

TROUBLE IN PARADISE?

The Erosion of System Support in Costa Rica, 1978–1999*

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Abstract: Costa Rica has been the real success story of Latin American democracy. For the last half-century, this small country has held free, fair, and competitive elections, experienced regular rotation of rulers and parties, and rarely violated human or civil rights. Consistent voter turnout rates of 80 percent and a firmly entrenched two-party system appeared to be unalterable features of the electoral landscape since the late 1950s. While democracy still seems securely entrenched, the 1998 elections brought a major shift. Abstention increased by 50 percent, and votes for minor parties in the legislature doubled, reaching one-quarter of the electorate. This research note presents evidence that the shift is the result of long-term forces, using cross-sectional survey data collected from 1978 to 1999. Notable declines in the legitimacy of the political system explain the drop in turnout and the rise of minor parties. The study then attempts to explain why this decline may have occurred.

The almost complete demise of Venezuela's deeply entrenched two-party system in the 1998 elections that brought populist former coup perpetrator Hugo Chávez to power has given pause to students of political institutions in Latin America. The sudden collapse of the venerable Venezuelan party system has led some to wonder if Latin America is endemically incapable of establishing stable political institutions (Mainwaring and Scully 1995). Although the collapse in Venezuela was sudden, key warning signs preceded it. Years of economic decline and highly visible corruption scandals are believed to have produced "an erosion of support for existing intuitions" (Romero 1997, 13–14), as measured by public opinion polls, as well

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as a drastic increase in voting abstention from the traditional level of 10–12 percent through 1983 to nearly 50 percent by 1993.¹

The Venezuelan experience cannot fail to arouse concern about Costa Rica, widely recognized as Latin America's oldest and most stable democracy. Freedom House, which measures democracy worldwide, has consistently awarded Costa Rica its highest rankings: in 1999 Costa Rica tied with the United Kingdom (Karatnycky 2000, 187–200).² Other studies have reached the same conclusions (Vanhanen 1975, 1997; Bollen 1980; Booth 1998). For the last half-century, Costa Rica has held fair and competitive free elections leading to regular rotation of rulers and parties and has rarely violated human or civil rights (Booth 1998; Yashar 1997).³ Only twice in the entire twentieth century was democracy suspended, and then only briefly.⁴ In the 1970s, when elected governments collapsed throughout Latin America and were replaced by harsh military dictatorships, Costa Rica deepened its commitment to democracy. Despite widespread revolution and civil war that spread throughout nearly all of Central America in the late 1970s and into the 1980s, Costa Rica remained democratic, with its competitive two-party system intact.

As the sun rose on 2 February 1998, many Costa Ricans awoke to find that key parameters in the Costa Rican election system had changed. Until that day, most able-bodied citizens had been expected to cast their vote in national elections. Abstentionism had totaled 18 or 19 percent in every election since 1962 except in 1974 (20 percent) and 1982 (21 percent).⁵ It had also long been axiomatic that the two dominant parties would win nearly all the votes. These characteristics of elections had become a source of pride for Costa Ricans, who often looked with disdain on their neighbors in Central America. As many as four-fifths of Guatemalan voters stayed home in recent referenda, and Nicaraguan elections have been characterized at times by parties so numerous and small that they have been nicknamed "*partidos de sofá*," meaning that all the members of such parties could be seated on a single sofa.

In the 1998 election, Costa Rican voting patterns changed sharply (Wilson 1998b). In that year, abstentionism rose from almost 19 percent in 1994

1. For an extended analysis of the role of legitimacy in the Venezuelan case, see Canache and Kulisheck (1998).

2. Costa Rica received a score of 1 on "political rights" and a 2 on civil liberties on a scale ranging from a high of 1 and a low of 7. In Central America, Guatemala scored 3 and 4, El Salvador 2 and 3, Honduras 3 and 3, and Nicaragua 3 and 3.

3. For a longer-term view that shows early problems with elections, see Molina and Lehoucq (1999).

4. In the early years of the twentieth century, the Federico Tinoco regime ruled with an authoritarian hand. A revolutionary junta took over the government after the Civil War of 1948, which broke out when the legislature annulled elections.

5. The abstention rates from 1962 to 1994 are 19 percent for 1962, 19 percent for 1966, 17 percent for 1970, 20 percent for 1974, 19 percent for 1978, 21 percent for 1982, 18 percent for 1986, 18 percent for 1990, and 19 percent for 1994. For the full data, see Hernández (1998, t. 3, p. 39).

to 30 percent, a level unprecedented in the previous forty years. Votes for minor parties in the presidential race quadrupled from about 2 percent to more than 8 percent, and minor parties more than doubled from seven to thirteen. The change was even more striking at the level of the legislature, where minor parties expanded their share of the votes from 12 percent in 1994 to 24 percent in 1998.⁶

Costa Rican politicians, academics, and pundits have all been attempting to interpret these shifts, many openly wondering if Costa Rica is beginning to follow Venezuela's lead. This concern has been reflected in numerous recent public opinion polls asking the question, "Does Costa Rica need a Chávez?" Two views currently prevail. One suggests that these shifts in voting patterns do not represent a fundamental change in the Costa Rican electorate and reflect largely short-term factors (Rovira Más 1999). Those factors include the poor economic performance of the administration of José María Figueres Olsen from 1995 to 1997, campaign scandals, fraud committed during the party conventions, and media publicity stressing popular frustration and alienation.

The second view is that these changes presage a major shift in Costa Rican politics that mirrors profound discontent with the extant system. This hypothesis, fostered by much of the popular press, asserts that the 1998 elections reflect a fundamental change in the direction of what has been called "the Central Americanization of Costa Rica." According to this perspective, Costa Rican exceptionalism has eroded in recent years, and the country is coming to resemble its neighbors, whose democratic traditions are far more limited. Voting levels in the 1998 election were still high by the standards of many countries, including the United States, and multi-partyism is not necessarily a warning, given that many nations have had stable multiparty systems for years. But for Costa Rica, these unprecedented shifts in electoral patterns have been widely perceived as indicating more fundamental changes. Hardly a week passes in Costa Rica without reference being made in the media to the collapse of two-party politics in Venezuela and the possibilities of such an occurrence in Costa Rica.

