



# Presidential Popularity in Central America: Parallels with the United States

ALFRED G. CUZÁN AND CHARLES M. BUNDRICK, UNIVERSITY OF WEST FLORIDA

This article builds on our previous work, which showed that presidential popularity in Costa Rica is responsive to economic conditions. Here the analysis covers, in addition to Costa Rica, four sister republics which only recently have undergone democratization. We find that, as in the United States, presidential popularity in Central America rises and falls with the state of the economy. Also as in the United States, presidential popularity in Central America is cyclical, higher early and late in the presidential term. As new and tenuous as democracy is in most of the region, when it comes to rating presidents, Central Americans appear to use the same criteria as voters in the United States.

That economic conditions are associated with the popularity—or lack thereof—of elected governments in the United States and Europe is well established. Generally speaking, despite variations of time and place, in these stable democracies popular support for the incumbents, measured by pollsters or elections, falls with economic downturns and inflation. In the politics of these countries, “economics matters” (Lewis-Beck 1988: 22). So strong is

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NOTE: Earlier versions of this article were presented at the 1996 meetings of the South-eastern Council on Latin American Studies and the Southern Political Science Association. Travel to acquire the public opinion data was made possible by a small projects grant from the University of West Florida, which is gratefully acknowledged, as is the access to the data granted the first author by Charles Denton of CID-Gallup, San José, Costa Rica. Many thanks to anonymous reviewers of this journal for their challenging critiques and helpful suggestions; and to James L. Busey, Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, and Marvin Alisky, Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Arizona State University, Tempe, for their continuing encouragement.

*Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (December 1997): pp. 833–849

the relationship between economic conditions and presidential popularity that economic variables take pride of place in most forecasting models (Lewis-Beck and Rice 1992; see also the collection of articles in Garand and Campbell 1996, a special issue of *American Politics Quarterly* devoted to forecasting U.S. presidential elections).

However, it is only within the last decade that researchers have begun to investigate whether similar patterns characterize popularity functions in less developed—and usually also less stable—countries (Paldam 1987; Seligson and Gómez 1987; Remmer 1991; Gasiorowski 1995; Pacek and Radcliff 1995). This study builds on our previous work, which showed that presidential popularity in Costa Rica is responsive to economic conditions (Cuzán and Bundrick 1991). Here the analysis covers, in addition to Costa Rica, four sister republics which only recently have undergone democratization. Our objective is modest: to inquire whether, and to what extent, economic and political variables found to be statistically correlated with presidential popularity in the United States and other stable democracies exhibit the same effects in Central America.

#### THE SETTING

The five countries of Central America are relatively small and economically undeveloped. In area they range from fewer than 10,000 square miles (El Salvador) to over 50,000 (Nicaragua); in population from 3 million (Costa Rica) to 10 million (Guatemala). Except in Nicaragua, less than half of the population lives in urban areas. From one fourth (Costa Rica) to more than half (Guatemala, Honduras) of the labor force is employed in agriculture, fishing, and related activities. In all countries agricultural products (coffee, bananas, cotton, sugar—the combination varies from country to country) make up most of the value of exports. Per capita income ranges from less than \$1,000 in Nicaragua to a little over \$2,000 in Costa Rica (CIA 1994). On “purchasing power parities,” the range is from a low of \$2,000 in Honduras to about \$5,500 in Costa Rica. (PPP is a measure of per capita GDP “adjusted to account for detailed price comparisons of individual items covering over 150 categories of expenditure”—see *Freedom Review* January-February 1996: 19-20.) Life expectancy is around 65 for males and 70 for females except in Costa Rica, where it is 75 and 80, respectively. Literacy ranges from a low of less than 60 percent in Guatemala to over 90 percent in Costa Rica. Thus, on broader measures of social development, Costa Rica is better off than its neighbors, indeed, than most of the world. In 1996, on the U.N. Human Development Index, Costa Rica ranks 31 (out of 174 countries), second in Latin America only to Argentina, whereas its Central American neighbors are bunched up below the world median: Guatemala ranks 112, Honduras 114, El Salvador 115, and Nicaragua 117 (U.N. 1996).

