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Introduction

From Uncertainty to Uncertainty

The Institutionalization of Elections in Central America

Mitchell A. Seligson

"The process of establishing a democracy is a process of institutionalizing uncertainty. . . ."—Adam Przeworski, "Some Problems in the Study of the Transition to Democracy"

For at least the past five centuries, Central Americans have lived in a highly uncertain world. The basic necessities of life, food, clothing, and shelter, so long taken for granted by the great majority of their North American neighbors, have never been assured to Central Americans. While journalistic accounts stress the poverty of the region as it stands today, and blame it for some, if not all, of the current civil strife, impoverishment has been an almost constant feature of life in Central America throughout its recorded history.

Indeed, although most agree that the Spanish conquest and colonization exploited the region unmercifully and, more important, produced a series of pandemics that decimated the native population, poverty and starvation were prominent in the isthmus long before the arrival of the Spaniards. Hence, although the debates among archaeologists have yet to be definitively resolved, the disappearance of the Mayan civilization in Guatemala *prior* to the arrival of the Spanish colonizers is generally linked to the failure of the fragile ecology of the land to support its growing population. In short, the uncertainty of survival is not a novel condition in Central America.

But if survival has been characterized by extreme uncertainty in Central America, politics has been highly predictable, indeed, almost totally certain in one regard. For centuries, there was never much doubt as to who would rule these mini-states: soldiers, strongmen, and foreign armies. Rarely did popular sentiment play an important role. While it is true that since Independence in

the nineteenth century elections were held from time to time, literacy, property, and gender restrictions excluded most citizens from the electoral process through the 1940s.

Even when the electorates were expanded, elections were canceled and citizens told that it was in the "national interest" to postpone the "disruptive process" until a more propitious moment arrived. When elections did occur, votes were bought or coerced, ballot boxes were stuffed, and vote totals fudged. On numerous occasions elections were interrupted at the counting stage or the winners were deposed in favor of the army's preferred candidates. On the whole, then, the elections themselves, such as they were, proved little, since the election process was not truly over until the soldiers, strongmen, and foreign armies had their final say. The rule of naked force proved to be the only element of political certainty.

The 1970s and 1980s have seen a new, higher level of uncertainty in the region. Never in its history has Central America undergone such widespread revolution, civil war, and foreign military intervention. The Nicaraguan Revolution and ensuing contra counterrevolution, the protracted civil war in El Salvador, and the brutal guerrilla struggle in Guatemala have caused unprecedented numbers of deaths and injuries in the civil population and created a massive refugee problem. The problem of the physical uncertainty of life has never been greater.

In this environment, the recent emergence of free, open, and competitive elections throughout the region promises to introduce an element of political uncertainty into the region, but one that is likely to be welcomed by the great majority of the population. If we accept Przeworski's often quoted definition of democracy cited in the epigraph of this chapter, democracy implies uncertainty about the outcome of each electoral episode.

For elections to be meaningful, their outcome cannot be predetermined: challengers must have the potential to beat incumbents. Institutionalization of uncertainty implies that victor and loser accept this uncertainty as a fundamental rule of the game. So long as they do not, an election becomes merely one mechanism, not *the* mechanism, for acquiring the right to rule. In that sense, then, the elections that have been occurring in Central America in the 1980s do not equate with the establishment of democracy, even though one cannot have a democratic system without elections. What the elections have the potential of doing is institutionalizing political uncertainty, a necessary but clearly not sufficient condition for democracy.

Recent elections in Central America have been fundamentally different from the great majority of those that have preceded them. With the exception of Costa Rica, a nation that fought a short, albeit bloody, civil war in the 1940s over the integrity of the electoral process, free, open, competitive, and internationally observed elections are an almost completely new phenomenon in the region. Even their harshest critics admit that these elections have been supported with great enthusiasm by the voters. But this should come as no surprise; citizens who chronically have been deprived of the right to express their political preference are understandably enthusiastic about the opportunity to do so now.

The key question that these elections leave unanswered is what long-term impact they will have on democratization in Central America. The analysis of that question is the subject of this volume. The collection is the outgrowth of a panel organized by the editors of the volume at the 1986 Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, held in Boston. The panel brought together a group of scholars who had been working in Central America long before the Sandinista Revolution and the civil war in El Salvador made the isthmus a key center of geopolitical attention for the United States government. Each of the presenters on the panel had been studying Central American politics for nearly twenty years, and some longer. While the length of their experience does not necessarily make them wiser than newcomers, it does give them a sense of perspective possibly lacking among scholars who began studying the region only after Central America became front-page news. It was with a certain sense of wry amusement that the panelists looked out upon a standing-room-only audience at the panel; these same scholars had grown accustomed to presenting papers on Central America only a decade before to audiences that were sometimes smaller than the number of panelists.

Each of the authors was asked to address the central question of the implications for democracy of the recent elections in Central America. This was a difficult task because it required the scholars to predict the impact of recent, short-term events (that is, elections) on long-term processes (that is, democratization). It was especially difficult for the Central American region for, with the exception of Costa Rica, experience with democracy had been so limited. It was further complicated by the heavy pressures of international actors and by the vagaries of the wars raging in the region.