This research note seeks to test these competing explanations. If the first explanation is correct, then it should not be possible to find long-term forces at work, and one would expect that in future elections, abstentionism should decline to historical levels of around 20 percent and minor parties should wither in number and voting strength. But if the pundits are right, the two leading parties could lose their grip on power in the legislature for the first time since the early 1950s. It has been argued that declining turnout

6. The system of proportional distribution of legislative seats heavily favors the major parties, so that the 25 percent vote for minor parties translated into only 12 percent of the seats. Even so, this number represented more than twice the seats held by those parties in the previous election.

and a breakdown of the traditional party system reveal an underlying and potentially growing crisis of legitimacy. This research note will therefore focus on the key question of the legitimacy of the political system. The essay will begin with a brief overview of legitimacy theory and then examine long-term trends in legitimacy in Costa Rica drawn from public-opinion surveys carried out between 1978 and 1999. It will then link those trends to the decline in turnout and the rise of third parties and attempt to explain them in terms of a decline in legitimacy, looking at several competing theories. The essay will end by proposing alternative explanations for the decline in legitimacy.

The Reservoir of Legitimacy Theory

In October 1929, the Wall Street stock market crashed in the United States. By the time the crash was over, stock values had plummeted to 10 percent of their former worth, and the United States and much of the industrialized capitalist world had plunged into what became known as the Great Depression. The political effects of that crisis can scarcely be overstated. As Nancy Bermeo observed, "In 1920, twenty-six out of twenty-eight European states were parliamentary democracies. By 1938, thirteen of these democracies had become dictatorships" (1997, 1). The breakdown of stable democracies has been linked to the erosion of political legitimacy brought on by long-term failure of regime performance. Both Seymour Lipset (1981) and David Easton (1975) argued in their classic works that democracies build their legitimacy over time by overcoming crises and achieving effective performance. The Great Depression may have been largely responsible for the breakdown of democracy in Germany and other poorly consolidated democracies in the interwar period in Europe, but democracy did not collapse in Britain or the United States, which suffered some of the worst economic consequences of the crash and the depression. The reasoning is that these systems had performed so well for so long that they had built up a reservoir of legitimacy in the eyes of their citizens, and although the depression drew on that reservoir, promoting the growth of numerous radical movements on the Left and the Right, the systems' two-party stability was never in doubt.

Earlier empirical analysis based on cross-sectional data demonstrated that Costa Rican stability in the face of extreme economic crisis mirrored that of the United States and Britain (Finkel, Muller, and Seligson 1989; Seligson and Muller 1987, 1990). In the early 1980s, Costa Rica suffered its most extreme economic crisis of the century (González-Vega and Céspedes 1993), but the reservoir of system support built up over many years prior to the economic crisis of 1982 was more than adequate for Costa Rican democracy to weather the storm. A panel-design study, looking at the same respondents over time, came to the same conclusion (Seligson and Gómez Barrantes 1987, 1989).

Extensive research has since been undertaken worldwide on the subject of political support and the stability of democracy (Norris 1999). One landmark study was conducted in Canada, whose national unity was being threatened by the possible secession of the province of Quebec, and it used a wide variety of measures of support (Kornberg and Clarke 1992). Another broadly comparative study recently covered many of the new democracies and expressed concern that a failure in performance could erode political legitimacy and undermine democracy (Inglehart 1999).

This research note reexamines the question of system support in Costa Rica, now extending the time series of data beyond the 1970s and early 1980s up through 1999. Over twenty years have passed since the first measurements of system support were made in Costa Rica. They revealed that Costa Rica enjoyed very high levels of support that allowed it to remain stable in the face of various crises. But one cannot assume that this deep "reservoir" was not being "drained" over time. It is therefore appropriate to take a second look at system support in Costa Rica in light of the results of the 1998 election. The data can help test the thesis that the explanation for the electoral shifts in 1998 are to be found in relatively superficial factors that arose between 1994 and 1998, rather than in long-term trends. Rarely do researchers have access to long runs of survey data in Latin America in which the identical questions were asked repeatedly. For Costa Rica, such data exist for the years 1978 to 1999. Long-run trends in those data will be presented and alternative explanations tested.

The System-Support Scale: The Items and Their Reliability

Measuring system support is fraught with difficulties. One of the most serious problems is that the measures initially devised by the University of Michigan, the "Trust in Government Scale," have not served researchers well. Studies in the United States showed dramatic declines in the trust in government measures beginning in the early 1960s, leading some highly respected authors to write about a "crisis of democracy" (Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki 1975). Yet democracy in the United States has remained strong, without signs of collapse or even weakening of the two-party system (as evidenced by the ephemeral impact of the Ross Perot phenomenon). More important, few behavioral consequences of low trust in government have been detected, with little or no association with voting abstention. The problem with the Trust in Government Scale and many similar measures is that they present respondents with pat phrases with which it is all too easy to agree, even if one is not alienated from the political system, for example, "Would you say that the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves?" (Citrin and Muste 1999).

To correct for the weakness of the prior measures, the Political Support-Alienation Scale was devised in a study of Germany (Muller 1979) and then

deployed in the United States, Israel, Mexico, and Costa Rica. It was later applied in all of Central America and in Paraguay, Peru, and Bolivia. The core of the Political Support–Alienation Scale consists of five items.⁷ They attempt to tap Easton’s generalized notion of “diffuse support” and Lipset’s notion of “legitimacy” rather than specific support for any given administration. Each is scored on a basis of 1 to 7, with 1 indicating the lowest level of support and 7 the highest. The five items ask:

1. To what extent do you believe that the courts in Costa Rica guarantee a fair trial?
2. To what extent do you have respect for the political institutions of Costa Rica?
3. To what extent do you think that the basic rights of citizens are well protected by the Costa Rican political system?
4. To what extent do you feel proud to live under the political system of Costa Rica?
5. To what extent do you feel that one ought to support the political system of Costa Rica?

The database for this project is unusually rich for Latin America, where surveys are often ad hoc and rarely repeat identically worded questions over long periods of time. The database includes a total of eight surveys taken from 1978 to 1999, which interviewed 4,744 respondents.⁸

The data presented here emerged from long-term cooperation between the author and Licenciado Miguel Gómez, formerly of the Escuela de Estadística of the Universidad de Costa Rica. In 1978 we undertook a pilot study of the greater metropolitan area of San José, using items derived from the German and U.S. studies. The data collected in subsequent years were funded jointly by the University of Arizona and the University of Costa Rica, with support from the U.S. National Science Foundation for the national survey data. The 1999 study was funded by a grant from the Ford Foundation to FLACSO–El Salvador. All interviews were conducted face-to-face, and samples were drawn from the Gómez national sampling frame based on the official census maps and population data.⁹ The sample designs for all the studies except 1987 and 1999 were focused on the greater metropolitan

7. Various applications of the scale have employed other items, but these five have remained the core.

8. In 1976 I began collaborating with Edward Muller. He carried out a study of system support and its impact on political participation in Germany (1979). A database had also been collected in the United States, focused on New York City. I collected another database in Israel with Dan Caspi, my Israeli coauthor (Seligson and Caspi 1983a, 1983b). Yet another database was collected in Mexico by John Booth and me (Booth and Seligson 1984, 1994). Extensive analysis was undertaken to validate the system-support scale developed in that research. The studies clearly showed that the measures were reliable and valid (Seligson 1983).

