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Chapter 5

Costa Rican Exceptionalism

Why the Ticos Are Different

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Costa Ricans, who call themselves *ticos*, have long prided themselves on being different from their neighbors in Latin America. As Mary Clark has pointed out in her discussion in this volume, Costa Ricans are justifiably proud of their high standard of living, which in the area of health matches that of the advanced industrial countries despite a per capita income one-tenth as high.¹ Indeed, according to the latest World Bank data, male life expectancy in Costa Rica exceeds that in the United States, and Costa Rica's overall level of human development outranks its level of income to a greater degree than in any other country.² Costa Ricans are also proud of their nonviolent tradition and their efforts to bring peace to war-torn countries in Central America.³ They boast of their system of national parks and nature preserves, which are probably second to none in Latin America. Yet in my many years of conducting research on Costa Rica, the one theme that emerges most frequently in interviews with scholars and lay people alike is pride in Costa Rican democracy. Certainly the objective facts support this pride; Costa Rica consistently scores at the top of Latin America in various rankings of democracy, and violations of human rights are virtually unknown in the country. Moreover, it has had the longest uninterrupted run of democratic rule of any country in Latin America.⁴

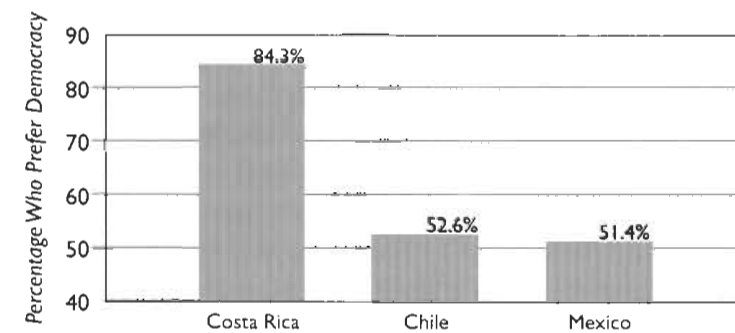
The data collected for this project strongly support the view that Costa Ricans are indeed different when it comes to their belief in democracy. In July 1998, 3,396 adults (18 and over) were interviewed in Costa Rica, Mexico, and Chile by the survey firm of MORI International. The margin of error for the survey was 3.0 percent in Chile and Mexico, and 3.5 percent in Costa Rica at the 95 percent confidence level. All interviews

were conducted face-to-face. In each country national probability samples were used, so the results accurately reflect the opinions of Costa Ricans, Mexicans, and Chileans.⁵ Each respondent was asked the following question:

With which of the following sentences do you agree most?

1. Democracy is preferable to any other form of government.
2. For people like me, a democratic regime or a nondemocratic regime is the same thing.
3. Under some circumstances, an authoritarian government could be preferable to a democratic one.

While many survey questions can be ambiguous, this one is not. The respondent is forced to choose among clear alternatives.⁶ In order to simplify the results and make the contrasts among the three countries as stark as possible, the responses were recoded so that the contrast is between those who said "Democracy is preferable to any other form of government" and those who chose one of the other two alternatives.⁷ The results are shown in figure 1, and they conform very closely to the conventional wisdom regarding Costa Rican support for democracy as a way of governance. Nearly 85 percent of Costa Ricans prefer democracy to any other form of government, contrasted with only about half of Chileans and Mexicans. These results are not only statistically significant, but also obviously substantively significant, since strong contrasts such as these, consistent with impressionistic evidence, are not often found in survey data. Mexicans, of course, have had little direct experience with a fully democratic system, because the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) exercised one-party hegemony for most of the twentieth century. Chileans had experienced democracy in the period prior to the Pinochet coup of 1973, but then lived under a stern and often brutal dictatorship for 17 years and today live under a system in which the military still retains ultimate control of key



Sig. <.001; Valid N = Mexico, 1,158; Costa Rica, 954; Chile, 1,132

Fig. 1. Preference for democracy

political domains. Costa Ricans, in contrast, have enjoyed a competitive, democratic system for more than 50 years, and for most of this century they have lived under a democracy.⁸

If we are to trust these results as providing a good measure of the extent to which the citizens of Costa Rica, Chile, and Mexico support democracy over other forms of rule, it is vitally important to establish the reliability and validity of this survey question. In this chapter, I first do that, and then go on to attempt to test various theories about the reasons that Costa Ricans differ from the others interviewed in this project. I conclude with an overall test that compares each of the theories to the others.

