

## Transitions to captured democracy: The 1998 Costa Rican election as a critical juncture

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### Abstract

While Costa Rica has retained democratic stability, it has transitioned from high-turnout bipartidism to lower participation within a multi-party system. This paper analyzes the transformative 1994-1998 legislature, its antecedents, and its consequences. It, therefore, explores a political watershed where electoral participation falls dramatically under a stable party system with no authoritarian transition, labelled here captured democracy. Methodologically, this work performed qualitative coding of media sources to trace how focusing events changed the national political context. Finally, it shows how the simultaneous weakening of the main parties Unidad and Liberación, a bipartisan pact, and several corruption scandals transformed Costa Rican democracy. *Keywords:* Party politics, voter turnout, democracy, participation, Costa Rica.

Resumen: Transiciones a una democracia cautiva: Las elecciones en Costa Rica de 1998 como coyuntura crítica

Aunque Costa Rica ha conservado la estabilidad democrática, ha pasado de un bipartidismo de alta participación a una participación menor dentro de un sistema multipartidista. Este artículo analiza la transformadora legislatura de 1994-1998, sus antecedentes y sus consecuencias. Explora, por tanto, una línea divisoria de aguas políticas en la que la participación electoral cayó drásticamente bajo un sistema de partidos estable y sin transición autoritaria, etiquetado aquí como democracia cautiva. Metodológicamente, este trabajo realiza una codificación cualitativa de las fuentes de los medios de comunicación para rastrear cómo centrándose en los acontecimientos cambia el contexto político nacional. Finalmente, se muestra cómo el debilitamiento simultáneo de los principales partidos Unidad y Liberación, un pacto bipartidista y varios escándalos de corrupción transformaron la democracia costarricense. *Palabras clave:* Política partidista, participación electoral, democracia, participación, Costa Rica.

## Introduction

Costa Rica is routinely considered the most politically stable Latin American country. Since after the first democratic elections in 1953 the Central American republic had no authoritarian relapses, leaving its governments free to pursue state-led modernization. Costa Rica enjoyed political stability under proportional electoral rules with two-party alternation between 1978 and 2014. Yet, the quality of politics (and living) has slowly declined for the past 40 years and today Costa Ricans are not as proud of their democracy as they used to be. Although the party system never collapsed in the way that it did in Peru or Venezuela, already in 1998 some argued that Costa Rica was a captured democracy where power is in the hands of a small elite and any form of protest is labeled anti-democratic.<sup>1</sup> In that same year's election, voter turnout suddenly fell by 11 per cent, never to recover in subsequent elections.

Empirically, this paper uses the Costa Rican case to address the specific type of political transformation brought about by a dramatic fall in voter turnout in a stable party system. After the Cold War ended, Latin American democracies followed different trajectories in regard to their party system institutionalization and levels of electoral participation. By combining variations in these two elements, one can trace cases of party system collapse, full democratic consolidation, partial de-alignment, and finally, captured democracy. While the first three transformations have received attention from the literature, this was not the case for the fourth category. Methodologically, this work employs a qualitative analysis of political discourse to reconstruct the main national events in Costa Rica for the 1994-1998 period. This methodology is highly transferrable and was recently used in a broader comparative study of electoral revolutions. Operationally, this implied coding a massive media sample to capture how elements related to the majority, the opposition, and institutional credibility contributed to this massive fall in voter turnout under stable partisan arrangements. This paper argues that the aggregate effect of a series of events that took place in this period, discursively framed through the media, redirected the trajectory of Costa Rican politics. To situate this election as a political watershed it reconstructs the 1994-1998 period, its antecedents, and its most salient consequences. The introduction also provides brief accounts of parallel cases from neighboring countries.