9. The sample sizes for each year are 201 in 1978, 280 in 1980, 501 in 1983, 506 in 1985, 927 in 1987, 597 in 1990, 505 in 1995, and 1,428 in 1999.

TABLE 1: Reliability Coefficients of the Five-Item System-Support Measure, Costa Rica, 1978–1999

Year	Standardized Item Alpha
1978	0.77
1980	0.75
1983	0.79
1985	0.75
1987	0.70
1990	0.74
1995	0.73
1999	0.73

TABLE 2: Factor Analysis of 1999 System-Support Items in Costa Rica

Component	Initial Eigenvalues	Percentage of Variance	Cumulative Percentage
1	2.415	48.294	48.294
2	.855	17.098	65.392
3	.753	15.058	80.450
4	.569	11.382	91.832
5	.408	8.168	100.000

NOTE: Extraction method, principal component analysis. Loadings range from 59 to 79.

area of San José. The 1987 survey (with support from the National Science Foundation) and the 1999 survey (with support from the Ford Foundation) were national in scope and thus can allow making direct comparisons with the metropolitan area and checking to see if those results differ substantially from national results. If they do not, it is reasonable to generalize from the smaller samples to the country as a whole.

The first step in the analysis is to demonstrate that these five items form a reliable scale. Table 1 shows the results of the reliability analysis for each year. These results show that the system-support measure has retained a good and stable level of reliability in each administration of the survey.

The items are not only reliable but in every year form a single factor when subjected to principal components analysis (only one factor has an eigenvalue over 1.0). The results of the 1999 study shown in table 2 are virtually identical with the results for all prior years. In sum, the system-support measure, which has been shown to be a valid measure, is demonstrated here to be reliable and unidimensional for each of the eight surveys covered in this study.

System Support, 1978–1999

I now turn to the central finding in this multiyear investigation. Figure 1 displays the trends in system support on each of the five core items in the

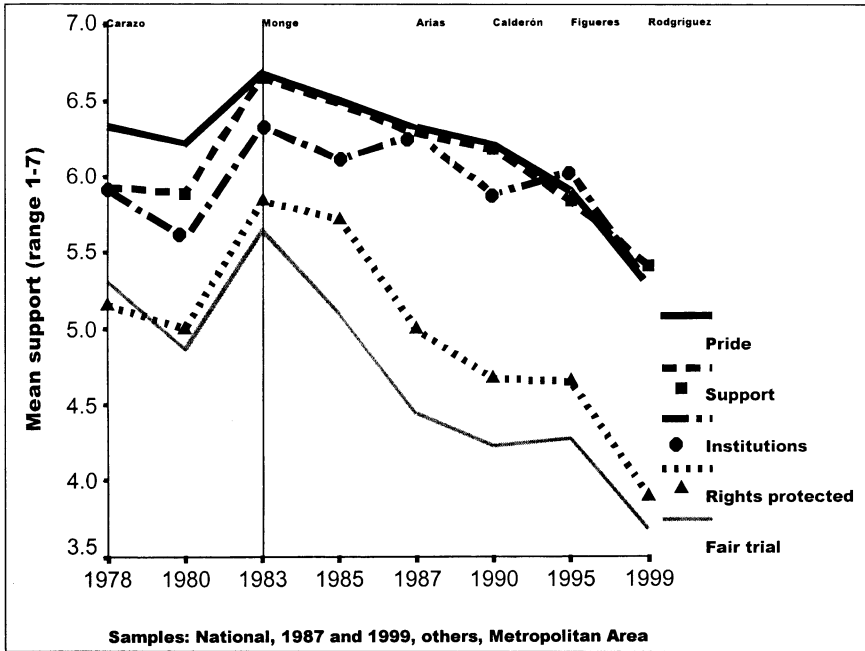


Figure 1 System Support in Costa Rica, 1978–1999

Political Support–Alienation Scale, on a scale from 1 to 7. Several important conclusions can be drawn from these results. First, system support on all items was high from 1978 through 1983. All the measures rank above 5, with three of them averaging 6 or higher in both 1978 and 1983. The issue of high versus low will become clearer later in comparisons with other Latin American countries. Second, the high point in the series came in 1983, shortly after the election of Luis Alberto Monge to the presidency. His administration rapidly restored equilibrium to the economic system that had been undermined during the administration of Rodrigo Carazo (1978–1982) and secured unprecedented levels of U.S. foreign aid for Costa Rica.

Third, declines in system support did not start in the period 1994–1999, as would have been the case if the problem was only short-term, but became evident beginning in 1985. A major falloff occurred in system support on every one of the indicators beginning in 1985, continuing through 1999. Only in 1995 was there a slight upward increase on some of the measures, but it was countered by a far sharper drop in 1999.

Finally, although all indicators declined, the slope of the decline of the items “rights protected” and “fair trial” is somewhat steeper than the other three items. This finding suggests that the problems of system support are more heavily concentrated in the judicial area than in the rest of the system.

One potential challenge to the veracity of these results should be laid to rest at once. As noted in the section on the database, most of the samples were concentrated in the metropolitan area, whereas the 1987 and 1999 surveys were national. Could it be that the comparatively low system support shown in 1999 was a function of including a large number of respondents from areas of the country where system support was much lower than in the metropolitan area?¹⁰ In fact, an analysis of the data shows just the opposite. The overall score on the combined five-item index of system support for the nation as a whole in 1999 (now scored on a 0–100 basis for the index, as will be explained) was 61.5, compared with 60.8 for the metropolitan area and 62.2 for the rest of the country. Thus adding the nonmetropolitan region into the sample raises system support, but only slightly from what it would have been for the metropolitan region alone. Consequently, the focus on the metropolitan area in most of the datasets but on national data in 1987 and 1999 is not responsible for artificially lowering the support level in those two years.

Can Declines in System Support Explain Declines in Voting?