RELIABILITY OF THE PREFERENCE FOR DEMOCRACY

Many social scientists are skeptical of survey questions because they doubt both their reliability and their validity. It is therefore important for me to establish both of these in this chapter. Fortunately, this is relatively easy to do. In order to determine the reliability of an item, it is often a good idea to repeat it in another survey to see if the results are similar. The preference-for-democracy item being analyzed in this chapter was included verbatim in the 1996 Latinobarómetro, a survey of more than 18,000 Latin Americans in 17 mainland countries of the region, excluding only Belize, Surinam, Guyana, and French Guiana.⁹ Figure 2 shows the results of the 1998 Hewlett Foundation survey on citizen values for Tulane University alongside the 1996 Latinobarómetro. The consistency of responses strongly helps establish the reliability of the results. It needs to be kept in mind that these surveys were carried out by different organizations, and different sample frames were used for each. Moreover, two years passed between the Latinobarómetro survey and the Hewlett survey. So we were not expecting to be able to reproduce the exact same level in the two surveys. Yet in the case of Costa Rica, the results vary by only 0.2 percent, well within the level of confidence of the sample design. In the case of Mexico, the difference was greater—5.3 percent; in Chile the difference was only 4.1 percent, but that is only 1–2 percent greater than the expected variation based on the confidence interval of 3 percent. In all three countries, the preference for democracy in 1998 was lower than it was in 1996, perhaps an indication that factors are at work reducing confidence in democracy; but the drop in Costa Rica is entirely within the 3.5 percent confidence interval, so no substantive conclusion can properly be drawn. Overall, these results give us reason to have a great deal of confidence in the reliability of the survey and suggest that if the identical question were asked repeatedly of samples in these countries, very similar results would emerge.

A second finding from the data presented in figure 2 is that Costa Rica ranks at the

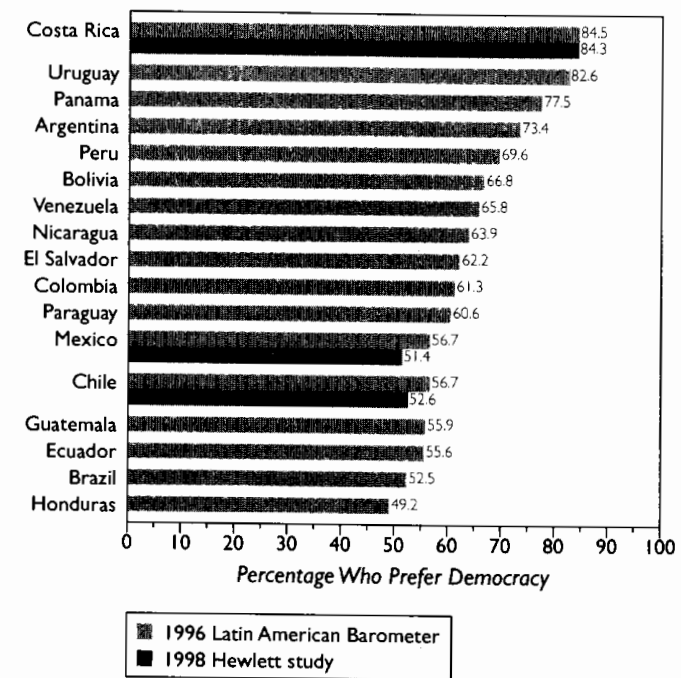


Fig. 2. Democracy is preferable to any other system

very top of all countries in the survey, followed by Uruguay, the country that is often ranked closest to Costa Rica in its level of democracy. These findings suggest the validity of the survey question, linking popular preference to regime type. However, it is inappropriate to push this conclusion very far, because the very next country on the list is Panama, which had a long string of military dictatorships for most of this century and has developed a competitive democracy only since the U.S. invasion in 1989. Similarly, Peru ranks high on the list, yet President Alberto Fujimori, who was responsible for an executive coup that extinguished democracy in the early 1990s, has run the country with little attention to the democratic process. So we need to keep in mind that in this chapter we are not trying to predict the regime type, but only measure popular support for democracy—which may (or may not) translate into a democratic polity.

A third finding from the comparisons shown in figure 2 is that the three countries selected do exhibit variation on the preference-for-democracy item. As noted, Costa Rica emerges at the top of the list of 17, while Mexico ties for twelfth place with Chile based on the 1996 Latinobarómetro data. If the other countries in the region were to

have retained their same preferences in 1998 as in 1996, then Chile and Mexico would fall near the bottom of the list, but it is likely that some shifting around would have occurred in the other countries during those two years, so it is very risky to draw that conclusion.