The results offer an important assessment of transitions to a captive democracy, where democratic institutions survive under diminished credibility. This article argues that the devaluation of Costa Rican democracy owes to five generalizable elements: (1) a weak and divided parliamentary majority that betrayed campaign promises; (2) a weak opposition centered around a gray presidential candidate, and lacking popular third parties; (3) a major banking scandal involving both traditional parties (Raventós, 1995); (4) a government pact between the two major parties that decreased partisanship and polarization (Hernández Naranjo 1996); and (5) a constant stream of poorly handled corruption cases. As a consequence, voter turnout fell by 11 per cent in 1998 and would never recover,

as a stale bipartidism continued until 2016, even if extra-parliamentary politics gained legitimacy and new third parties enjoyed some success. Finally, the conclusion argues that the same approach could also be applied to address more dramatic political breakdowns such as those observed in Chile (2013), Colombia (1991), and Paraguay (2003).

Historical precedents and theoretical underpinnings

As a decade of global political transition, the 1990s changed the political equilibria of Latin American countries. A complex democratization process unfolded, often through the revitalization of pre-authoritarian parties, while average electoral participation decreased and street protests fell in intensity (Schatzman, 2005). Still, regional-level generalizations miss the varied patterns of party system consolidation and electoral participation, which profoundly affected each country’s subsequent political development. To show the importance of these two elements, table 1 assigns countries to four outcomes, combining participation and party institutionalization.

Table 1: Categorizing the political trajectories of Latin American and Caribbean democracies in 1990-2000

|      |          | Electoral participation   |   |
|------|----------|---|---|
|      |          | stable  | falling   |
| PSI* | increase | full democratic consolidation<br>(Uruguay, Panama, Chile...)      | captive democracy (Costa Rica,<br>Honduras, Jamaica, Barbados...) |
|      | decrease | partial de-alignment (Argentina,<br>Bolivia, Brasil, Trinidad...) | party system collapse (Venezuela,<br>Peru, Colombia, Guatemala)   |

\*Party system institutionalization

First, there were countries – Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru – where electoral participation fell and also saw the emergence of new populist parties during the 1990s. They have been given ample space in the literature as cases of party system collapse (Dietz & Myers, 2007; Morgan, 2011; Seawright, 2012; Roberts, 2014). In addition to the rise of powerful political outsiders such as Hugo Chavez and Alberto Fujimori, who actively contributed to dismantling the party system, these four countries also experienced a simultaneous rise in invalid voting linked to widespread dissatisfaction within the electorate (Cohen, 2018).

A second category is occupied by positive outliers, that is, 1990s democracies where voter turnout remained high during a process of party system consolidation (Schedler, 2001). Notice that this typology applies best to cases following a negotiated transition from authoritarianism, which in Chile resulted in two competing political coalitions, and in Uruguay in a three-party system after the 1994 election (Weinstein & Rebella, 2018). This process guaranteed equilibrium and consensus, and only recently the balance has broken in Chile. Third, one can

differentiate cases where there was no clear collapse of partisan representation, although programmatic brand dilution was common (Lupu, 2016). In some countries, voter turnout was relatively stable as democratic institutions consolidated, as in Argentina (Seligson, 2003) and Brazil, where variations were absorbed by invalid voting, under compulsory voting (Power & Roberts, 1995). In this category one of the main parties weakened, or there was a general fragmentation around two main parties, leading to a partial de-alignment (Carreras et al., 2014). Here turnout stability hinged upon the emergency of new successful major parties and the creation of broad government coalitions.

Last, a fourth group of countries, which followed a hybrid pattern, made of falling electoral participation under party system institutionalization, that is labeled here as captured democracy, “whereby democracy endures, but the elite are able to have a disproportionate effect on equilibrium economic institutions” (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2008). This type of transition happened in the two-party systems of Honduras, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua, and across the Caribbean Sea, in Jamaica and Barbados. In these countries, the main institutional actors were well-institutionalized and conserved power, but lost electoral support as the quality of democracy deteriorated and viable third-party options were absent. This paper focuses in which elements characterize these transitions to captured democracy.