It is clear from this analysis that something more than a short-term change is occurring among Costa Rican voters. Can the change in levels of system support be translated into an explanation of the decline in voting turnout? Kenneth Coleman's (1976) study of voting abstention in Mexico found that low support was associated with higher abstention. Yet it is unreasonable to expect that those expressing only slightly lower system support would simply stop voting. Rather, a more realistic expectation would be some sort of threshold in system support below which voting turnout would decline sharply.

Is there evidence of a threshold in system support that impacts voter turnout? To answer this question, it is appropriate first to create an overall scale of system support because it has already been shown that the five items form a single dimension and that the items form a reliable scale. The scale, labeled "system support," is constructed by converting all the items to a 0–100 basis and summing them.¹¹ For this analysis, the 1999 dataset is

10. The metropolitan area is defined as the urban cantons of the province of San José, excluding Pérez Zeledón, as well as the first cantons of Alajuela, Heredia, and Cartago.

11. This scaling was done by first creating a true zero point by subtracting one point from each score for each respondent on each of the five variables in the series. That produced variables ranging from 0 to 6 rather than the original 1 to 7. The new range was then divided by 6, so that the items now ranged from 0 to 1, and multiplied by 100. Missing data (which vary between 1 and 3 percent per item on the entire 1978–1999 dataset) are treated by substituting the mean of each case whenever the respondent answered at least three of the five items. When fewer than three items produced valid responses, that entire case was scored as missing and excluded from the analysis.

used because it contains the largest sample in the series and is national in scope. The results confirm the linkage between low system support and declines in voting turnout. System support was significantly associated ($< .001$) with voting or nonvoting. Those low on system support were less likely to have voted in the election immediately prior to the survey than those high on support. This evidence provides initial support for the view that the decline in system support influenced the turnout in the 1998 election.

Yet if turnout is associated with low system support, why did it not reduce turnout in elections prior to 1998? It is fair to question the link between low system support and voting abstention because support had been falling steadily since 1985 but lowered turnout emerged only in 1998. Prior research has suggested that there may be a "threshold effect" that requires system support to be at very low levels before voters abstain. In Edward Muller's (1979) study of Germany, for example, a behavioral impact of low system support was encountered when a scale similar to the one utilized in Costa Rica was employed. In Germany and the United States, only very low levels of system support were associated with an increased probability of violent political behavior. In Costa Rica up through the 1995 survey, there were virtually no cases of very low system support. Thus while the average level of support was declining, few Costa Ricans ranked the system at the extreme low end of the scale. It can be hypothesized that in Costa Rica, only when support declines to low levels do voters stay away from the polls. In effect, this threshold effect suggests that when support is high or medium, most Costa Ricans vote. But when support is low, abstention increases.

A clear demonstration of the impact of low system support can be seen in figure 2, which shows a clear threshold on the system-support scale. For presentation purposes, the overall system-support scale, which ranges from 0 to 100, has been divided into ten increments from 1 to 10. When system support falls to 2 or below (0–20 on the original 100-point scale), voting declines dramatically, to near the 50 percent mark for president and below 50 percent for local (municipal) elections. Examination of the survey data for 1987, the only prior year with national-level data, reveals only a single respondent out of a sample of 927 cases in which system support scored below 3. Thus in the years when national system support was very high, there were too few Costa Ricans expressing extremely low system support to have any notable impact on turnout. Abstention in those years was largely a function of routine factors such as illness, imprisonment, distance from the polling place, and absence from the country. This threshold effect would explain why the impact of declining system support was not noted until the 1998 elections. Up to that point, levels of discontent had risen but not enough to cross this threshold. By 1998 the threshold had evidently been crossed, and abstentionism increased.

These findings must now be subjected to a multivariate analysis to demonstrate that system support is a significant predictor of voting and ab-

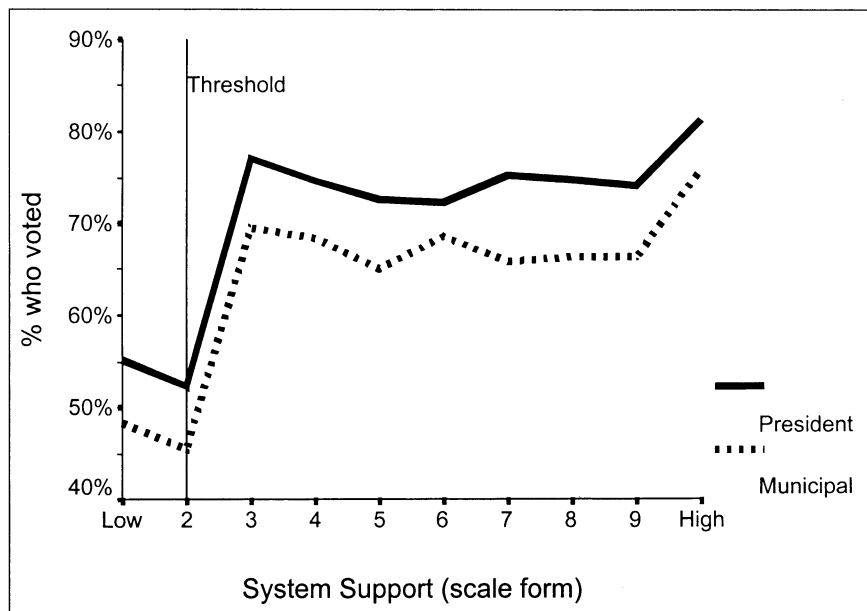


Figure 2 System Support and Voting in Costa Rica, 1999

stention when controlled for other factors. Absent this evidence, one might wonder whether if after standard demographic and socioeconomic controls are introduced, the relationship shown in figure 2 remains significant. Because vote/abstain is a dichotomous dependent variable, a logistic regression specification is required. The results are shown in table 3.

The logistic regression includes system support as its first predictor. In addition, a measure of urbanization of the community in which the respondent lives was added because urban residents often experience fewer barriers in getting to polling places than do rural residents. Age, sex, wealth, and education are also included in the equation.¹² The results reveal that while each of these demographic and socioeconomic predictors except ur-

12. Sex is coded so that the higher number equals female. Education is coded to reflect the actual number of years of formal education. Wealth is measured by a five-item index of ownership of various household markers of wealth (color television, black-and-white television, refrigerator, telephone, and car or truck). Respondents who had more than one television were assigned one point, those with one TV, one point, and those with none, zero points. This measure of wealth was used instead of income because although income produced a similar result, 125 respondents in the sample did not reveal their incomes, reducing the sample size for the regression results. System support is transformed to reflect the bifurcated pattern shown in figure 2.