VALIDITY OF THE PREFERENCE FOR DEMOCRACY

Establishing the validity of a questionnaire item is always a more difficult task than establishing its reliability. A valid question is one that actually measures what we say it is measuring. In this case, we wish to know if the overwhelming preference for democracy in Costa Rica is a valid statement for a genuine belief in democracy. Fortunately, the survey gives us an ideal question for testing the validity of this item. The very first question in the survey asks:

In one word, could you tell me what democracy means to you?

The respondents were not read a list of options, but were asked to provide an answer of their own. The results for the three countries are displayed in figure 3. The contrast is stark: over two-thirds of Costa Ricans define democracy as "liberty," compared to less than one-third of Chileans and a little more than one-fifth of Mexicans. We can all debate what is the "correct" definition of democracy, but I think most scholars would agree that liberty is at the core. Responses such as "respect/legality," "voting/elections," "welfare/progress," and "type of government" are all definitions that fall wide of the mark, focusing on either process issues (e.g., elections) or on outcomes that may or may not be associated with democratic systems (e.g., economic welfare or

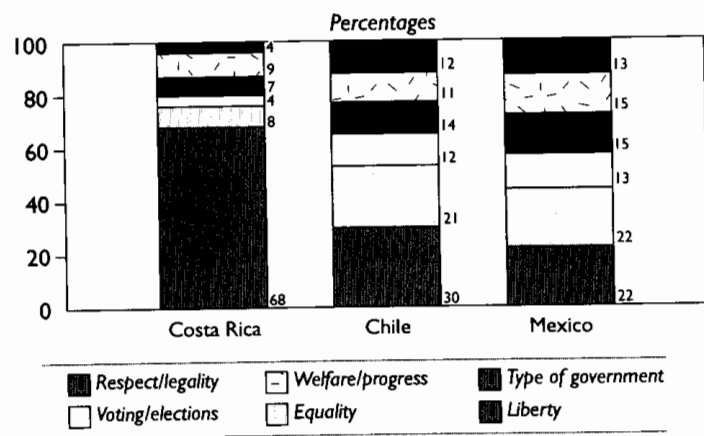


Fig. 3. Contrasting definitions of democracy

equality). Empirical research has consistently shown that democratic systems are no more likely to guarantee economic growth or equality (socially or economically) than other systems, however desirable those outcomes might be.¹⁰ It is Costa Ricans alone among citizens of our three countries who have overwhelmingly captured and internalized the equating of democracy with liberty.

We can conclude from these exercises in reliability and validity that the questionnaire item selected as the basis for contrasting the three countries in this set of survey data is both reliable and valid. It is now appropriate to attempt to determine why it is that Costa Ricans favor democracy so much more strongly than do Chileans or Mexicans.

EXPLANATIONS FOR COSTA RICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Tolerance

According to Robert Dahl, democratic political systems are ones in which the population is committed to belief in a system of both extensive and inclusive public contestation.¹¹ In such systems, the public accepts the right of widespread participation (i.e., universal suffrage) and also is willing to tolerate the rights of the opposition and minorities. Since the early part of the twentieth century, universal suffrage has become accepted throughout the world, but tolerance for the rights of the opposition and minorities has not. Intolerance is manifested on a daily basis in the civil wars that wrack the globe today. It is therefore reasonable to ask if the hallmark of Costa Rican democracy is a greater tolerance for the rights of others, when compared to the Mexican and Chilean systems.

The Hewlett survey includes a social tolerance measure that reads as follows:

I am going to read to you a list of people. Tell me whom you would prefer NOT to have as neighbors.

- a. Evangelicals
- b. Homosexuals
- c. Foreigners

In all three countries, foreigners are the most highly tolerated: 80 percent in Mexico, 88 percent in Costa Rica, and 89 percent in Chile. On this item there is so little expressed intolerance that it is not useful in distinguishing among the three countries. Tolerance of evangelicals as neighbors is also quite high: 77 percent in Mexico, 87 percent in Costa Rica, and 82 percent in Chile. Here again, tolerance is so widespread that we find that most respondents in the three countries express tolerance. Only with respect to homosexuals does the picture change. On this item, 67 percent of Mexicans, 57 percent

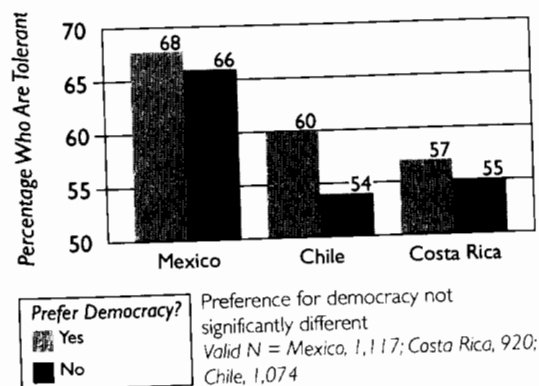


Fig. 4. Tolerance toward homosexuals

of Costa Ricans, and 57 percent of Chileans express a tolerant point of view. We can use this item to attempt to see if tolerance is the hallmark of Costa Rican democracy.