Politically, too, Costa Rica is different, being governed by a democracy with an old pedigree (Peeler 1995). The foundations of the present system were laid in 1948–49, when a successful revolution broke out following the government's attempt to annul the results of a bitterly disputed election (Lehoucq 1995a). The following year an elected assembly wrote a new constitution providing for an independent Supreme Electoral Tribunal, after which the victor of the 1948 election served his term. Eleven consecutive competitive elections have been held since 1953, the longest period of uninterrupted constitutional democracy in Latin America, longer, even, than some West European countries, such as France, Greece, Portugal, and Spain. In fact, on the Freedom House Index of political rights and civil liberties, Costa Rica has consistently received the highest possible rating on political rights; in 1995, its rating on civil liberties was the same as that of the United Kingdom (*Freedom Review* 1996: 16–17). In other words, Costa Rica is a first-rate democracy, an exceptional country in the developing world.

The country's party system is bimodal. In the 1990 and 1994 elections, 98 percent of the votes for president and over 85 percent of the votes for congress were cast for the candidates of two major parties (Lehoucq 1995b: 112). These are the National Liberation party (PLN), organized by the winners of the 1948 revolution, and the Christian Social Unity party (PUSC), a fusion of anti-PLN factions, including the losers of 1948. Of the eleven elections held between 1953 and 1994, the PLN has won the presidency, and a majority or plurality in the national assembly, seven times. It is the party with the best organization and the deepest roots in the country's political culture (McDonald and Ruhl 1989).

In contrast to Costa Rica, political life in the rest of Central America has been relatively nasty, not to say brutish (Anderson 1988; Brockett 1988; and the country chapters in Booth and Seligson 1989). Brief episodes of reform or interludes of democratization notwithstanding, until very recently El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua were ruled by dictatorial regimes of a military or, in Nicaragua, a dynastic cast. Although historically an oligarchical two-party system made for a less harsh regime in Honduras, this country was under military rule in the 1960s and 1970s. To make matters worse, offshoots of the Cold War sprang up throughout the region, the largest in El Salvador and Nicaragua, the longest-lived in Guatemala. In these three countries yawning social and economic inequalities supplied the local fuel for guerrilla and civil wars, the flames of which were fanned by the United States on one side and the Soviet Union and its surrogates, principally Castro's Cuba, on the other (Wickham-Crowley 1992; Kagan 1996). In El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua terrorism from left and right (the latter usually an informal arm of the security forces) deeply scarred the body politic. Although in every

country the present government is the product of competitive elections, and represents a decided improvement over previous regimes, it is not on the same democratic level as Costa Rica's. Every one of these countries is rated as "partly free" by Freedom House, with El Salvador and Honduras scoring somewhat higher than Guatemala and Nicaragua (*Freedom Review* 1996: 16-17).

The first of the Central American dictatorships to move to a more democratic regime was Honduras. In 1982, even as it hosted revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries from its neighbors, as well as thousands of U.S. troops, Honduras reverted to a two-party system that dates to the beginning of this century, albeit with weak civilian control over the military. The 1982, 1986, and 1994 elections were won by the Liberal party, in 1990 by the National party. In 1995, Honduras tied with El Salvador for second place in Central America on the Freedom House Index of political rights and civil liberties.

For most of the years between 1954, when the United States backed the overthrow of a left-wing regime, and 1985, when elections were held under a new constitution, Guatemala was ruled by military-dominated regimes under attack from leftwing guerrillas lodged in the western highlands, home of large concentrations of Indians. In 1985, 1990, and 1995, elections for president and the legislature were contested by a multitude of parties and factions. These include the Christian Democratic party, winner of the 1985 election, and various coalitions held together by powerful personalities. In 1993, President Serrano attempted to make himself dictator. Instead, he was ousted by the military, and congress elected a moderate successor to complete the presidential term. In 1995, two conservative candidates squared off in a run-off. The winner, Alvaro Arzú, took 51 percent of the vote. Under his administration, the government and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Union, an umbrella organization composed of four guerrilla factions, negotiated a political solution to Guatemala's internal war—the longest in Central America. Of the region's five countries, Guatemala ranks last in Freedom House's index of political and civil rights.