TABLE 3: *Predictors of Voting Abstention in Costa Rica, 1999: Logistic Regression Results*

Predictor	B	Standard Error	Wald	Significance	Odds Ratio
System support	.954	0.254	14.103	.000	2.597
Urbanization	.120	0.095	1.607	.205	1.127
Age	.039	0.005	55.692	.000	1.040
Sex	.005	0.001	15.837	.000	1.005
Wealth	.159	0.053	9.060	.003	1.172
Education	.043	0.019	5.079	.024	1.044
Constant	-2.622	0.422	38.569	.000	.073

Source: 1999 national probability sample of 1,428.

banization has a significant impact on voting or abstention, system support proved to have by far the strongest impact. Examining the column of statistical significance, each of the predictors except urbanization is significant at the .02 level or beyond. Older Costa Ricans are more likely to vote than younger Costa Ricans, a familiar finding to those who have examined voting behavior in Central America (Seligson et al. 1995). These results show in the last column, labeled "odds ratio," that for each year of increase in age, the odds of voting increases by 4 percent. Overall, nonvoters in Costa Rica average thirty-three years of age, while voters average thirty-nine years of age. Females are significantly (but only slightly) more likely to vote than males, with 53 percent of the voters being female. For each increment in the wealth scale (ranging from 0 to 7), the odds of voting increase by 17 percent. Education also matters: for each year's increase in education, the odds of voting increases by 4 percent. Costa Rican voters averaged 8.5 years of education, whereas nonvoters averaged 8.0. These standard predictors pale in importance, however, in contrast to system support. As the logistic regression equation results show, a shift from low to high support increases the odds of voting by 1.6 times. In sum, these results leave little doubt about the impact of system support on voting versus abstention in Costa Rica.

Can Declines in System Support Explain the Rise in Minor Parties?

As noted, the fall in turnout in the 1998 election was accompanied by blossoming support for minor parties. Can this change also be linked to a decline in legitimacy of the political system? The data show that it can. Support for the system among voters for the two major parties (the incumbent Partido Liberación Nacional or PLN and the victorious Partido de Unidad Social Cristiano or PUSC) was almost identical, with a slight edge given to the party elected in 1998. On a 0 to 100 scale, those who voted for the PUSC had a system support score of 64, and for the PLN a score of 62. Those who cast a null or blank ballot, in contrast, scored significantly lower

TABLE 4: *System Support: Costa Rica in Comparative Perspective*

<i>Country and Year</i>	<i>System Support Score (0–100)</i>
Peru 1997	35
Peru 1996	36
Nicaragua 1995	43
Bolivia 2000	43
Bolivia 1998	44
Nicaragua 1999	51
El Salvador 1995	53
Paraguay 1996	53
El Salvador 1999	57
Costa Rica 1999	61
Costa Rica 1995	72
Costa Rica 1985	87

Source: University of Pittsburgh Latin American Public Opinion Project.

in system support (57), while those who voted for one of the minor parties were lower still (53). A logistic regression analysis, following the model utilized in the analysis of voting, found that none of the standard predictors proved significant except for education, in which the average education of voters for the minor parties was 10.5 compared with 8.1 years for those who voted for either of the two mainstream parties (table not shown). System support, however, was significant. The odds of voting for the mainstream parties was 49 percent lower among those with low system support than with those with high system support. Thus multivariate results of both abstentionism and voting for minor parties highlight the importance of system support.

Comparative Magnitude of the Decline in System Support

System support has fallen, but how low is it in comparison with other countries in Latin America? As can be seen in table 4, the decline is a sharp one. System support in Costa Rica remains higher than in any other country in the University of Pittsburgh Latin American Public Opinion Project, but barely so. The 1999 results place Costa Rica much closer to some of the other countries with data for 1999, such as El Salvador. This trend suggests that some degree of “Central Americanization” or a “Latin Americanization” may well be underway in Costa Rica, with the high levels of support expressed in the 1980s falling close to levels expressed in countries with a much more limited democratic tradition.

Alternative Explanations

The finding that system support in Costa Rica has waned and has caused a decline in voting and a rise in support for minor parties can be challenged in four ways. First, the decline in system support may be purely an artifact of the methodology used, namely, repeated cross-sectional samples. Second, the decline may be an artifact of a generalized decline in system support that may have occurred throughout Central America. Third, the decline may be little more than a regression to the mean, the high levels being an artifact of inflated levels of system support brought on by nationalistic sentiments stimulated by the Nicaraguan Revolution. Fourth, the results obtained may merely reflect the impact of exposure to the mass media rather than a genuine shift in citizens' views of their political system. These four challenges will be considered one by one.

Effects of Age, Cohort, and Period

How reliable is the finding that system support has declined in Costa Rica? Could the results obtained here be merely an artifact of the methodology used, which relies on repeated cross-sectional samples? When such repeated surveys are used, two important effects can seriously distort the conclusions based on longitudinal national averages, misleading investigators into assuming a general decline in system support when the decline is in fact confined to one or more specific age groups.¹³ The so-called age effect occurs as a result of life-cycle differentials, exacerbated by demographic shifts. This effect influences individuals only at certain points in their lives. Oscar Hernández (1990), for example, found in the 1980s a subnational average level of abstentionism among first-time voters in Costa Rica. He explained it by arguing that new voters wanted to try out their coming-of-age rights, but after the initial "thrill" had passed, they returned to the normal demographic pattern found in Costa Rica and elsewhere of lower voting among the young and the very old and higher voting among those in their middle years (Seligson et al. 1995). Other studies have found that the young are more liberal than the old. If the age pyramid of a given population remains unchanged, then the age effect in this case would not shift national averages toward greater liberalism, given that the young become more conservative as they age. But although Costa Rica in the mid-twentieth century had exceptionally high birth rates, a rapid and steady decline began in the 1960s (Gómez 1970). As a result of the decline in birthrates, the population pyramid has been slowly shifting toward older citizens. For example, in 1980 children ages ten to fourteen amounted to 10 percent of the population, but by 1998 children in this age group had fallen by half to only 5 percent

13. For an excellent discussion of these three effects, see Glenn Firebaugh (1997, 6–7).

(World Bank 2000, 234). Because the young are less likely to vote than the old and the young are shrinking as a proportion of the national population, shifts in the age pyramid cannot explain the decline in voting.

A second possible factor affecting the repeated cross-section data is known as the cohort effect, resulting from some event or series of events that might have lowered system support for a particular age cohort of voters throughout their lifetimes. For example, if the Nicaraguan Revolution of 1979 produced a decline in system support among Costa Ricans being socialized into politics at that time, then this age group might be dragging down overall national levels of system support.