At first glance, it appears that on the three social tolerance measures generally, Costa Ricans do not stand out from Mexicans and Chileans. Costa Ricans were more tolerant of foreigners than were Mexicans but a bit less tolerant than Chileans; and they were tied with Chileans on tolerance of homosexuals. On only one of the three items, tolerance of evangelicals, were Costa Ricans higher than both of the other countries.¹² On the basis of those comparisons alone, Costa Rica does not stand out in its level of social tolerance.

In looking more closely at the data on social tolerance, the focus needs to be on the homosexual item, since that is the one in which the respondents most clearly distinguish themselves. If tolerance goes hand in hand with support for democracy, then it is reasonable to expect that the more tolerant respondents would prefer democracy more often than the less tolerant respondents. The comparisons displayed in figure 4 test this hypothesis for each of the three countries in our sample. The results show that while in each country those who prefer democracy are more likely to express tolerance toward homosexuals than those who do not prefer democracy, the differences are not statistically significant. In Mexico and Costa Rica the difference is only 2 percent, while in Chile it is 6 percent.¹³

The conclusion from this analysis is that social tolerance does not seem to be a critical factor in explaining Costa Rican exceptionalism. Fortunately, the survey contains another item that measures tolerance that will allow further testing of this hypothesis.

Respondents were asked:

Would you be in favor of or against one of your children (or siblings, if you do not have children) marrying a person of a religion different than yours?

The results of this question are presented in figure 5. Here there is additional evidence that tolerance does not explain Costa Ricans' preference for democracy. First, religious tolerance in Costa Rica is higher than in Mexico, but lower than in Chile. Thus, it is impossible to explain Costa Ricans' strong preference for democracy as a function of their level of religious tolerance. Second, within each country, those who favor democracy are no more tolerant than those who do not favor democracy.

The additional tolerance item clearly does not help us explain Costa Rican exceptionalism. We are forced to conclude, on the basis of the analysis of all four social tolerance items, that we must look elsewhere to explain the Costa Rican case.

Trust

Perhaps no other variable has garnered more attention in the recent literature on democracy than trust. Research on trust extends back over many years in the political psychology literature, but the big boost in attention came with the publication of Robert Putnam's 1993 book on democracy that focused on the importance of social capital, as well as Ronald Inglehart's 1997 studies of the World Values Surveys.¹⁴ According to these studies, countries that build interpersonal trust among their popu-

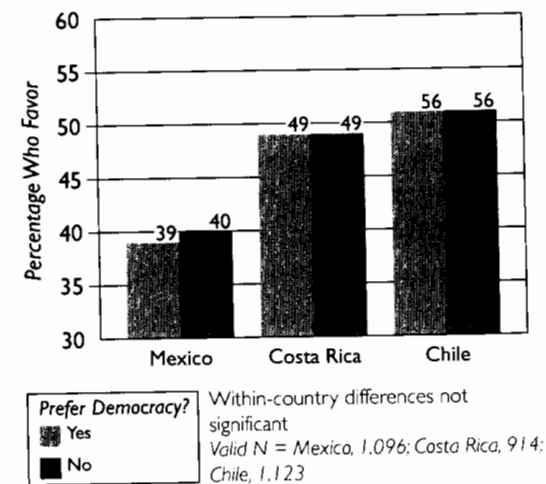


Fig. 5. Favor children marrying outside of religion

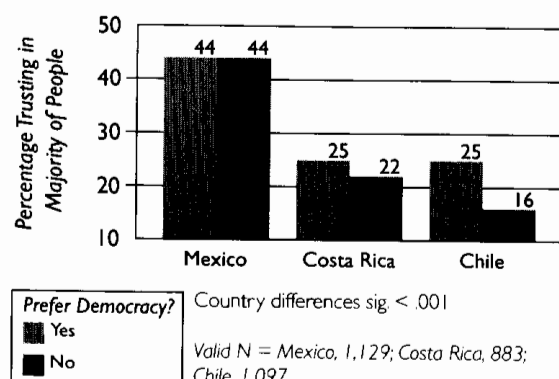


Fig. 6. Interpersonal trust

lation are more likely to be able to sustain democracy. It has also been argued that trust helps boost economic development, which in turn helps build democracy.¹⁵ Trust is seen as an outgrowth of active participation in civil society, but since the Hewlett survey does not include data on such participation, we cannot determine the origins of trust within the sample. Nonetheless, since the causal arrows presumably go from civil society participation to trust, and from trust to democracy, we will have no difficulty in seeing if the more proximate variable, trust, is related to a preference for democracy.