From the 1970s and through the next decade, fierce civil wars were fought in both Nicaragua and El Salvador. After the overthrow of the long-lived Somoza dynasty in 1979, a leftist regime with close ties to Fidel Castro and the Soviet Union, that of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), attempted to consolidate power (Kagan 1996). The revolutionary coalition that brought them to power soon broke apart, and the Sandinistas came under increasing challenge from many of their former allies in the struggle against Somoza, including the legendary newspaper *La Prensa*, the Catholic Church, and the business community, as well as from a U.S.-backed guerrilla movement, the *Contras* (Everingham 1996). Across the Gulf of Fonseca, in neighboring El

Salvador, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), a leftist guerrilla group with a revolutionary ideology and international ties similar to those of the Sandinistas attempted to overthrow a U.S.-backed regime making the transition from military dictatorship to elected government under Napoleón Duarte, founder of the Christian Democratic party (Menzel 1994).

In both countries years of fighting proved inconclusive, forcing the warring sides to search for an electoral solution. In 1990, the Sandinistas were defeated by the UNO, a coalition of parties which, differences of personality and tactics aside, shared with the *Contras* the goal of ousting the FSLN. However, in deals worked out during the transition period, Sandinistas retained control of key military and police posts and acquired title over an enormous amount of property confiscated during the revolutionary period (Uhlig 1991). Moreover, control over labor unions and other organizations of committed militants allowed them to exercise informal power, primarily the power to disrupt economic and political life by means of strikes and street blockades. In 1996, the Sandinistas lost again, this time to Independent Liberal party candidate Arnoldo Alemán. Nicaragua rates second lowest in Central America (after Guatemala) on the Freedom House index.

In 1992, peace negotiations mediated by the United Nations culminated in a negotiated settlement in El Salvador providing for the peaceful incorporation of the FMLN in the democratic process. In the 1994 elections, the conservative ARENA party retained the presidency. For its part, the FMLN displaced the Christian Democrats as the second-largest political party in the country. Its standard bearer placed second in the first round of the presidential election, in which the ARENA candidate failed to secure an absolute majority. In the run-off, the FMLN ticket took 32 percent of the vote (Lehoucq 1995c: 179-80). In the 1997 local and legislative elections, FMLN slates did well in many parts of the country, even winning the mayor's race in the capital city, San Salvador.

#### HYPOTHESES, DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Since 1979, *Consultaría Interdisciplinaria en el Desarrollo* (CID), a survey research firm affiliated with Gallup International, has surveyed Costa Rica's voters three to four times a year.<sup>1</sup> About a decade ago, CID started conducting similar surveys in the rest of Central America, first intermittently and now

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<sup>1</sup> CID is co-owned by Charles Denton, a political scientist who has published about Costa Rica (Denton 1971, 1985). In the summers of 1990 and 1995, the first author paid a visit to CID, where Dr. Denton gave him free access to the public opinion data, a professional courtesy we gratefully acknowledge here.

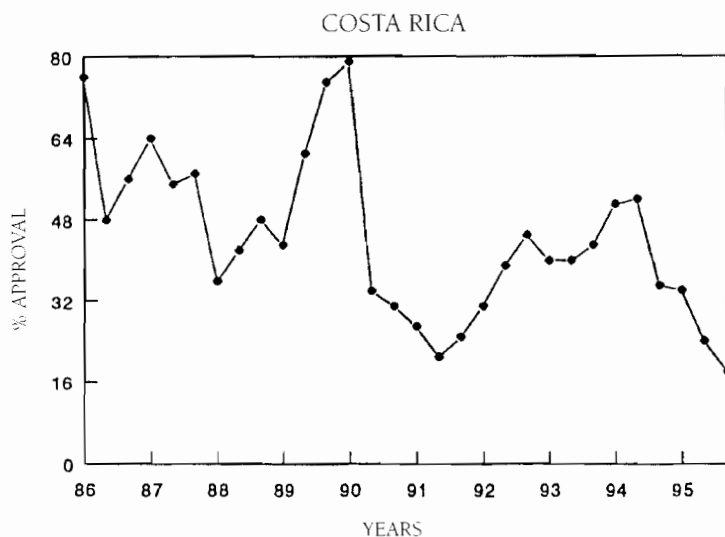
regularly. As of July 1995, 123 surveys had been completed, distributed as follows: 51 in Costa Rica, 24 each in El Salvador and Honduras, 11 in Guatemala, and 13 in Nicaragua. About 1,200 respondents were polled each time, some by telephone (more so in Costa Rica, where there are more telephones per capita) and the rest in person.

