, it is necessary to investigate how the elites value the institutions and fundamental mechanisms that organise representative democracy. For this reason, the second question of the interview referred to a key aspect of liberal democracy: *In the context of pluralism and wide party competition, to what extent do you agree – a lot, quite a bit, a little bit or not at all – with the statement that elections are always the best way to express political preferences?*

Table 2. Degree of agreement that elections are the best way to express political preferences * Political Party

	<i>Nicaragua</i>		<i>El Salvador</i>		<i>Guatemala</i>		
	PLC	FSLN	ARENA	FMLN	PAN	FRG	URNG
Not at all	0	1	0	4	0	0	1
	0%	4.2%	0%	17.4%	0%	0%	25%
A little bit	0	4	0	11	1	2	1
	0%	16.7%	0%	47.8%	7.7%	4.5%	25%
Quite a lot	3	10	9	3	3	14	2
	9.7%	41.7%	39.1%	13%	23.1%	31.8%	50%
A lot	28	9	14	5	9	28	0
	90.3%	37.5%	60.9%	21.7%	69.2%	63.6%	0%
Total	31	24	23	23	13	44	4
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Out of the replies obtained (see Table 2), it is necessary to point out the existence of a group of deputies in Nicaragua and within the FSLN (about 21% of the total) who only agree a bit or do not agree at all with the idea that elections are always the best way to express political preferences. On the other hand, this group is not found in the PLC since in this party all of the deputies agree with the statement either quite a bit or a lot. This does not mean that the FSLN disagrees with elections, bearing in mind that 72.9% of its deputies agree quite a bit or a lot, but there is a certain mistrust of elections per se. This lack of trust is also present in other left-wing groups in Central America.

The “reservations” of a certain group within the FSLN about elections as a method of political expression can also be observed in the left of El Salvador and Guatemala, although in both cases the numbers are larger. In fact, in the case of the FMLN, the majority of its deputies (65.2%) agrees only a little bit or does not agree at all with the statement that elections are always the best method for expressing political preferences. This figure is particularly striking as elections are the means by which the interviewees obtained their seats. On the other hand, elections are widely accepted by ARENA, since all of its deputies agree either quite a bit or a lot. The case of Guatemala is more or less the same as that of El Salvador, since exactly half of the deputies of the former armed left (the URNG) does not agree that elections are the only way to express a society’s political preferences. Once again, this contrasts with the wide acceptance among the

right-wing parties in Guatemala, which are clearly in favour of elections as the best method of political expression.

Bearing this range of views in mind, it is necessary to ask: why does the left in all three countries, particularly in El Salvador and Guatemala, show reservations about elections as a mechanism of political expression? Perhaps part of the answer becomes clear when deputies are asked about the confidence they have in the last elections carried out in their respective countries. In this respect, the FSLN, the FMLN and the URNG show low levels of confidence in the elections (see Table 3), that were carried out during the 1990s³. Thus, whereas the PLC, ARENA, PAN and FRG (which interestingly were the winners in the different presidential elections) have complete confidence in the elections that were carried out (with respective approval rates of 4.52, 4.60, 4.15 and 4.50 out of 5), to a certain degree the FSLN, the FMLN and the URNG question their legitimacy (with respective approval rates of 2.28, 3.04 and 3.5).

Table 3. Mean values of confidence in electoral processes

Political Party	Mean	N	Typical Deviation
<i>Nicaragua</i>			
PLC	4.52	31	0.7
FSLN	2.28	25	0.92
<i>El Salvador</i>			
ARENA	4.60	24	0.5
FMLN	3.04	22	0.79
<i>Guatemala</i>			
PAN	4.15	13	1.34
FRG	4.50	44	0.73
URNG	3.50	4	0.58

The mean values are obtained on a scale where 1 is minimum confidence and 5 is maximum confidence.

Continuing the same theme, the deputies of the three countries were also asked about another basic aspect of liberal democracy which, undoubtedly, is fundamental for a regime to be considered democratic: political parties. Once again, the position of the deputies of the FMLN and the URNG were striking, since, in coherence with their opinion about elections, they did not show a particularly positive attitude about political parties as an instrument of democracy. This is a potentially worrying sign of their adherence to and compromise with the most representative institutions of liberal democracy. However, it is also possible that the explanation for this position is linked to the experience of both organisations which have been linked, for most of their history, to a rejection of the formal instruments of what they consider to be a “bourgeois democracy”.