Does high interpersonal trust explain Costa Rican exceptionalism? Figure 6 strongly suggests that it does not. Mexico, the country in the data set with the most limited democratic tradition, and the one in which the smallest percentage of respondents stated that they prefer democracy, had almost twice the trust level found in Costa Rica and more than twice the level found in Chile. Within both Costa Rica and Chile there is, however, some evidence that those who believe in democracy express higher levels of trust, with the stronger pattern found for Chile.

These results certainly cast strong doubt on the importance of interpersonal trust for democracy. When we combine them with the negative findings on tolerance, it is fair to conclude that the major candidates for explaining democracy in Costa Rica, tolerance and trust, have proven to be sorely disappointing. Are there other places to look?

Accountability

The classic work by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba *The Civic Culture* argued strongly that citizen efficacy is crucial to democracy.¹⁶ Efficacy was defined in that

study as citizens' feelings that they could have an impact on public affairs. Much has been done with efficacy over the years, but of late it has been less frequently used in the political psychology literature.¹⁷ It has been pointed out that the difficulty with the efficacy questions is that they place the burden on the citizen rather than on the government. That is, citizens might *try* to make their voices heard, but if the government is "deaf," citizens can justifiably feel ineffectual in spite of their efforts.

The Hewlett survey overcomes this problem by avoiding the issue of the government's willingness to accept citizen input in decision-making, focusing instead on citizen behavior. The question was:

Would you personally be ready to do something to demand accountability from the politicians and bureaucracy: yes or no?¹⁸

The analysis compares those who responded to this item with "definitely yes" to those who were less certain about whether citizens should demand accountability. Figure 7 shows that here, at last, the data conform to our expectations. Costa Ricans are significantly more likely to believe in holding government officials accountable for their actions than are Mexicans or Chileans. Within Mexico and Chile, those who prefer democracy are more willing to hold their governments accountable. In Costa Rica, there is virtually no difference between those who prefer democracy and those who do not.

Accountability may turn out to be a very important feature of democratic systems.

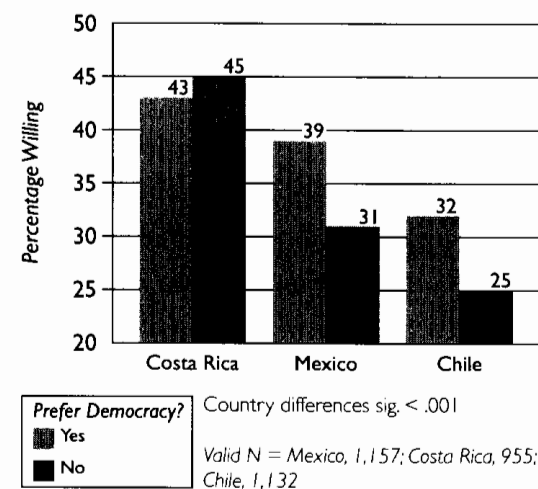


Fig. 7. Definitely willing to hold public officials accountable

When democracy was restored in countries such as Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, El Salvador, and Guatemala, there was a need to deal with the violations of human rights that had occurred during the military regimes. Yet in order to persuade the militaries to relinquish power, deals had to be cut granting widespread immunity from prosecution. That is why former president Augusto Pinochet has totally escaped being held accountable within Chile for the actions of his government during his 17 years in power; it is only international actors who have been seeking to have him stand trial for human rights violations. It may be that in Costa Rica the higher level of support for citizen responsibility to hold public officials accountable for their actions helps explain the resilience of democracy in that country.

Unfortunately, in the Hewlett data set there is only one item measuring accountability, which is a very slim reed on which to hang a theory. More questions are needed asking about accountability at different levels of government (local, regional, and national) and about accountability for different kinds of government actions (corruption, human rights violations, failed policies, etc.). Certainly, future studies of the attitudinal correlates of democracy should include a variety of measures of accountability.