One of the questions asks the respondent to evaluate the performance of the incumbent president. The options are "very good, good, neither good nor bad, bad, or very bad." Adding the first two responses yields the president's approval rating, APPROVE. Figure 1 presents the presidential approval ratings for all five Central American countries from 1986 to 1995. There are two graphs for Costa Rica: one includes all observations since 1979 and the other the 1986-95 period only. This is done to facilitate visual comparison with the other countries, where the data series starts in 1986 (El Salvador and Honduras), 1987 (Guatemala), or 1989 (Nicaragua).

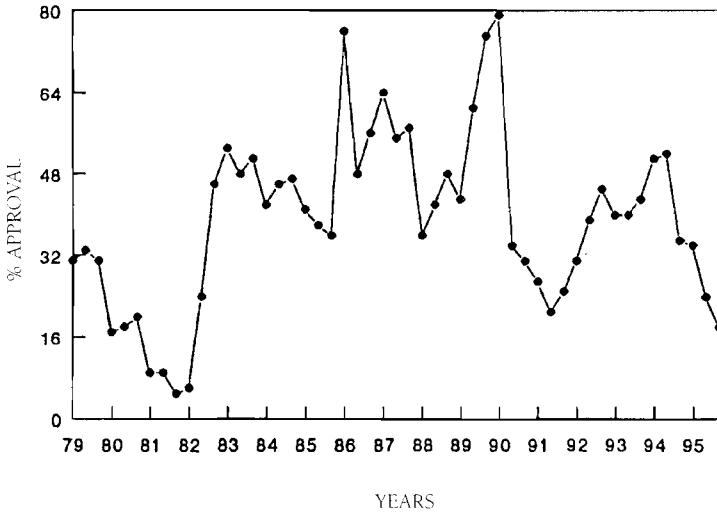
Figure 1 shows that, although during the first few months of 1995 presidential approval ratings were quite low in all five countries, hovering around 16 percent or less, there are differences in the decade-long trend. The Nicaraguan case is the least ambiguous: there the trend of presidential popularity was downward, unremittingly so between 1991 and 1993, after which it bottomed out at around 16 percent. In Costa Rica, too, the general trend was

FIGURE 1  
PRESIDENTIAL POPULARITY—1986-1995

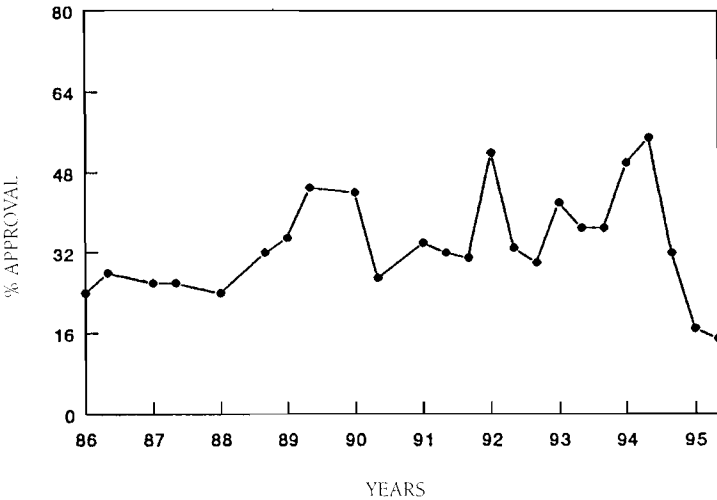
% RATING PRESIDENTIAL PERFORMANCE AS GOOD OR VERY GOOD



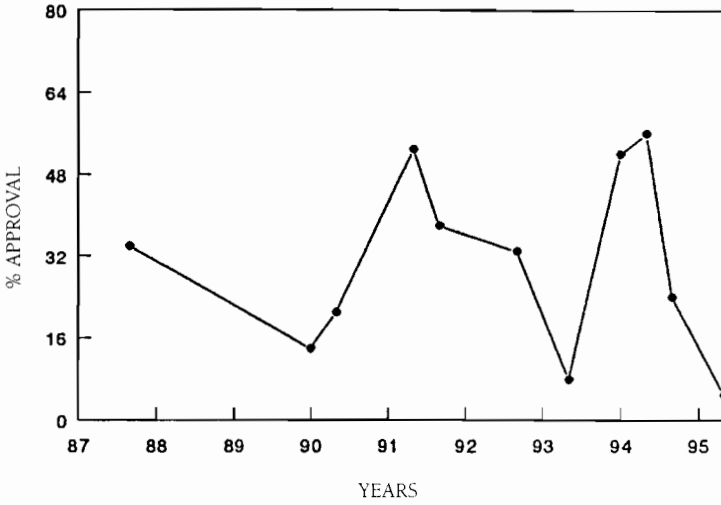
COSTA RICA  
FOR THE EXTENDED PERIOD 1979-1995