If there is an age effect, then the declines in system support are merely illusory. Yet if there is a cohort effect, the declines are real but an artifact of the impact on one specific age group. When this group passes through the system and begins to die off, the effect will decline and eventually disappear.

Because age data are available, both of these hypothetical effects can be tested. Examining the data allows ruling out both age effects and cohort effects. First, no significant association was found between age and system support.¹⁴ Thus even though the young are less likely to vote, they are not less likely to have levels of system support different from older Costa Ricans. Second, the relationship between age and system support proved to be virtually flat, with no peaks and valleys. Therefore, the young do not exhibit higher support than those who are older, nor has a specific age cohort been traumatized politically into expressing lower system support than others younger or older than they.

The remaining effect to explain these data is the so-called period effect, in which a generalized process is underway that affects all age groups (see figure 1). That is what appears to have happened in Costa Rica. Had the data shown evidence of an age effect, it would be of no concern because it would be part of a natural process affecting all Costa Ricans rather than evidence of a secular decline in support. Had the evidence shown a cohort effect, the concern would be minimized because once the "damaged cohort" moved through the system, the level of support would be expected to return to its earlier high level. What was found instead is genuine evidence of a period effect, a much more serious problem for the Costa Rican system because it has affected all age groups. It is impossible at this juncture to determine whether changes in the future could reverse the current steady decline or if the decline will level off. But up through 1999, at least, there is no evidence of anything but a steady erosion of support.

14. The correlation was based on the actual age rather on grouped data.

Regional Trends

Students of system support have noted long-term declines in a number of countries (Nye, Zelikow, and King 1997). In studies carried out in advanced industrial democracies in Europe, limited longitudinal data show mixed trends, with countries exhibiting declines in support often outnumbering those with level or increased support (Dogan 1997; Turner and Martz 1997; Dalton 1999; Holmberg 1999; Klingemann 1999).

Could it be that in Central America, the insurgencies, revolutions, and economic crises dominating the region since the early 1980s have created an atmosphere of declining political support and that Costa Rica is merely part of this regional trend? Limited evidence suggests that this is not the case. The identical questions measuring system support have been asked in repeated surveys in three of Costa Rica's Central American neighbors.¹⁵ Results from the capital-city metropolitan region are available that are comparable with the surveys conducted in Costa Rica for the years other than 1987 and 1999. When converted to the same 0–100 scale, as done with the Costa Rican data, the El Salvador means in system support were 50 in 1991, 53 in 1995, and 57 in 1999, indicating a slight increase over this time period. Meanwhile, the Costa Rican results were declining from 87 in 1985 to 61 in 1999 (Seligson, Cruz, and Córdova Macías 2000). In Guatemala a survey conducted in 1991 produced a mean on the five survey items of 54, declining slightly to 49 in 1999. Survey data from Nicaragua in 1995 showed a mean of 43, increasing to 51 in 1999 (Seligson 2000a). Although these data are limited and do not cover the same full range of years included in the more comprehensive Costa Rican database, they suggest no dramatic downswing in support that could indicate a regional trend affecting the Costa Rican results. The countries that have undergone difficult democratic transitions are not experiencing anything like the declines experienced in Costa Rica.

Artificially High Starting Levels

A third potential critique of these findings is that the high levels of system support found in the early years of this series of more than twenty years may have been nothing more than an artifact of nationalistic sentiments stimulated by fears of the potential impact of the Nicaraguan Revolution on Costa Rica. Not long after the Somoza dictatorship was thrown out of power by the Sandinistas in 1979, tensions began to build from opposition elements who charged that they were being excluded from power and that the Sandinistas were leaning toward communism. With the eventual support of the United States, the "Contras" emerged as a potent military

15. The surveys form part of the University of Pittsburgh Latin American Public Opinion Project.

force bent on overthrowing Sandinista rule. Armed camps were established by some opposition groups along Costa Rica's northern border with Nicaragua, and eventually a flood of refugees descended on Costa Rica.

Is it possible that the low levels of system support encountered in the more recent surveys are nothing more than a reversion to possibly low levels prior to the early surveys shown in figure 1? Two pieces of evidence refute that argument. First, the initial measurement in the time series was for 1978, a year before the Nicaraguan Revolution and long before the Contra movement and the subsequent flood of Nicaraguan immigrants into Costa Rica. Second, the notion that the high levels of system support found in the 1978 survey might have been an artifact of fears emerging from the increasingly violent nature of the prerevolutionary conflict can be refuted definitively. In the 1978 survey, several items were included that measured support for the Sandinistas. One study of that data (Seligson and Carroll 1982) found that Costa Ricans overwhelmingly supported the overthrow of the Somoza regime. When respondents were asked if they believed that the Sandinistas were fighting for a just cause, 96 percent agreed. Furthermore, 76 percent of respondents in the 1978 survey did not believe that the Sandinistas were communists. Finally, no significant association can be found between the system-support measure and fear of the Sandinista movement. Such fear did not inflate the early scores for level of support.

Media Effects

Does this decline in support reflect a genuine shift in Costa Rican attitudes toward their political system, or is it merely an artifact of a generalized negativism that has descended over a country with greater exposure to mass media? This fourth challenge explanation can be tested in two ways. First, it can be determined whether exposure to mass media is associated with lower system support. The survey included questions on frequency of obtaining news from radio, television, or a daily newspaper. None of these variables were consistently or significantly related to system support. The only pattern that could be found, albeit insignificant, was that those with less exposure to television news expressed lower system support. This finding suggests that increased media exposure is not responsible for lowered system support.

A second way to test the media thesis is to examine another series of democracy-related questions that have been used in the survey since 1978. If system support is declining because of some generalized negativism spreading throughout the population, perhaps induced by the media, then four items measuring political tolerance should be affected as well (only three were used in 1978). These items were designed to tap into a generalized sense of political tolerance for the rights of political minorities. They have been

employed in the series of surveys detailed here and have been found to be reliable and valid. In Costa Rica, the Alpha reliability coefficient varied from a low of .79 to a high of .87 for the 1978–1999 data sets. In factor analysis, a single dimension emerges. The series of questions ask:

1. There are people who say only bad things about the governments of Costa Rica, not only the current government but the system of Costa Rican government. How strongly (on a scale of 1 to 10) would you approve or disapprove of the these people having the right to vote?