Following the institutionalist literature, in this article the term critical juncture is used to capture the abrupt transformation of existing structures, resulting in path-dependent outcomes (Mahoney, 2000; Hogan & Doyle, 2007). The 1998 Costa Rican election marked a critical juncture for voters because while there was no party system collapse, electoral participation fell dramatically and never recovered. Costa Rica was chosen for its substantive importance as a consolidated democracy with a positive reputation, which also justified its inclusion in a recent cross-regional project on large turnout variations (Lioy, 2021). Even today, there is a striking difference between the expert coding of Costa Rica as the best Latin American democracy (V-Dem, 2020) and dramatically low levels of trust in political parties, at 12 per cent in *Latinobarometro* 2017. Without these elements, one might have lumped Costa Rica together with cases such as Uruguay and Chile. Yet, unlike some of their fellow Latin Americans, Ticos reacted apathetically to “hollowed out” post-Cold-War politics, after traditional cleavages lost relevance. This characteristic makes them more alike to Western European voters, which similarly diminished their electoral participation after a loss of party system differentiation (Mair, 2013).

Two quick comparisons with similar cases help characterize transitions to captured democracy. In Jamaica, voter turnout drastically fell – from 78.4 per cent in 1989 to 67.3 per cent in 1993 – within an institutionalized two-party system. Both main parties are still dominant, even if the country has since fallen into a spiral of violence for which politicians are partly responsible, having armed their supporters at multiple points in the country’s history. The 1993 election was a political watershed because PNP (People’s National Party) had

abandoned its previous Marxist influence, erasing political differentiation with conservative JLP (Jamaica Labour Party), but still maintained power with a landslide victory. The heavy toll of austerity policies and the government's constant quarrels with the IMF damaged political credibility (Payne, 1992). After failing in the previous two mandates, JLP had lost political support, so there was no viable opposition to the Manley government under plurality electoral rules.

Another pertinent parallel comes from Honduras, a country too often neglected by the comparative literature on parties and elections. Just like for Jamaica, 1993 was the watershed year where turnout fell by 11 per cent, after having already fallen by 8 per cent in the 1989 election. While the 1989 value can be ascribed to a physiological fall in the second election after democratization, the 1993 contest saw Carlos Roberto Reina's Liberal party easily defeat by 10 per cent the incumbent National party of president Callejas. The Liberal government was heavily contested through street demonstrations and workers' strikes during the 1989-1993 period because of the implementation of structural adjustments and the continued military influence in national politics (Zelaya & Ferrera, 2012). Both main parties would remain hegemonic and alternate in leading the country, with low levels of legitimacy and scarce electoral participation, until the coup against Manuel Zelaya in 2009 reconfigured national political equilibria.

As these examples have shown, participatory breakdown sometimes does not result in party system collapse, but in the creation of a captured democracy. Since the 1998 Costa Rican election was clearly a crisis of electoral participation, its theoretical framing draws from the voter turnout literature. Short-term turnout changes are seen as consequences of a changing individual or collective political context (Heath, 2007). For example, Aldrich et al. (2011) show how a changing personal context, such as moving houses, makes voting less likely. The same is true when the collective political context changes for all voters in the same direction, as was the case for several Latin American and Caribbean democracies during the 1990s.

Wessels and Schmitt (2008) divided electoral context into two dimensions relevant to voters' choice: The structure and differentiation of political supply (competition) and political institutions' effectiveness (credibility). This work applies this conceptualization to the individual level, since "repetition of voting does not indicate that a strong habit has been formed unless [...] done in a very similar context" (Aldrich et al., 2011). Under democracy, political parties are always in dialog, as a party system is a system of interactions between political parties (Sartori, 1976). Therefore, political competition can be conceptualized through mechanisms covering the parliamentary majority, the opposition, and their relationship. Competition is at its highest when the majority and the opposition are both strong and when they look more clearly differentiated from one another.

As for credibility, political institutions affect voter turnout through external efficacy, which captures institutions' perceived responsiveness to the electorate

(Dalton & Anderson, 2011). When politics shifts from being issue-focused to a “horse race”, groups that use voting as a positive marker will drop it from their collective identity (Anderson, 1998). Corruption, lacking efficacy, and dissatisfaction with political arrangements hurt credibility and depress electoral participation through the electorate. Conversely, turnout increases when people see institutions as representative, efficient, or transparent. Notice how comprehensive studies of corruption and turnout find that turnout is lower in high-corrupt countries, but that corruption perceptions matter more in low-corruption contexts to determine different voting behavior inside a population (Dahlberg & Solevid, 2016).