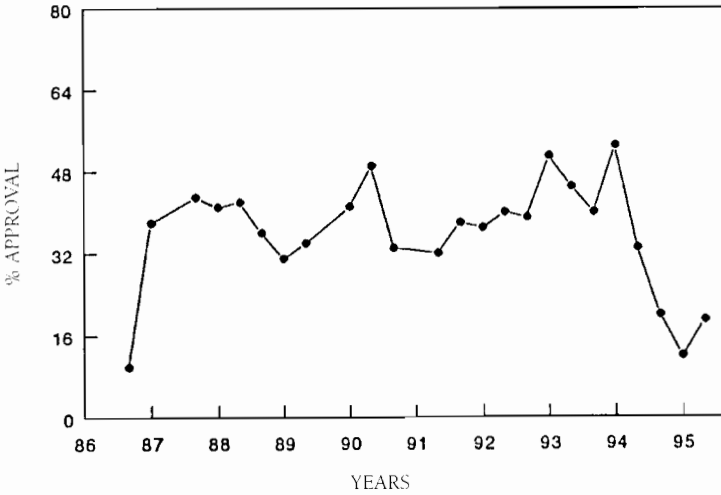
EL SALVADOR



GUATEMALA

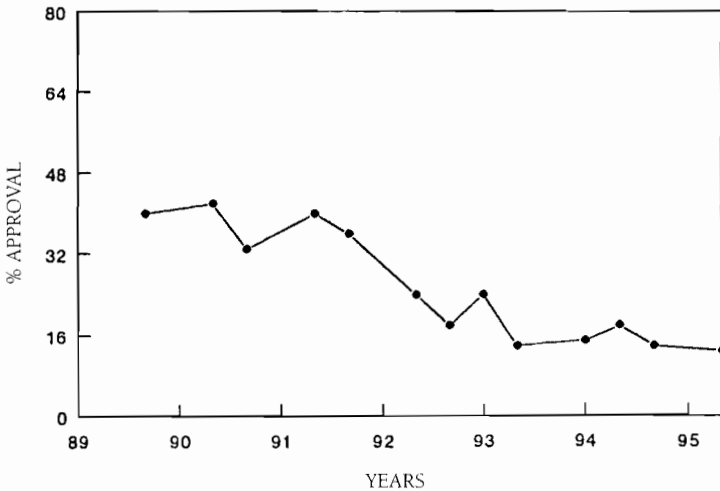


HONDURAS





NICARAGUA



downward, albeit with two important exceptions. One was the 1989-90 popularity peak coinciding with that year's presidential election; the other was the partial recovery of presidential popularity under President Calderón Fournier that lasted into 1994. In the current administration popularity resumed its downward course. In the March 1995 survey, only 18 percent of those surveyed approved of President Figueres' performance.

By contrast, presidential popularity rose modestly but steadily during the middle of the period in El Salvador (1988-94) and Honduras (1989-93). In the last two years of surveys, however, approval ratings in both countries fell precipitously, by about two-thirds, from over 45 percent to around 15 percent. Finally, Guatemala shows increasingly wide swings in presidential popularity, with peaks and bottoms alternating every one to two years. In sum, in Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, the general tendency has been for presidential popularity to decline over time while in El Salvador and Honduras it was just the opposite, although in the last two years in the series they, too, saw approval ratings plummet to the level of their neighbors.

We set out to test the following hypotheses. First, in keeping with findings in North America and Europe, we expected APPROVE to vary inversely with inflation and unemployment and directly with economic growth. In other words, we hypothesized that the higher the rates of inflation or unemployment, the lower the president's popularity and, conversely, the faster the economy grows in real terms per capita, the higher the president's approval rating.