Now that we have evaluated the institutions and rules that form the basis of the type of government (such as elections and parties) it is also necessary to collect information about the confidence the party elites have in other institutions and actors that form the

basic framework of any political system. This will be shown in Tables 4, 5 and 6 for each country.

Table 4. Nicaragua: Degree of confidence in the following institutions (%)

	PLC				FSLN			
	A lot	Quite a lot	A little bit	Not at all	A lot	Quite a lot	A little bit	Not at all
Judiciary	0.0	3.2	64.5	32.5	16	36	48	0.0
Political Parties	25	37.5	37.5	0.0	4.0	52	36	8.0
Business organisations	15.6	6.3	62.5	15.6	0.0	0.0	66.7	33.3
Trades Unions	6.7	23.3	66.3	6.7	12.5	66.7	16.7	4.2
Armed Forces	24.1	34.5	34.5	6.9	40	56	4.0	0.0
Catholic Church	63.3	26.7	10	0.0	4.0	12	48	36
Parliament	48.4	22.6	19.4	9.7	8.0	48	40	4.0
President of the Republic	19.4	9.7	41.9	29	4.0	36	44	16
Civil Servants	6.5	9.7	64.5	19.4	3.8	3.8	57.7	34.6
Media	22.6	16.1	22.6	38.7	20	36	36	8.0
Police	26.7	30	40	3.3	36	40	24	0.0
Supreme Electoral Court	21.9	37.5	37.5	3.1	4.2	12.5	41.7	41.7

In Nicaragua, there are important differences between the two most important parties with regard to confidence in specific institutions in the country. Thus, while for the PLC the institution which inspires most confidence is the Catholic Church (63.3%), for the FSLN it is the army (40%). There are also important differences between the parties when evaluating other institutions such as the judiciary, trades unions, parliament, the media and the Supreme Electoral Court. In this respect, among the institutions that inspire the PLC with least confidence are the judiciary (because of the number of conflicts generated over the decade as a result of many cases of corruption involving Arnoldo Alemán, the party's main leader, during his presidency, between 1996 and 2001) and, paradoxically, civil servants. Equally important is the evident sensitivity within the PLC to business organisations which can be explained in part by the populist nature of the party and its mistrust of the business elite. In fact, as was seen in the last elections of 2006, the party chooses options that are more politically and economically orthodox. On the other hand, the FSLN, has least confidence in business organisations, the Catholic Church (historically antagonistic to the Sandinistas during the revolution), the Supreme Electoral Council (which reinforces their aforementioned doubts about the electoral process) and civil servants.

With regard to El Salvador, the FMLN's lower confidence in institutions is particularly striking. More specifically, it reflects high levels of mistrust amongst the left towards the judiciary, business organisations, political parties, and civil servants. In terms of ARENA, the most striking results – as to be expected – are the deputies' confidence in the President of the Republic (which has always been from that party) and in the Catholic Church. On the other hand, trades unions are the actors which merit the lowest levels of confidence, according to ARENA.

Table 5. El Salvador: Degree of confidence in the following institutions (%)

	ARENA				FMLN			
	A lot	Quite a lot	A little bit	Not at all	A lot	Quite a lot	A little bit	Not at all
Judiciary	20.8	20.8	54.2	4.2	4.3	17.4	78.3	0.0
Political Parties	4.3	56.5	34.8	4.3	4.3	17.4	73.9	4.3
Business organisations	20.8	62.5	16.7	0.0	0.0	9.1	86.4	4.5
Trades Unions	4.3	8.7	39.1	47.8	17.4	17.4	60.9	4.3
Armed Forces	37.5	45.8	16.7	0.0	4.5	27.3	68.2	0.0
Catholic Church	60.9	30.4	8.7	0.0	17.4	39.1	43.5	0.0
Parliament	25	45.8	29.2	0.0	0.0	31.8	68.2	0.0
President of the Republic	65.2	34.8	0.0	0.0	17.4	65.2	17.4	0.0
Civil Servants	8.7	65.2	26.1	0.0	0.0	4.5	86.4	9.1
Media	20.8	50	29.2	0.0	13.6	54.5	31.8	0.0
Police	4.3	21.7	65.2	2.7	4.5	18.2	68.2	9.1

In Guatemala, as is the case of Nicaragua and El Salvador, parties show different degrees of confidence in institutions. Nonetheless, in this case it is necessary to highlight the fact that none of the institutions evaluated is perceived by parties as highly trustworthy. Only the Catholic Church inspires relatively higher levels of confidence in the three parties⁴. However, confidence in the different institutions considered in the analysis varies in a roughly similar way between the left and right of the three countries, except in relation to very specific institutions (for example the judiciary) which have suffered from institutional conflicts in the recent past, or in institutions, such as the army, which held opposing positions to the parties during the armed conflict. This reflects the different positions adopted by the parties in the institutional and political context. Whereas the right adopts government positions, the left acts more like the opposition, at least up to the time of data collection.