In sum, competition and credibility-related events should significantly alter the electoral context for all voters and should therefore have the power to break consolidated voting habits. Just like changing health, or location matter to a voter’s political context, so do shared transformations in national institutions and party systems. They result in fluctuations such as the dramatic participatory fall of 1998 Costa Rica, which has been analyzed comparatively in the study of dramatic changes in voter turnout from which this paper originates (see Liroy, 2021). The next two sections then trace the antecedents to the 1994-1998 legislature to provide a backdrop for this case study and then illustrate the conceptual and methodological approach.

### **Costa Rican politics before 1994**

This section frames national politics after two-party alternation began in 1978, arguing that the *status quo* resisted until 1998 due to Costa Rican ‘hyperdemocracy’, single-party majorities with real opposition, continued trust in the state, and international support. Regarding the Costa Rican ‘hyperdemocracy’, since the first democratic elections in 1953, Costa Ricans voted more than their neighbors, because a strong parliament and several nationally-respected political figures lent credibility to national elections. Protections against authoritarianism were solid, as the Constitution denied Presidential re-election after a term (lifted in 2005) and also Parliamentary re-election. This was inscribed in a strong egalitarian myth, as the poverty of colonial Costa Rica fed the idea that the *campesinos* and the bourgeoisie were relatively equal. Economically prominent within Central America, Costa Rica had large public welfare and state-owned enterprises which extended into the energy and banking sectors. Institutions had gained a reputation for transparency and modernity until the country defaulted financially in 1981 during Rodrigo Carazo’s center-right *Unidad* administration. Afterward, institutional credibility owed to Oscar Arias’ good Central American diplomacy and the elections of sons of respected former presidents: Calderón (PUSC, 1990) and Figueres (PLN, 1994).

Table 2: Mapping the argument

| Antecedents: Costa Rica between 1978 and 1994  |   |  |  |
|--|---|--|--|
| <b>Egalitarian myth</b><br>- poor colony<br>- economic development<br>- welfare state<br>- middle class creation<br>- national pride   | <b>Balanced bipartidism</b><br>- one-party majorities<br>- 1978: Carazo president<br>- 1981: PUSC foundation<br>- 1982-90: PLN majority<br>- 1990: Calderón wins  | <b>“Hyperdemocracy”</b><br>- high turnout (>80%)<br>- weak unions<br>- importance of party primaries<br>- Caudillos’ sons elected  | <b>International support</b><br>- cold War regional dynamics<br>- massive US aid   |
| 1994: Figueres ( <i>PLN</i> ) president, 81.1% turnout, <i>PLN</i> has 28 Congress seats (+1 <i>PUAC</i> )   |   |  |  |
| <b>Banco Anglo scandal</b><br>- Jun.94: huge losses<br>↓<br>- Sep.94 Figueres closure<br>↓<br>- corruption exposed<br>- intense media coverage<br>- <i>PLN</i> , <i>PUSC</i> both involved                           | <b>Bipartisan pact</b><br>- PAE III signed<br>- economic crisis<br>↓<br>- Apr.95: Figueres-Calderon pact<br>↓<br>- lack of policy results<br>- party bases’ opposition  | →<br>→<br>→<br>→   | <b>Early outcomes</b><br>- loss of credibility of public institutions<br>- loss of attachment to political parties<br>- loss of differentiation between parties  |
| <b>Weak majority (<i>PLN</i>)</b><br>- Dec.94 bad economy<br>↓<br>- May.95 pact disapproval<br>↓<br>- 96 Corrales opposition<br>- no internal democracy<br>- Jul.97 primaries scandal<br>↓<br>- Nov.97 weak campaign | <b>Weak opp. (<i>PUSC</i>)</b><br>- 94 BAC involvement<br>↓<br>- Fishman complaints<br>↓<br>- Rodriguez blunders<br>- internal infighting<br>↓<br>- still level with <i>PLN</i> in July 1997<br>- slight final recovery | ↓<br>↓<br>↓↓   | <b>Credibility/scandals</b><br>- 94 BAC, Banco Nacional, violation of Venezuelans’ habeas corpus...<br>- 1995 wave of strikes (Puntarenas, Limon, ICE)-<br>-96/7 Israel weapons, <del>Controlador</del> deuda política, Villalobos, MOPT, BICSA... |
| 1994: Rodriguez ( <i>PUSC</i> ) president, 70% turnout, no Congress majority (27 for <i>PUSC</i> )   |   |  |  |
| Aftermath: Costa Rica between 1998 and 2014  |   |  |  |
| <b>Low turnout</b><br>- never over 70% again<br>- disillusioned electorate<br>- does not recover even for <i>CAFTA</i> referendum  | <b>No Congress Majority</b><br>- lame duck Presidents<br>- weak alternation <i>PLN/PUSC</i><br>- third party strength for <i>PAC</i> and <i>ML</i>  | <b>Centrist <i>PLN</i></b><br>- <i>PAC</i> created to its left<br>- internal victory of Arias and Chinchilla<br>- alignment with <i>IMF</i> - strongly pro- <i>CAFTA</i> | <b>Public protests</b><br>- opposition moves outside of party system<br>- legitimate, positive media<br>- no- <i>CAFTA</i> grassroots’ campaign  |