Several caveats about the economic data, however, are in order. First, although inflation, measured as the percent change in consumer prices, is available on a monthly basis, only annual values of real per capita GDP growth and unemployment are available. (Data on inflation and economic growth are taken from the International Monetary Fund and on inflation from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean—see references.) Thus, for growth and unemployment, each *year's* value was correlated with every polling observation made during the same year. Second, the unemployment rate does not mean the same thing in all countries. Only in Honduras is unemployment measured as a nationwide rate. In Costa Rica and El Salvador unemployment is measured as the national urban rate; in Guatemala and Nicaragua, as the capital city rate of unemployment. Moreover, at the time the analysis was conducted data for this variable were available only through 1994. Also, there were additional missing values for unemployment in several countries during the early part of the data series, and for Nicaragua on inflation in 1993 and 1994. Thus, our third caveat is that not all observations on presidential popularity are fitted into our models. Still, the usable data set encompasses over 100 observations, including recent ones showing a collapse of presidential popularity in El Salvador and Honduras.

Second, we hypothesized a positive correlation between APPROVE and a variable we call CYCLE. It has been shown that, in the United States, *ceteris paribus*, presidential popularity is cyclical. It starts high early in the presidential term, during a fleeting honeymoon period, after which it declines steadily, only recovering, if at all, and then only partially, during the last year or so, as the new presidential campaign gets underway (Brace and Hinckley 1991: 1004). In this paper, CYCLE is a binary (dummy) variable which takes a value of 1 in the first two and the last two surveys taken respectively in the first and last year of an administration, and 0 in all others.

Finally, we sought to find out if there is any relation between presidential popularity and his or her party or party coalition's position on a hypothesized left-right ideological spectrum. Thus, we created PARTY, a (mostly) binary (dummy) variable that takes the value of -1 if the president's party is ideologically left or left-of-center, 1 if right or right-of-center, and 0 if ambiguous (only in Guatemala during the interim presidency of León Carpio). In some cases, e.g., Nicaragua's Sandinistas and El Salvador's ARENA, the ideological coloration of the president's party is easy to discern. In other cases, locating the ideological center of the party is debatable, e.g., the Liberal party in Honduras. Furthermore, a binary variable does not make fine distinctions along an ideological continuum, e.g., Nicaragua's Sandinistas and Costa Rica's National Liberation party are both scored -1, even though the former is farther to the left than the latter. An additional complication is that, even where the

party can be plausibly characterized ideologically, the label may not fit a particular president very well. (And, as we shall see, president trumps party.)

Nevertheless, we made what seemed to us to be the most plausible characterization of the historic position of the president's party relative to its *domestic* rivals. Classified as left-of-center are the Christian Democrats in both Guatemala and El Salvador, Nicaragua's Sandinistas, Honduras' Liberal party, and Costa Rica's National Liberation party. Classified as right-of-center are all other of Guatemala's winning parties or coalitions (except, as previously mentioned, for interim President Carpio, who was coded "0," the only administration so classified), as well as El Salvador's ARENA, the National party of Honduras, and Costa Rica's Social Christian Unity party. Incidentally, we had no a priori expectations about the relation between PARTY and APPROVE. We simply wanted to find out whether a president's popularity is at all related to the presumed ideological coloration of his or her party, and if so in what direction.

### RESULTS

We set out to estimate the following general model, first in a pooled data set (with country dummies added) and in each of the three countries contributing the most observations (Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Honduras):

$$\text{APPROVE} = a + b_1 \text{GROWTH} + b_2 \text{INFLATION} + b_3 \text{UNEMPLOYMENT} \\ + b_4 (\text{CYCLE}) + b_5 (\text{PARTY}) + e$$

The results (not shown—see below) were mixed. In the pooled data set, as well as in Costa Rica, GROWTH had a positive effect on APPROVE. Inflation, on the other hand, had no statistically significant impact except in Honduras, where it was negative. Unemployment had no statistically significant effect in any of the models. CYCLE was positively related to APPROVE in the pooled data set and in El Salvador. Finally, in the pooled data set and in Costa Rica, PARTY was negatively related to APPROVE, but in Honduras the reverse was true. No other relationship was statistically significant at the .05 level. The adjusted R sq. ranged from a low of .31 in the pooled data set to a high of 0.60 in the Costa Rica model.