In this context, it is relevant to observe what party elites consider to be the “advantages of democracy” since even if they all consider themselves to be in favour of this type of government (as previously seen) it is obvious that they all have different benefits and advantages in mind (as can be observed in Table 6). And as was to be expected, two different conceptions of democracy emerge. One is linked to the left and focuses on the redistributive element, whereas the other is linked to the right and accentuates the protection of individual rights and freedoms. This leads us to conclude that there is an ideal of “social democracy” on the left and of “liberal democracy” on the right which prioritises the protection of freedom, understood as individual freedom (even though during the 1980s, the government respected neither freedoms nor rights (Martí 2004)). Finally, it is also evident that the Central American left has always aimed to expand the democratisation of society through the direct participation of social groups and not just via elections.

Table 6. Main advantage of a democratic regime * Political party

	<i>Nicaragua</i>		<i>El Salvador</i>		<i>Guatemala</i>		
	PLC	FSLN	ARENA	FMLN	PAN	FRG	URNG
Economic growth	16.7%	26.9%	0%	17.4%	15.4%	18.2%	0%
Protection of individual rights and freedoms	43.3%	15.4%	59.1%	17.4%	30.8%	25%	0%
Possibility of electing government	10%	3.8%	9.1%	17.4%	15.4%	15.9%	25%
Greater equality of opportunities	10%	7.7%	4.5%	13%	7.7%	11.4%	0%
Respect for the human rights of minorities	0%	3.8%	9.1%	0%	0%	6.8%	25%
Possibility of participating in elections	0%	11.5%	4.5%	4.3%	7.7%	9.1%	50%
Better distribution of income	3.3%	23.1%	0%	21.7%	0%	9.1%	0%
Peaceful resolution of conflicts	10%	3.8%	4.5%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Possibility of participating in politics through political parties	6.7%	0%	9.1%	8.7%	15.4%	4.5%	0%
Doesn't know/ doesn't answer	0	3.8%	0%	0%	7.7%	0%	0%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	31	24	24	23	13	44	4

The differences between parties in the three countries are also evident when deputies are asked about what they consider to be the most relevant factor in the consolidation of their democracies (Table 7). Thus, in Nicaragua the PLC and the FSLN in general agree on identifying a consensus on the Constitution and basic institutions as the most relevant aspect of democratic consolidation. In El Salvador, even though both groups agree (about 17%) on the importance of reaching a such consensus, the deputies of ARENA consider electoral processes to be the priority (45.8%) whereas the FMLN values equally the importance of values of citizenship, economic agreements between the government, trades unions and business, and the lack of electoral fraud (likewise about 17%). Finally, in Guatemala the PAN priorities the development of free and clean elections (46.2%) as well as an independent constitutional court (38.5%). For its part, the FRG accentuates regional decentralisation (38.6%) and civilian control of the Armed Forces (20.5%), as is also the case with the URNG which further highlights the importance of economic agreements among government, trade unions and business.

Table 7. Key factor for democratic consolidation * Political Party (%)

	<i>Nicaragua</i>		<i>El Salvador</i>		<i>Guatemala</i>		
	PLC	FSLN	ARENA	FMLN	PAN	FRG	URNG
Civilian control of the Armed Forces	10%	4.2%	20.8%	13%	7.7%	20.5%	25%
Consensus on the Constitution and basic institutions	30%	37.5%	16.7%	17.4%	0%	11.4%	0%
Decentralisation and regional	3.3%	16.7%	4.2%	13%	7.7%	38.6%	25%

democratisation							
Moderation of extremist parties on left and right	6.7%	4.2%	4.2%	2.1%	0%	2.3%	0%
Free and clean electoral processes	16.7%	12.5%	45.8%	17.4%	46.2%	9.1%	0%
Independent Constitutional Court	30%	12.5%	0%	4.3%	38.5%	2.3%	0%
Economic agreements between government, trades unions and businessmen	0%	12.5%	0%	17.4%	0%	4.5%	25%
Democratic citizen values	3.3%	0%	8.3%	17.4%	0%	11.4%	25%
Doesn't know/doesn't answer	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	31	24	24	23	13	44	4