Respect for the Rule of Law

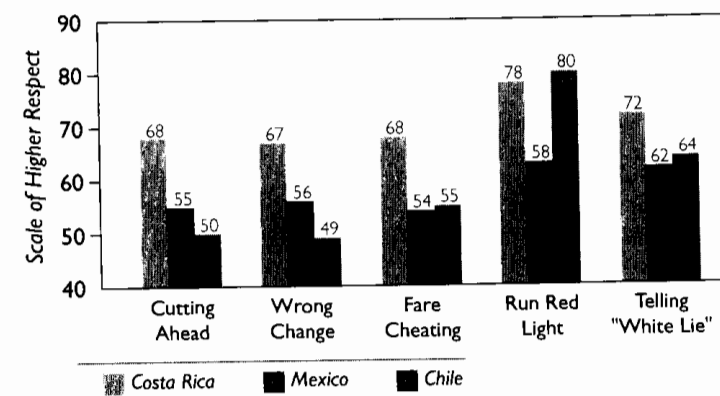
Studies of democracy have focused mostly on citizen rights, but the responsibility side also ought to be examined. Citizens in a democratic system are expected to respect the rule of law, as well as other social norms. The Hewlett survey asked a series of questions that attempted to measure this attitude. Respondents were asked:

I am going to read you a list of different things that people do. For each one of them, tell me if you believe that, in general, people who do these things are (1) very stupid; (2) somewhat stupid; (3) somewhat smart; or (4) very smart.

- a. Cutting in line
- b. Not saying anything if they get extra change
- c. Not paying fare in the subway or bus
- d. Going through a red light when there is no traffic
- e. Inventing a phoney excuse

This series includes items that measure attitudes toward actual violations of law (going through a red light and nonpayment for subway or bus service) but also items measuring adherence to social norms. Figure 8 shows the results.¹⁹

On four of the five items, Costa Ricans express significantly more respect for the law and for social norms than do Chileans or Mexicans. On only one item, going through a red light, are Chileans more law-abiding than Costa Ricans. It may well be, however, that Chilean police are especially vigilant when it comes to common traffic violations



Country differences sig. <.001 for each variable

Fig. 8. Respect for rule of law

and that the results on this item do not reflect a general respect for the rule of law. Consider the results on fare cheating, where Chileans are far less likely to be honest than Costa Ricans. The other "crimes" are not punishable by law except for cheating on bus fares, and the punishment there must be very infrequent and minor. So, it would seem that Costa Ricans' respect for the rule of law extends to a generalized respect for the rights of others, even when punishment is not an issue.

Happiness

Do contented citizens have a preference for democracy? Certainly, the work of Inglehart based on the World Values Survey data has suggested this rather strongly. In the Hewlett survey, the following question was asked:

In general, would you say that you are very happy, somewhat happy, somewhat unhappy, or very unhappy?

Support for the Inglehart perspective emerges in this data set, as is shown in figure 9. Costa Ricans are far more likely to express a high level of happiness with life than the citizens of the other two countries. Within the countries, however, those who prefer democracy are no more or less likely to be happy.

What is unknown about the happiness variable, however, is whether it is the cause or the result of a preference for democracy. Perhaps citizens of democratic countries are happier than those under authoritarian-based regimes precisely because they live in a democracy. Since the survey data are a snapshot look at these attitudes, we cannot

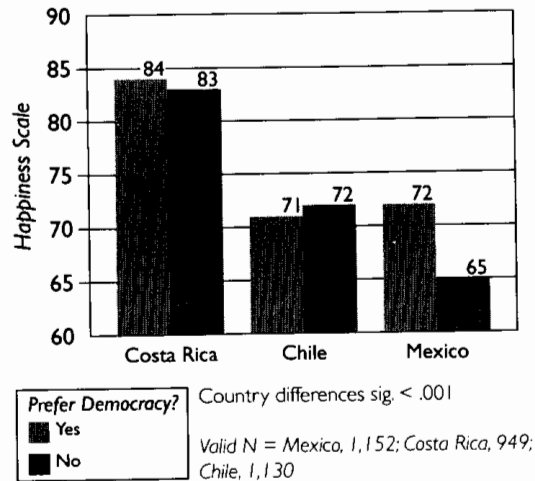


Fig. 9. Personal happiness

easily determine the direction of causality.²⁰ Satisfaction with the economy may, of course, be a factor explaining overall personal happiness. If this were the case, then the preference for democracy could actually be a function of the economic performance of the country. As will be shown below in the multivariate analysis, however, this is not the case.

MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS

Only by turning to a multivariate analysis of the data can we determine which of the factors examined thus far have an impact on the dependent variable—preference for democracy—when we control for all others in the model. Perhaps more importantly, we can determine the importance of the variables identified here in explaining Costa Rican exceptionalism.

The approach in the regression analysis is to pool all three samples so that the impact of each of the predictors can be seen for the entire population. To do this, however, requires the creation of “dummy variables” to represent the country effect. Since there are three countries in the sample, two dummies were created, one for Mexico and one for Chile; Costa Rica is used as the base group against which the other two are compared.

Further additions needed for the regression analysis are demographic and socioeconomic factors. These have not been examined thus far in this chapter, in part because

they carry little theoretical import, but also because—as will be seen shortly—they have little impact on the preference for democracy in these samples. Included in the regression analysis, therefore, are the variables of gender, age, education, and monthly family income.

In order to simplify the multivariate analysis, an index of support for the rule of law was created out of the five variables analyzed earlier. These form a reliable scale (with alpha coefficients of .78 in Costa Rica, .77 in Mexico, and .82 in Chile).²¹ Similarly, an index of social tolerance was constructed for the three tolerance items analyzed above.²² For this set of items, however, even though the inter-item correlations were positive for each country, the reliability of the scale was quite low. This suggests that a better scale of social tolerance needs to be utilized in future studies. Individual items could have been used in the multivariate analysis, but that would have unnecessarily complicated the model.

Finally, in order to facilitate comparison of the impact of each variable, they were all scored on a 0–100 basis, with the exception of education, age, and monthly family income. Those variables were left in their original form, since they relate directly to ranges in the survey instrument.

The multiple regression results are presented in table 1.²³ Model 1 incorporates each of the predictors examined in this study. The regression tells us, first of all, that although it is possible to explain variation in the preference for democracy among these samples with the variables examined here, the overwhelming explanatory factor is being a Costa Rican, versus being a Chilean or a Mexican. Being a Chilean *lowers* one's preference for democracy over authoritarian rule by 30 points on a 100-point scale, while being a Mexican lowers it by 31 points. All of the other variables in the study that make a significant difference in preference are greatly overshadowed by the impact of nationality. None of them has so much as a one-point impact on preference for democracy. More will be said about this finding in the concluding section of this chapter.

The second finding to emerge from model 1 is that demographic and socioeconomic factors have no impact on preference for democracy, except for income, which makes a slight negative contribution. It is of no import, therefore, whether the respondent is male or female, poorly or well educated, or young or old.

The third finding is surprising in the light of the analysis presented earlier. Once the impact of nationality is removed from the samples, then interpersonal trust, which had been discarded in the univariate analysis, becomes statistically significant. This is telling us that both Putnam and Dahl were on the right track when they pointed to

TABLE 1 Predictors of a Preference for Democracy

Predictors	Model 1		Model 2	
	B	t	B	t
(constant)	68.35	7.67	13.15	1.59
Interpersonal trust	.05*	2.21	.02	.79
Social tolerance	.04	1.33	.04	1.27
Accountability	.12***	4.35	.14***	4.95
Respect for the rule of law	.17***	4.99	.25***	7.19
Personal happiness	.07	1.89	.17***	4.76
Economic satisfaction	-.07	-1.94	-.01	-.28
Gender	.18	.10	-.94	-.50
Education	.08	.03	.08	.33
Age	-.64	-.52	-.40	-.32
Monthly family income	-2.60*	-2.02	2.64*	2.09
Chilean	-30.23***	-12.08	—	—
Mexican	-30.83***	-12.46	—	—
Adjusted R ²		.11		.04

Note: All variables coded on a 0–100 basis, except education, age, and monthly family income.

* Sig. < .05

** Sig. < .01

*** Sig. < .001

these attitudinal variables as having an impact on democratic beliefs. By including the country dummy variables, we have removed from the analysis any impact of living under the political system of Costa Rica, Chile, or Mexico. Once this is done, we see that interpersonal trust does make a difference independent of the nature of the political system under which one lives. The difference, however, is very small.

A fourth finding, one consistent with the univariate analysis, is that respect for the rule of law and willingness to hold the government accountable for its actions do make a significant contribution to predicting a preference for democracy over authoritarian rule. Finally, even though personal happiness was found to help explain Costa Ricans' preference for democracy, in this multivariate analysis it does not. The control for economic satisfaction, similarly, turns out to have no significant impact. This may be because personal happiness is also included in the model, and the impact of economic satisfaction might erode the impact of personal happiness.