The initial models had to be discarded, however. In El Salvador and Honduras the models met the Ordinary Least Squares general assumptions, i.e., neither collinearity nor autocorrelation was present. However, although there was no collinearity, the OLS models for both Costa Rica and the pooled data set showed positive first-order autocorrelation ( $r = .22$  and  $.35$ , respectively, both being significant—via the Durbin-Watson test—at the .05 level). Positive first-order autocorrelation is often a sign of specification error, i.e., that a relevant independent variable has been excluded. We suspected that the missing

variable in both models was to be found in Costa Rica, since this country contributes roughly half of the observations to the pooled data set. A printout of the model residuals for this country showed an apparent relation with presidential terms. Accordingly, in both models PRESIDENT dummies were entered to control for the effects of five chief executives covered by the study: Carazo, Monge, Arias, Calderón-Fournier, and Figueres. As a result, the autocorrelation disappeared in both models ( $r = .08$  Costa Rica and  $r = .11$  in the pooled data set, both being statistically insignificant). Furthermore, in the presence of PRESIDENT dummies, the effect of PARTY was no longer statistically significant. Consequently, equivalent dummy variables were introduced in El Salvador and Honduras to control for the effects of three presidents in each country. However, in these two countries it was not possible to retain PARTY in the models, as PARTY turned out to be a linear combination of the dummy variables for PRESIDENT.

The final, much improved models are shown in Table 1. GROWTH and UNEMPLOYMENT have the hypothesized effect in at least one of the models: the former in the pooled data set, the latter in Costa Rica and El Salvador. This does not necessarily mean that UNEMPLOYMENT is unrelated to presidential approval in the pooled data set or GROWTH in the Costa Rica and El Salvador models. It is only that, these measures being to some extent the inverse of the other (generally, unemployment falls in a growing economy), GROWTH is a better predictor than UNEMPLOYMENT in the first while the reverse is true in the other two models. Only in Honduras is presidential popularity apparently immune from these effects.

Ironically, though, it is in Honduras, and only here, that INFLATION has the expected negative impact on presidential popularity. In no other model does the rise in the general level of consumer prices produce a statistically significant effect on public approval of the president. The lack of an INFLATION effect in all but the Honduran models is puzzling, and contradicts our previous finding about Costa Rica (Cuzán and Bundrick 1991). It is consistent, however, with Gasiorowski and Power's observation that in the 1980s, in contrast to the 1970s, inflation played no role in democratic consolidation in the Third World (1996: 26). Perhaps in these parts, inflation, which at times has been very high, has lost some, although (as per Honduras) not all of its political punch. Although we have no hard evidence in this regard, we wonder whether, as the brisk trading in dollars that is observable in the streets of San José suggests, there has been an increase in the "dollarization" of these economies, which in turn may have taken the political wind out of the sails of inflation.

Turning to the political influences on presidential popularity, CYCLE has the expected effect in all models except in Honduras (where the sign of the

≡ TABLE I  
 OLS REGRESSION ESTIMATES OF PRESIDENTIAL POPULARITY IN CENTRAL AMERICA  
 (T-STATISTICS IN PARENTHESES)

	All countries	Costa Rica	El Salvador	Honduras
INTERCEPT	37.83 (3.74)	41.40 (4.78)	37.29 (3.05)	28.34 (3.48)
GROWTH	1.51** (4.99)	0.78 (1.39)	1.17 (1.99)	-0.39 (-0.42)
INFLATION	0.00 (0.81)	-0.05 (-0.36)	0.13 (0.54)	-0.49* (-2.62)
UNEMPLOY	-0.49 (-0.91)	-3.31* (-2.06)	-3.53* (-2.14)	-0.09 (-0.09)
CYCLE	6.45** (3.24)	8.66** (2.73)	12.99** (4.77)	3.96 (1.32)
PARTY	2.37 (1.65)	+47 1.19		
DUMMY_CR	-8.39 (-0.75)			
DUMMY_ES	-5.18 (-0.76)			
DUMMY_GT	-1.43 (-0.18)			
DUMMY_HO	1.38 (0.20)			
PRESIDENT_1	-8.16 (-0.98)	-5.25 (-0.97)	13.76 (1.87)	13.37 (1.75)
PRESIDENT_2	22.19** (2.99)	31.47** (3.60)	20.36** (3.32)	21.72** (3.87)
PRESIDENT_3	24.71** (3.46)	29.76** (3.91)		
PRESIDENT_4	-0.08 (-0.01)	8.94 (1.19)		
Adj. R sq.	0.55	0.71	0.65	0.64
N	109	49	20	23