The data collected up to this point offer some very clear conclusions on democracy and democratic institutions in Central America. Firstly, that democracy has been internalised by all of the deputies as the only form of government. This does not rule out the existence of a certain anti-institutional trends on the left, which still has reservations about elections and political parties. This is particularly evident in the cases of the FMLN and the UNRG which are a lot more critical in their evaluations than the FSLN. Perhaps it is because up until now, in contrast to the FSLN, they have gained a lot less out of these institutions. It is important to bear in mind that during the transition to democracy the FSLN started from a privileged position that was not enjoyed by the FMLN, nor the URNG. It could also be because the latter two parties are faced with a much more complex competitive environment than that of the FSLN whose only real competitors, the liberals, act in a fragmented and undisciplined way.

Yet a second question, related to the last table, also needs to be highlighted: the different opinions on the current state of democracy. For, while in El Salvador there is a great contrast between the diagnosis of the FMLN and ARENA, in Nicaragua there is quite a wide “consensus” between the PLC and the FSLN. As a result, we can conclude that Nicaragua has a greater capacity to reach consensus and dialogue than El Salvador and Guatemala, given that there is an agreement within the two Nicaraguan parties on what has to be rethought or improved, even if afterwards they do nothing about it.

The “State versus Market” debate

Up until the second half of the 1980s most countries in Central America adopted a strategy of economic development that meant a considerable intervention by public authorities in the industrialisation process. This model was implemented in a variety of ways. In some countries the state maintained an important role in the economy, either through social-reformist policies, as in Costa Rica; or corporatist policies, as in Nicaragua under the Sandinistas. In other countries, authoritarian regimes managed the economy through monetary and free exchange policies, as in El Salvador or Guatemala. However, since the 1990s, the institutional and socioeconomic coordinates of all Central American countries have converged (Gomà, 1998). This decade was marked, not only

by a wave of democratisations but also, on the economic level, by the discarding of statist and regulatory strategies in favour of neo-liberal policies inspired by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the opening up of economies to the outside world.

It is important to note that these neo-liberal IMF inspired policies were implemented in the context of the “lost decade”, characterised by credit restrictions which resulted from the debt crisis and economic downturn. Their application meant a radical change from managing demand to stimulating supply; and from the creation of a public surplus to the consideration of private benefits as the only factor that created collective welfare. All of this was accompanied by the reduction of the margins of national manoeuvrability due to the rigid conditions imposed by the World Bank and the IMF. However, the new neo-liberal model not only affected economic policy but also brought with it the massive deregulation of the labour markets and the under-capitalisation of health services, education and social housing, without generating any type of compensatory program. After a decade, the main effect of these policies has been an increase in social inequality (Robinson, 2003).

This process hit Central American countries exceptionally hard, particularly the countries considered here, which had recently suffered civil wars. In the isthmus, the adjustments were implemented in an economic context where the average ratio of external debt to GDP was twice the Latin American average (74% compared to 36%) and where the terms of trade of the region’s products decreased by 40% over the last 15 years. Moreover, policy implementation occurred during a post-war period characterised by the reconstruction and demobilisation of insurgent armies and the reduction of the Armed Forces (Cardenal and Martí, 1998).

This recent history of the region being studied here makes it necessary to examine the debate about the role that the State or the market should exercise in society. Precisely for this reason, the second of the two basic axes of this investigation into the opinions of the political elites of Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala collects information about how they conceive of the aforementioned relationship: *how much market and how much state*, and for what purpose. Therefore, the first question that needs to be analysed refers to the presence of the state and of the market (see Table 8).

In the case of Nicaragua, there are important differences between both parties with regard to the intervention of the State in the economy. However, these differences are perhaps smaller than what we might expect. In any case, it can be said that the FSLN supports a greater state presence in the economy than the PLC. In comparison, the difference in El Salvador is very marked since the FMLN supports a greater state presence in the economy than ARENA, which is much more inclined than Nicaragua’s PLC to reject state regulation of the economy. In Guatemala, both the PAN and the FRG opt for a free market, in contrast to the URNG which, like the FSLN, adopts a more intermediate position.