Costa Rican democracy developed as a strong two-party system in 1978. At center-left *PLN* (*Partido Liberación Nacional*) explicitly put state intervention in its ideological charter, while rejecting Marxism. Its main conservative rival *PUSC* (*Partido Unidad Social Cristiana*) had coalesced several Christian-democratic organizations to win the presidency in 1978 with Carazo. After two terms

for PLN (1982-1990) under Luis Alberto Monge and Oscar Ariás, PUSC returned to office under Rafael Ángel Calderón. Although both parties had embraced neoliberalism during the 1980s, *Liberación* remained still verbally committed to social policy in the 1994 campaign. Differentiation also came from parties' positioning towards lending institutions, as outgoing President Calderón supported a new structural adjustment plan, while Figueres opposed it. Differentiation also depended upon voters' strong affiliations to either party. Last, bipartidism meant weak third parties, as in 1994 lone MPs came from regional parties PUAC (*Partido Unión Agraria Cartaginense*) and PAN (*Partido Agrario Nacional*) and social-democratic *Fuerza Democrática* held 2 seats. Finally, surviving Marxist party (*Vanguardia Popular*) had lost its only seat and the weak workers' unions were subordinate to parties.

Policy-wise, Calderón had sought to slowly rationalize the government sector. Important steps were taken in the energy and insurance sectors (Zúñiga, 1995). As he left office, Calderón's achievements reflected his priorities: Success against inflation and deficit together with growing private investments; shortcomings in healthcare, education, and stagnant wages. During the 1994 campaign, PUSC proposed aggressive privatizations, including telephone and electricity monopolies (Lehoucq, 1995). Despite the three previous administrations' public sector cuts, Costa Ricans still relied upon and trusted their state apparatus in 1994, when opinion polls still measured support for national institutions as high (Booth, 1998).

Costa Rica's international status placed it as a positive regional outlier. Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 increased aid to the country in exchange for support in fighting Communism. Public finance default under the Carazo presidency (1978-1982) made the country eager to remain a responsible international ally and switched the country's support in the Nicaraguan civil war away from the *Sandinistas*. Overall, Costa Rican governments enjoyed international support regardless of which party would win the following election, which brought stability.

## Methodology and empirical model

This work's methodology – coming from the larger comparative project detailed in Lioy (2021) – is a qualitative coding of large media samples. It collects discourse related to the majority, the opposition, and national institutions and tests for the presence of consistently positive or negative trends. Conceptually, this work maintains that dramatic changes in voters' behavior depend upon rapid changes in the national perceptions of political credibility and competition. Media reports of national-scale events can alter such collective perceptions since they are “sequences of occurrences that result in the transformation of structures” (Sewell, 1996).