NOTE: The president dummies are numbered consecutively, from the first to the penultimate president in the data series, the last president being a residual category. In Costa Rica, the presidents are: Carazo, Monge, Arias, Calderón-Fournier, and Figueres; in El Salvador, Duarte, Cristiani, and Calderón-Sol; in Honduras, Azcona, Callejas, and Reina. In the pooled data set, the PRESIDENT dummies represent only the Costa Rican presidents. \*\* statistically significant at .01 level \* statistically significant at .05 level

relationship is positive but is not statistically significant). Thus, there appears to be some evidence that the cyclical nature of presidential popularity detected in the United States has a parallel in Central America. While the honey-

moon effect can be assumed to have the same causes in both regions, i.e., a willingness to give a new president the benefit of the doubt, the recovery phase of the cycle cannot be attributed to “hopes for the future . . . reinvoked by the campaign and reelection victory” (Brace and Hinckley 1991: 1006) because the immediate reelection of the *president* is prohibited, although the same rationale plausibly applies to his or her *party*’s campaign to reelect a successor. Perhaps, complementarily, there may be a farewell effect, with the public willing to forgive and forget the president’s failures and bid what many view as the symbol of the nation a fond good-bye.

Independent of economic and cyclical effects, some presidents stand head-and-shoulders above their peers in terms of public approval: Alberto Monge and Oscar Arias in Costa Rica, Alfredo Cristiani in El Salvador, and Rafael Callejas in Honduras. Monge and Arias, both of the left-of-center PLN, confronted with the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua, which Costa Ricans viewed with alarm, dealt differently with it. The former quietly collaborated with U.S. efforts to assist the *Contras* while the latter struck out independently with diplomatic initiatives culminating in the Central American peace plan which earned him a Nobel prize. Since both men were held in relatively high public esteem, it appears that Costa Ricans were willing to support their president as long as he was doing something to deal with the perceived Sandinista threat. In El Salvador, Cristiani, the first president elected by the right-of-center ARENA party, pursued the war against the FMLN, repulsing a guerrilla offensive on the capital city, even as he negotiated to bring the fighting to an end. Under Cristiani, the warring sides agreed to a U.N.-brokered peace agreement, the FMLN joined the political process, and the Salvadoran military was purged of some of its worst elements.

Viewed in this light, it is tempting to speculate that the relative popularity of these three presidents had something to do with how they rose to the domestic and international challenges posed by offshoots of the Cold War which sprang up in Central America during the 1980s. The same cannot be said of Callejas, of the right-of-center National party in Honduras, whose term began in 1990, after the crisis had passed. Perhaps, however, he was the beneficiary of the easing of tensions and renewed attempts at Central American integration which followed. In any case, we defer to country and area specialists to unlock the secrets of the relative success of these four presidents.

Coincidentally, in Costa Rica the two most popular presidents were of the left-of-center PLN, and in El Salvador and Honduras the most successful president belonged to the right-of-center party of his country, ARENA and PN, respectively. It is this association that accounts for the correlation between PARTY and APPROVE in the initial model which, as we noted, had to be discarded. In fact, president trumps party, which means that Central Ameri-

cans are discriminating in their evaluations, holding the president accountable for success or failure regardless of party. The dismal approval ratings of PLN's Figueres in Costa Rica and ARENA's Calderón-Sol in El Salvador are cases in point.

The goodness of fit of the models varies across data sets. In Costa Rica, the adjusted R sq. is .70, i.e., within range of that obtained in models of presidential popularity in the United States (see, e.g., Brace and Hinckley 1991: 1002-06). In El Salvador and Honduras, a respectable two-thirds of the variability in presidential popularity is accounted for. The fit is lowest in the pooled data set (R sq. = .55) but in the neighborhood of what comparable models using cross-national pooled time-series election data have obtained (e.g., Pacek and Radcliff 1995: 752). In short, the models fit the data rather well.

### CONCLUSION

This article has shown that, within-region differences notwithstanding, the popularity of chief executives in Central America appears to be subject to the same kind of economic and political influences as in the United States. Invariably, wherever they reach statistical significance, economic growth has a positive and inflation and unemployment a negative effect on presidential approval ratings in Central America. And, as in the United States, presidential popularity exhibits a cyclical pattern, with the highest values obtained early and late in the presidential term. Thus, as tenuous and flawed as democracy is in Central America (except in Costa Rica, where it is of long standing), despite the area's relative underdevelopment, and even in the midst of civil war or international crisis, with all the passions which such events unleash, the publics of this region appear to grade their chief executives according to the same criteria employed by voters in the developed democracies of North America and Europe. When it comes to rating presidents, economics matters to Central Americans, too.

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