Table 8. State vs market

Political Party	Mean	N	Typical deviation
<i>Nicaragua</i>			
PLC	3.96	31	1.05
FSLN	2.86	25	0.88
<i>El Salvador</i>			
ARENA	4.20	24	0.76
FMLN	2.68	22	0.75
<i>Guatemala</i>			
PAN	3.92	13	1.12
FRG	3.82	44	1.30
URNG	2.75	4	1.26

The mean values are obtained from a scale in which 1 represents maximum state presence in the economy and 5 represents maximum regulation through the market itself.

With regard to another key issue, that of taxation (see Table 9), the left – wing groups of the three countries believe that is necessary to burden capital and labour more than consumption. In this respect, 88% of the FSLN’s deputies believe it necessary to establish taxes on capital and labour, whereas only 12% think it is necessary to tax consumption. In the same way, although to a lesser extent, the FMLN supports (57%) taxes that are not intended to burden consumption, whereas the URNG proposes unanimously this type of fiscal policy. However, this agreement among the different left-wing groups is not reflected among right-wing groups. While, the ARENA deputies prefer to burden consumption (45.8%) rather than capital and labour (37.5%), 54.8% of deputies in the PLC would burden capital and labour, 22% consumption and another 22.6% prefer not to answer the question. Meanwhile, the FRG of Guatemala leans slightly towards burdening capital and labour (48.8%), unlike the PAN which prefers a fiscal policy centred on consumption (53.8%).

Table 9. Type of tax burden * Political party

	<i>Nicaragua</i>		<i>El Salvador</i>		<i>Guatemala</i>		
	PLC	FSLN	ARENA	FMLN	PAN	FRG	URNG
Taxes on capital and labour	17	22	9	12	3	21	4
	54.8%	88%	37.5%	57.1%	23.1%	48.8%	100%
Taxes on consumption	7	3	11	5	7	20	0
	22.6%	12%	45.8%	23.8%	53.8%	46.5%	0%
Doesn’t know/doesn’t answer	7	0	4	4	3	2	0
	22.6%	0%	16.7%	19%	23.1%	4.7%	0%
Total	31	25	24	21	13	43	4
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

The analysis of the survey data on opinions about economic ideology up to this point offers three conclusions that merit reflection. The first is that, an assessment of deputies’ positions with regard to the relationship between State and Market and their

fiscal preferences seems to reveal a split within the right. One faction is elitist, neo-liberal and enthusiastic about the market and the “opportunities” offered by globalisation. It is comprised of ARENA and the PAN (and from the elections of 2006 onwards in Nicaragua by Eduardo Montealegre, who competed with the PLC under the Alianza Liberal Nicaragüense). The other faction is composed of the PLC, FRG and in El Salvador by the Partido de Conciliación Nacional. These parties defend a hierarchical society and “zero tolerance” policies on crime, as well as supporting a certain degree of protectionist corporatism using a nationalist and populist discourse. The second conclusion is that the left-wing parties agree basically on adopting positions in favour of state regulation of the market and fiscal policies that burden labour and capital rather than consumption, although if the data in the tables are considered closely, the responses of the parliamentarians of the FMLN, the FSLN and the URNG are not particularly “radical”, but rather more moderate⁵. The third conclusion is that, despite different positions adopted by left and right-wing groups (the latter with its two factions), the differences are not as extreme as one might expect, considering the region’s historical antecedents.

Where is politics at? Some concluding reflections

Now that the opinions of the political elites of the relevant left and right-wing groups in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala have been contrasted, we shall observe how the deputies consider themselves, their party and their opponents according to ideology, as seen in the three tables below. Using averages obtained from a scale of 1 (left) to 10 (right), we can see enormous differences between parties from an ideological point of view (see Tables 10, 11 and 12). In this sense and in light of these data, the political systems seem to be rather polarised. In Nicaragua, the deputies of the FSLN position themselves at 1.83, position the party at 1.69 and position their political opponent at 9.19 on the scale; whereas the deputies of the PLC position themselves at 7, the party at 7.11 and their political opposition at 1.81. In El Salvador, the deputies of the FMLN position themselves at 2.12, the party at 2.28 and their political opponent at 9.21; whereas the deputies of ARENA position themselves at 7.55, the party at 8.05 and their political opponent at 1.6. In Guatemala, the deputies of the URNG position themselves at 2.25, the party at 1.25 and their political opponents (the PAN and the FRG) in a centre right position. This is in contrast the FSLN and the FMLN which both locate their opponents on the extreme right.