Model 2 analyzes the data without controlling for the impact of nationality. For that reason it clearly is an underestimated model, but it is useful for confirming some of the earlier findings. We see in model 2 that accountability, respect for the rule of law, and personal happiness each predict a preference for democracy. Interpersonal trust once again falls to insignificance. Finally, while demographic factors play no role, economic ones do, with higher income having a positive impact on preference for democracy.

This suggests that the old notion of working-class authoritarianism is not supported by these data. The variable that has the most important impact on preference for democracy (see the B's) is respect for the rule of law, followed by personal happiness and accountability.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EMPIRICAL THEORY OF DEMOCRACY

What are the implications of the findings of this chapter for democratic theory, and the field of political culture in particular? While studies of democratization abound, most of them fall into one of two nearly mutually exclusive categories. One set of studies focuses on institutions; the other set, including the chapters of this volume, concentrates on culture. The study of institutions has a long history in political science, but for many years it meant little more than comparing constitutions. Not much was learned about democracy by that effort. In the last 20 years, however, the "new institutionalism" has emerged as a powerful field in political science. As a result of the advances in that field, virtually all experts now agree that institutions do in fact matter. One question is, however, *when* do they matter? In other words, do certain institutional arrangements, such as parliamentarism versus presidentialism, matter in all cases, or only in advanced industrial democracies? More important still is the question of *how much* institutions matter. The dominant studies in the field have shown that certain electoral rules are responsible for the greater probability of particular electoral outcomes as opposed to others. When it comes to larger issues related to the stability of democracy, however, these studies have been less helpful.

It is in the area of the big questions that political culture research claims to make its contribution. According to political culture theory, the values of citizens determine, in very fundamental ways, the kind of political system they will have. Political culture does not have much to say about which candidate or party will win an election, unless a party or candidate presents a fundamental challenge to the system, as did Hitler's party in the 1930s. Under those circumstances, citizens predisposed to accept an authoritarian alternative to democracy might well support such candidates, voting to terminate the current system. On the other hand, if a majority of citizens support democracy, then such candidates cannot legally win office. Similarly, if coup plotters attempt to seize governmental power by unconstitutional means, citizens committed to democracy would be expected to protest, even at the risk of their personal safety, in order to resist such a blow to their vision of the good state. Indeed, this is precisely what happened in Costa Rica in 1948, when citizens took up arms as a result of the incumbent

party's efforts to remain in power after a disputed election. While other factors played a role in the Costa Rican Civil War of 1948, the national lesson that was learned is that the electoral system is not to be tampered with.

The data presented in this chapter provide strong evidence that political culture matters when it comes to these big issues. It has been shown that Costa Rica, Latin America's most highly consolidated democracy, is one country in which political culture overwhelmingly favors democracy. To use the popular expression, in Costa Rica "democracy is the only game in town." Not so in Mexico and Chile, according to the data in our survey. In those two countries, it is an open question as to what kind of system citizens prefer. If political culture theory has any predictive power, it would predict that the stability of democracy in Mexico and Chile is far from assured.

What can we say about Costa Rican exceptionalism? We know that Costa Ricans have a much stronger preference for democracy than do the citizens of Mexico and Chile. We also know that variables such as respect for the rule of law and willingness to hold government accountable for its actions are factors that make Costa Ricans different from their counterparts elsewhere in Latin America.²⁴

The larger message from the data analysis conducted here is that most of the variance that makes Costa Ricans much closer allies of democracy is not to be explained by the social-psychological attitudes analyzed here. Rather, the results strongly suggest that in Costa Rica there exists a deep-seated commitment to democracy that goes beyond issues of interpersonal trust and the like. All countries develop national myths; Costa Rica is a small and not especially prosperous country, but many scholars have noted that its citizens have developed a national myth that makes them proud of their country, and what they are most proud of is their democracy. One hears this on a daily basis in schoolrooms, one reads it in the press and hears it on television. Central to the Costa Rican myth is the country's identity as a democracy.²⁵ No other country in Latin America has had a stable democracy for so long, and no observer sees any serious threat to its continuation.

What lessons are there for other countries that wish to enhance the prospects of democratic stability? The Costa Rican case seems to be a persuasive illustration of the importance of developing a national myth (a political culture, if you will) about the centrality of democracy. Other countries develop national myths: in Chile, there is much celebration of the power of the armed forces, and in Mexico the myth has long centered on the Revolution. No doubt these myths, too, are important in defining national character, but their particular forms do little to encourage democracy.