2. Thinking still of those people who say only bad things about the Costa Rican system of government, how strongly do you approve or disapprove of those people being able to carry out peaceful demonstrations for the purpose of expressing their points of view?

3. How strongly do you approve or disapprove of the people who say only bad things about the Costa Rican system of government being allowed to run for public office?

4. Thinking still about those people who say only bad things about the Costa Rican system of government, how strongly do you approve or disapprove of them appearing on television to make a speech?

The four items of the tolerance scale are displayed for the same period (1978–1999) in figure 3. Because tolerance is strongly affected by education, the samples are limited to the metropolitan area, where there are comparable data on level of education for all eight surveys. These results show that unlike the system-support measures, tolerance has shown no obvious declining trend over the years. Tolerance of the right to demonstrate, vote, and run for office has not changed at all, except for minor variations from year to year. Approval of the right to free expression on television has declined, but only slightly (from 5.6 to 5.1). It is therefore possible to reject the hypothesis that the decline in system support is an artifact of some sort of generalized measurement error or effect.

Taken together, the four challenges to the findings presented here—those of age-related effects, regional effects, artificially high starting levels, and media effects—do not undermine the results. In some ways, these results enhance the decline in support by showing it to be robust. What then can explain the declines in system support in Costa Rica?

Possible Explanations

The results of this study demonstrate four clear findings. First, Costa Rica has been experiencing a long-term decline in system support. Second, when the decline produced for the first time a group of citizens expressing very low system support, an “abstentionism threshold” was crossed in the 1998 election and spilled over directly on lowered voting. Third, levels of support have not fallen to crisis levels in that they remain higher than other countries in Latin America, but they are much closer to crisis levels than

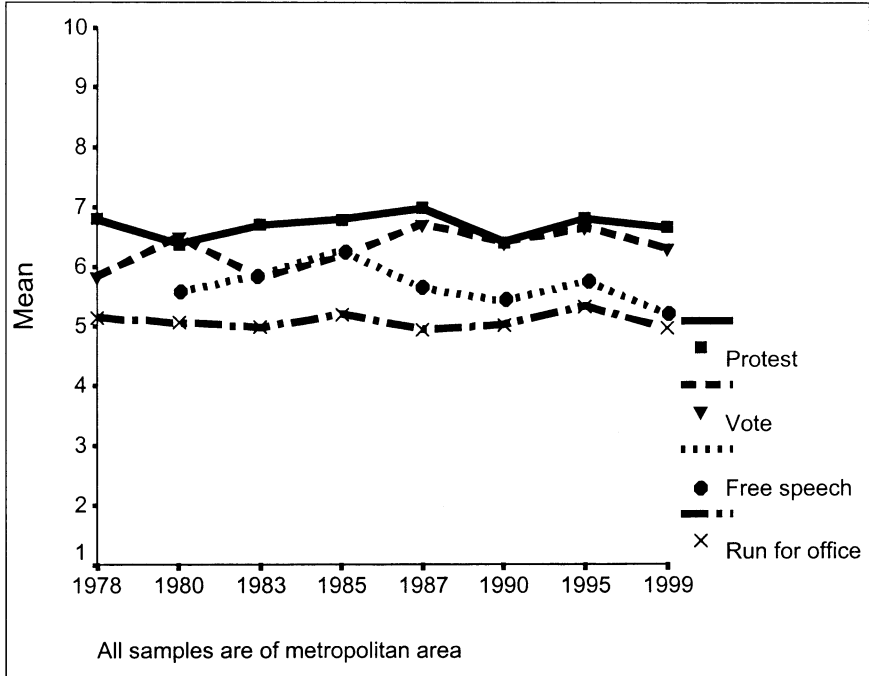


Figure 3 Political Tolerance in Costa Rica, 1978–1999

they have been since this measurement effort began in 1978. Fourth, the decline in system support affects all age groups. It is thus neither an age effect nor a cohort effect but a generalized period effect.

Do these results mean that Costa Ricans are abandoning their support for democracy? Not at all. In a comparative study undertaken in 1998 by Roderic Camp, support for democracy was compared in Chile, Costa Rica, and Mexico.¹⁶ That study found that Costa Ricans were far more committed to democracy than were the citizens of Chile and Mexico (Seligson 2001). Each respondent was asked the following question:

With which of the following statements 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 are the same thing.
3. Under some circumstances, an authoritarian government could be preferable to a democratic one.

In Costa Rica, 84 percent of respondents chose the first option, preferring democracy to any other form of government. In Chile, however, only

16. At that time, Camp was at Tulane University and received support from the Hewlett Foundation.

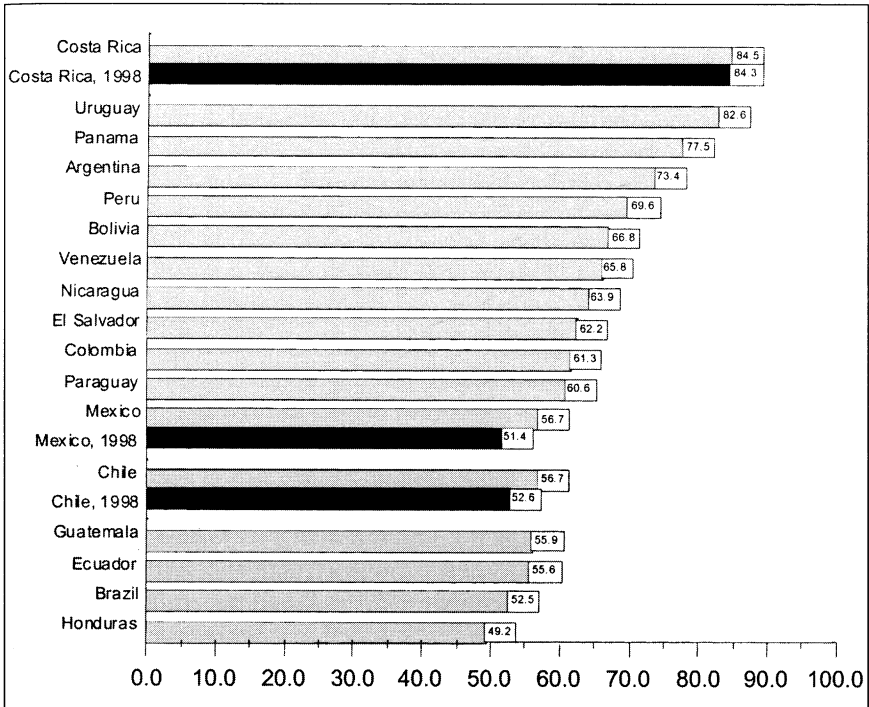


Figure 4 Preference for Democracy in Latin America

53 percent of the respondents chose that option, and in Mexico a bare majority of 51 percent.