Table 10. Deputies’ identification of their own ideological position

Political Party	Mean	N	Typ. Dev.
<i>Nicaragua</i>			
PLC	7	31	2.14
FSLN	1.83	25	1.07
<i>El Salvador</i>			
ARENA	7.55	24	1.09
FMLN	2.12	22	1.4
<i>Guatemala</i>			
PAN	6.17	13	1.47

FRG	5.48	44	1.53
URNG	2.25	4	0.96

The averages are obtained based on a scale where 1 is left and 10 is right.

Table 13. Deputies' identification of their party's ideological position

Political Party	Average	N	Typ. Dev.
<i>Nicaragua</i>			
PLC	7.11	31	2.06
FSLN	1.69	25	1.01
<i>El Salvador</i>			
ARENA	8.05	24	1.09
FMLN	2.28	22	1.4
<i>Guatemala</i>			
PAN	6.92	13	0.95
FRG	6.51	44	1.70
URNG	1.25	4	0.50

The averages are obtained based on a scale where 1 is left and 10 is right.

Table 14. Deputies' identification of opposing party's ideological position

Political Party	Average	N	Typ. Dev.
<i>Nicaragua</i>			
PLC according to the FSLN	9.19	25	1.04
FSLN according to the PLC	1.81	31	1.00
<i>El Salvador</i>			
ARENA according to the FMLN	9.21	21	0.89
FMLN according to ARENA	1.6	24	0.75
<i>Guatemala</i>			
PAN according to the FRG	8.25	44	2.19
PAN according to the URNG	9	4	1.41
FRG according to the PAN	8.46	13	2.40
FRG according to the URNG	9	4	1.41
URNG according to the PAN	2.75	13	0.74
URNG according to the FRG	2.47	43	1.45

The averages are obtained based on a scale where 1 is left and 10 is right.

According to the data, it seems clear that these are highly polarised party systems in ideological and symbolic terms. However, we cannot just accept this figure, since the replies regarding support for a democratic system (together with its institutions and policies) as analysed in other sections, suggest that it needs to be redefined. In fact, although the party systems are ideologically polarised and lead us to expect potentially unstable political arenas, on the other hand it is also true that all of the groups evidently

agree on democratic institutions (*polity*) and policy. As a result, we would be well-advised to conclude that over the 1990s, a noticeably complex and, to a certain extent, contradictory “elite” space has formed in the three countries. Bearing this in mind, the question is: how can we qualify this type of elite articulation (or transformation)?

There has certainly been a noticeable change in the opinions of the interviewees in comparison with those expressed two decades ago. These elites (whether they are the heads of former guerrilla groups or the leaders of the “formerly” reactionary right wing) agree, for the first time, that representative democracy is the best of all possible regimes and that its rules are acceptable. However, the differences increase when they evaluate the institutions and the political and social actors who participate in political life. Thus, despite agreement on the rules, good or bad relations with different actors and institutions involved in the political system make it clear that in the game there are very different (and unequal) groups of forces at play. In general, right-wing elites articulate a greater confidence in institutions and actors than left-wing elites (with natural divergences with regard to such traditional allies as business groups and trade unions). In this sense, we could state that the right is more comfortable in the playing field of representative democracy, with more allies and greater support. It has not been in vain that the right has consistently won all of the elections to the Presidency of the Republic that held in the region, with the exception of Daniel Ortega’s “victory” in November 2006⁶.

Focusing on opinions related to the relationship between state and market, it is necessary to bear in mind that in all three countries the capacity to develop economic policy has been the exclusive task of the right. Therefore, at the present time, only the right has had the opportunity to demonstrate its ability⁷ and, precisely for that reason, we can state that the policies generated have not changed the pernicious tendencies of exclusion and poverty of large groups; rather they have been accentuated. Therefore, the transformation of the right from profoundly reactionary and authoritarian positions to the adoption of civil behaviour and a role as defenders of liberal democracy and of the “free market” have not led to real changes within the realm of economic policy.

In this sense, it is necessary to ask if those who define themselves as democrats within the right really are democrats, as sometimes the acceptance of “democracy” is not due to a change of values, but rather a strategic decision resulting from a realisation that a new political system allows actors to defend and promote their interests more comfortably than before (Font, 1998). The behaviour of the liberal opposition in Nicaragua after the return of the FSLN to power is a useful example of this.