In order to assist the authors in addressing common themes, John A. Booth prepared a framework for analysis that appears as chapter 1 of this volume. In

that essay, Booth reviews various definitions of democracy, both classical and modern, and concludes that a broad definition in which democracy is seen as "popular participation in rule" is the most appropriate for understanding the Central American cases. By taking this perspective, he focuses on elections as a subset of a larger process of democratization: elections may help lead to popular participation in rule, but they do not define it. There was widespread agreement among the authors on this point. This was, however, perhaps the only area in which they agreed. Since several of the authors are expert in more than one country in the region, there was an overlapping of expertise but often a disagreement among them as to the implications of the recent elections for the process of democratization in general and in particular countries.

The authors do not arrive at a consensus in this volume and the reader should not expect to find one. This lack of consensus should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the literature on Central America, or, for that matter, the literature on democracy. The rapidity of change in the region, along with the heavy dose of international involvement, has given rise to widely differing analyses, and there are contending ideological models for democracy in conflict in Central America. Unfortunately, many recent publications on the region have been more polemical than substantive. The contributions in this volume concentrate on substance.

In spite of their frequent disagreements over interpretation, each of the authors addresses some or all of six questions Booth poses in his introductory essay. He derives these questions from his review of the definitions of democracy, and, taken as a group, the questions enable the authors to assess the probable impact of elections on democracy. Booth's six questions, discussed in detail in chapter 1, are as follows:

1. What is the effect of the election(s) on the range of political participation?
2. What is the effect of the election(s) on the breadth of participation?
3. What is the effect of the election(s) on the depth of participation?
4. Did the election(s) occur in an environment conducive to the free exercise of full participatory rights, and was the conduct of the election(s) fair?
5. Did the election(s) consolidate or help consolidate a stable regime under democratic rules?
6. Did the election(s) contribute toward a political culture of support for participation and democratic rules?

Readers of these chapters might draw different conclusions from those presented in the papers. The questions themselves, however, should be useful for those interested in a systematic framework of analysis.

Chapter 2 looks at Honduras, often viewed as the geopolitical axis of Central America. Mark B. Rosenberg examines the shaky foundations of the transition from military to civilian rule and raises serious questions about the commitment to the institutionalization of uncertainty among some of those who have been elected to high office. José Z. García in chapter 3 then examines the history of recent elections in El Salvador and suggests a number of conditions that need to be met for the process of democratization to succeed. In chapter 4 Robert H. Trudeau emphasizes the history of state repression in Guatemala and the continued importance of the military in almost all aspects of political life. In chapter 5 Susanne Jonas contrasts the Guatemalan and Nicaraguan cases and sees Nicaragua further along the road to democratization than Guatemala. Mitchell A. Seligson and Miguel Gómez B. in chapter 6 argue that Costa Rica, Central America's only well-established democracy, has already achieved the goals implied by Booth's six questions and suggest that the central question in the Costa Rican case is forecasting the stability of democratic rule in the context of a severe economic downturn. While synthesis of these country-based studies, in the context of the fundamental disagreements expressed, is not possible, John Peeler reviews the chapters with reference to the six questions as they apply to the prospects for democracy in each of the countries treated in the volume.

Events move very quickly in Central America. At the time of the writing of this introduction new hope for peace has emerged as the "Esquipulas II" agreement signed in Guatemala in August 1987 is being implemented. Although the main focus in the agreement is the ending of regional hostilities, a key element is the call for democratization, defined as the promotion of a process of pluralist and participatory democracy along with the establishment of free and democratic elections in each of the countries. A regional truce might bring to an end the civil strife that has afflicted the area throughout this decade. It will not, however, guarantee democracy in any of the countries. Democratization is a long-term process, especially in a region that has had so little experience with it. Nonetheless, as this volume demonstrates in considerable detail, electoral democracy has rapidly emerged throughout the region. Perhaps the search for regional peace will end up producing regional democracy as well.

References

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1 Elections and Democracy in Central America

A Framework for Analysis

John A. Booth

Many observers regarded Marco Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo's assumption of the presidency of Guatemala in January 1986 as a signal moment in the history of Central America because it meant that, for the first time in memory, all five isthmian nations had elected governments. This remarkable "outbreak" of elected regimes in the region was part of a larger process underway throughout the hemisphere, as many South American states had also replaced military with elected civilian governments in the last decade (Drake and Silva, 1986; Malloy and Seligson, 1987; *Contemporary Marxism,* 1986).

Political scientists have long ignored the elections of Central America, except those of Costa Rica, because they have so often been either fraudulently manipulated or, if properly carried out, later overturned by military coups. It is widely assumed that elections may promote democracy, but for decades dictatorial regimes in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador have periodically held elections that merely reinforced or justified authoritarian rule. Indeed three of the most brutal regimes in Central American history came to power through elections: those of Nicaragua's Anastasio Somoza Debayle (1967–79), Guatemala's Romeo Lucas García (1978–82), and El Salvador's Gen. Carlos Humberto Romero (1977–79).

Given the region's checkered electoral past, Central American elections in the 1980s have attracted considerable and sometimes almost astonished international attention. Many nations and nongovernmental organizations, for example, sent delegations to witness the elections in El Salvador in 1982 and 1984, Nicaragua in 1984, and Guatemala in 1985. Several nations and various international political party organizations contributed financial support and technical advice to Central American election agencies and parties.

Among countries outside the region, the United States has taken the liveliest interest in recent Central American elections. The Reagan administration has encouraged and supported—using diplomatic, financial, and political