In the 1999 survey of Costa Rica used throughout this study, the identical question was also asked. In that survey, 89 percent of Costa Rican respondents said that they prefer democracy over the other alternatives, a number slightly above the 1998 data. In the larger Latin American context, the 1996 Latinbarometer shows the same pattern, with Costa Rica at the top of all countries in the region.¹⁷ These results are shown in figure 4.

While the above data show that Costa Ricans still strongly support democracy, their level of support for their political system (as opposed to democracy) has declined substantially in recent years. What factors can explain this decline in support? Several explanations are offered here.

One possible explanation is the crime problem. Crime has been found to erode system support, and it has been increasing in Costa Rica (Seligson and Azpuru n.d.; Seligson 2000b). Full details cannot be provided here, but some key figures recently reported by the United Nations stand out. The

17. The Latinbarometer data were made available by the Inter-American Development Bank.

homicide rate in Costa Rica in 1978 was 5.4 per 100,000 population, but by 1993, it had increased to 9.1, exceeding the rate of 7.0 for the United States, a historically violent country. The arrest rate in Costa Rica per 100,000 was 105 in 1974 but soared to 336 in 1994 (UN 1999, 312–15). More crime may be undermining support by weakening Costa Ricans' confidence that the state can protect them. Crime may also anger citizens who conclude that criminals can act with impunity because they see criminals escaping justice by avoiding arrest due to failures in the police system or being exonerated by the courts because of technical failures in the case.

A second explanation could be the demographic changes that have occurred in Costa Rica as a result of the unprecedented in-migration of Central Americans from other countries. According to the best estimates, 9 percent of the population of Costa Rica now consists of Nicaraguan immigrants (Brenes 1999; Morales and Castro 1999). No one knows how these immigrants view the Costa Rican political system. Future surveys might consider asking about national origin to determine whether these immigrants express lower system support than do native-born Costa Ricans.

A third possible explanation is growing frustration with the system of representation. Costa Rica, like many Latin American countries, uses a "closed-list" multi-member system of proportional representation. Voters cast their vote for a slate of candidates rather than for an individual. In this system, the voter is connected to the party, not the candidate. In Costa Rica, the distance between representatives and voters has been widened by the prohibition in the Constitution of 1949 on the immediate reelection of deputies (Carey 1996). Moreover, in the mid-1990s, the system of "*partidas específicas*," which granted small pork-barrel funds to deputies in the majority party, has been shifted to local (district) control. This change has likely weakened the connection between representatives and constituents further by hampering deputies' efforts to satisfy constituent demands. Many proposals for reform of the electoral system have been considered for years, but thus far the creation of some system of single-member electoral districts has not been approved (*Revista Parlamentaria* 1999).

A fourth explanation, one that many Costa Ricans may feel is the most accurate, is the failure of leadership in recent years. Costa Ricans may have been lucky in the twentieth century to have been led by an unusually competent series of leaders. This pattern seems to have shifted in recent years, especially in the 1990s. If recent leaders have not performed well, it cannot be surprising that system support has been declining.

A fifth explanation seems to me to provide the strongest explanatory power. Costa Rica has become caught up in fundamental paradox, in which citizens seem to be involved in a love-hate relationship with the state. Like virtually all developing countries, Costa Rica has been engaged in a long-term process of neoliberal restructuring (González-Vega and Céspedes 1993) involving downsizing of the state and opening domestic markets to com-

petition. Yet unlike most other countries, Costa Rica is carrying out these changes in a country where several large state-owned enterprises have performed well over the years and enjoy strong loyalties among the population. The electric, telephone, and insurance monopolies are prime examples. Costa Ricans have enjoyed a state-run telephone monopoly that has given them access to a reliable and economical phone network. Telephone availability per capita is among the highest in Latin America.¹⁸ Since the mid-1980s, however, when system support began to decline, Costa Rican governments of the two major parties have been committed to opening these monopolies to competition, if not complete privatization. Costa Ricans have strongly opposed such efforts, as shown in all poll data (Wilson 1998a). In March 2000, massive street protests broke out all over the country opposing a proposed law that would have begun opening both electricity and communications to competition. Previous protests were almost always limited to a specific sector, such as university students or small farmers. In this case, the protests spread to all sectors of the population for two weeks and displayed a ferocity uncharacteristic of Costa Rican demonstrations. As a result of this episode, support for the incumbent administration fell to new lows, with 82 percent of the public rating the government negatively in a poll in April 2000. Ironic as it may seem, the success of state-run enterprises has resulted in a negative evaluation of the Costa Rican state because of its efforts to scale back or dissolve these enterprises.

Conclusion

Costa Rica is a significant test case for those interested in the consolidation of democracy. This small country has long been considered a model for other third world nations to follow. The presumption has been that Costa Rica long ago overcame the problems that have made the path to consolidation so rocky in other countries. Yet the evidence presented in this research note suggests that profound long-term change is underway in Costa Rica. System support has steadily eroded, slowly draining the once ample reservoir of legitimacy. Even when economic growth has been solid, averaging at least 5 percent in the past few years, support has continued to decline. It is possible that when Costa Ricans again go to the polls, abstentionism rates and votes for minor parties may decline as a result of the emergence of an unusually attractive candidate. For example, if the constitution is amended and former President Oscar Arias is allowed to run, his

18. World Bank data show that in 1997, Costa Rica had 169 telephone lines per 1,000 persons compared with 56 in El Salvador and 29 in Nicaragua (World Bank 2000, 266–67). Even Panama, with a somewhat higher gross national product per capita, had only 134. In Latin America, only Argentina and Uruguay recorded a higher number of phone lines per capita, with 191 and 232 respectively.

widespread support could energize the electorate. But it is unlikely that a single popular president could reverse the long-term slide in system support, and the prospects for a constitutional change are remote.

The broader implications affect observers' view of the prospects for stable democratic institutions in Latin America. As noted in the introduction, Venezuela's strong two-party system imploded almost overnight, replaced by a new populist party of questionable stability. Costa Rica has enjoyed a stable two-party system since the 1960s. Yet the rapid increase in votes for minor parties may be pointing toward a radical change in that system (Rovira Más 1999), with unpredictable outcomes. The key challenge for Costa Rican leaders as well as those interested in democratic consolidation is to determine precisely what is causing the decline in legitimacy in Latin America's strongest democracy.

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