Meanwhile, on the other end of the political spectrum, it is necessary to note that the left has also undergone considerable transformations. One of the most surprising is the change of position with regard to the status quo. For, although the left justified the activation and continuity of the armed conflict for an entire decade on structural factors (such as the persistence of poverty, the unjust distribution of property or the perverse distribution of wealth), once the peace agreements were signed, their main concerns have centred on institutional aspects. Furthermore, the differences regarding the role that the State should have in the regulation of the market are noticeably more moderate than before and, in some cases, even concur with right-wing groups.

This type of transformation of the party elites, although it can offer some institutional stability (considering that they agree “on almost everything”) also presents some dangers, for it is necessary to ask what the future holds if the rights carries on winning in El Salvador and Guatemala or if the FSLN continues with the economic policy of previous liberal administrations. Perhaps this dynamic could create increased apathy and mistrust towards institutions and elites on the part of the citizens, when they realise that despite the political pacts that opened up the political game at the beginning of the 1990s, the new regimes have not led to substantial improvements in the situation of the majority of the population.

However, within the puzzle that has been created so far in this paper, there is a piece that does not fit: if the elites agree on a democratic political game, accept institutions and agree on the policy to be implemented, how is it possible that they hold such an evident ideological distance among themselves? Is it just so that they can differentiate among themselves? Or is it so that the left can hang on to its revolutionary icons and symbols and so that the right can carry on admiring the North American government? Or is it a strategy to mobilise voters at certain times?

There is no doubt that we should ask ourselves the reason for and the purpose of politicians in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua positioning themselves at ideological extremes. It is difficult to offer a convincing reply, but perhaps a clear ideological distance in certain political scenarios could be useful for all forces involved. Perhaps it is the only way of mobilising a progressively apathetic electorate and creating conflicts to keep public debate alive.

In summary, if what has been demonstrated here is true, we should ask ourselves how far this mechanism of calculated tension can go, without leading to a crisis. From a historical perspective (Higley and Gunther, 1992), the cases studied here are not exceptional since in other contexts this dynamic – when it is accompanied by a degree of economic growth and expectations of improvement on the part of the population – has created a slow but effective model of insertion. However, in the countries considered here it is difficult to predict what will be the result in the long term since, although the elites agree in accepting (and benefiting from) democratic institutions, most citizens have not obtained any substantial benefits from them.

¹The opinions of the parliamentary elites are taken from interviews carried out by the Project “Representación Política y Calidad de la Democracia: un estudio de las élites parlamentarias de América Latina,” financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Technology (ref SE C2002-3483) and directed by Prof Manuel Alcántara Sáez of the University of Salamanca. The number of parliamentarians interviewed in each party was calculated according to their relative weight within the national congress of their respective countries. The data from Nicaragua are from the 1997-2001 legislature; the data from El Salvador are from the 2000-2003 legislature; and the data from Guatemala are from the 1999-2003 legislature.

² There are many different articles about the two “pacted peace processes”. We recommend the analysis on El Salvador by Cardenal (2002); Martí’s work on Nicaragua (1997) and the studies by IDEA (1998) and Sieder ed on Guatemala (1998).

³ With regard to this aspect, it is necessary to point out various incidents recorded in all of the presidential elections in Nicaragua, particularly the chaos in 1996 (see the special report published in the journal *Envío* in November, 1996) and the permanent problems with censuses in El Salvador and Guatemala (Spence, 2004).

⁴ 92.3% of PAN’s deputies, 59.1% of FRNG’s deputies and 75% of the URNG’s interviewees show a lot of confidence or quite a lot of confidence in the Catholic Church.

⁵ In another text by the same authors (Martí y Santiuste 2008) the paradox of the “moderation” of left-wing political elites in Latin America is considered in depth. In this context, the FSLN and the FMLN (a bit more to the left than its Nicaraguan counterpart) are not particularly radical.

⁶ On the elections carried out in Nicaragua in November 2006 and Daniel Ortega winning the Presidency of the Republic see the article by Martí (2007).

⁷ It is perhaps too early to draw conclusions about the policy implemented by Ortega’s government in Nicaragua, however it is worth mentioning the analysis of the first year of the Sandinista administration by Martí (2008, in print).

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