A single report of some occurrence is negligible, as isolated positive and negative commentaries get easily explained away, but *salient* events have



persistence and coherence to alter discourse. Alimi and Maney (2018) similarly characterized *focusing events* while *critical events* are generative of shifts in electoral prospects (Diermeyer & Stevenson, 2000). Once mostly happening behind closed doors, internal political debate is now publicly constituted and communicated through text and talk (Shenhav & Sheaffer, 2008). Imagine a contentious party convention or a scandal that becomes discursively framed in a negative way. Consider what happens if such an event lingers in public opinion for weeks, triggers a fight in the party leadership, or occurs right before nationwide municipal elections. Then it may damage a party's electoral efficacy, hurt its membership base, divide its parliamentary *fraction*, and alienate donors, among others. All very concrete consequences that transcend mere discourse.

The sample included 4,760 newspaper articles with political content collected in the *Biblioteca Nacional* of San José, spanning the two elections of 6 February 1994 and 1 February 1998. Under democracy the national media follows politics, shaping political information for voters (Matsubayashi & Wu, 2012). Research shows that even so-called *campaign deciders* are attentive to political information (Dalton, 2006), and all information presented between two elections affects collective turnout decisions. In Costa Rica, the country's leading newspaper *La Nación* was a fundamental source of political information all through the 1990s (Rodríguez Molina, 1998) and had been criticized by left-wing unions and organizations in the 1980s for being too close to the oligarchic power groups behind the two main parties (Soto Acosta, 1986).

For this work, adopting a qualitative codebook guarantees homogeneity, to check each sampled article for a positive or negative mechanism related to credibility or competition, drawing from previous work on Congressional testimonies (Birkland, 1998). Including non-salient material preserves the contradicting signals that voters experience (Shaw, 1999). Finally using single articles as observations presents political discourse without ex-post reinterpretations, and daily newspapers cannot foresee events, including the upcoming election's turnout and winners.

Table 3 shows a simplified codebook for all mechanisms, divided among (1) the majority; (2) the opposition; (3) party system polarization and, (4) institutional credibility. When an article reflects a certain mechanism positively or negatively, it receives its coding. Otherwise, it remains uncoded. An article coded with a (+) for a certain mechanism adds 1 point to its counter. For example, an article showing a united opposition increases the counter for the opposition. The assignment of a (−) code, subtracts 1 point from that mechanism's counter. Proceeding chronologically, the counter for a mechanism receiving more positive than negative coding increases, otherwise it decreases

Table 3: Simplified codebook for all mechanisms under study

| code | mechanism*                   | impact**<br>on turnout<br>[hypothesis] | topics of articles where this<br>discursive mechanism can<br>be found                                | examples*** of key words<br>and reported behaviors   |
|------|------------------------------|--|--|--|
| 1α   | cohesion of majority         | +                                      | the parliamentary majority, the parties that compose it, the executive, the president...             | unity/division, criticism/praise or (dis)approval from within  |
| 1β   | strength of majority         | +                                      |  | strong/weak, winning/losing, good/bad polling  |
| 1γ   | majority economic record     | +                                      |  | good/bad, improving/worsening attributed to current govt   |
| 1δ   | anti-government protests     | -                                      |  | grievances, unaddressed issues   |
| 1ε   | authoritarian majority       | +                                      |  | control, authoritarianism  |
| 2α   | cohesion of opposition       | +                                      | the parliamentary opposition, any parties or candidates that are not currently in government         | unity/division, criticism/praise or (dis)approval from within  |
| 2β   | strength of opposition       | +                                      |  | strong/weak, winning/losing, good/bad polling  |
| 2γ   | opposition-led protests      | +                                      |  | politicians participation in social movements  |
| 2δ   | pro-opposition reforms       | +                                      |  | policy with specific benefits  |
| 3α   | ideological polarization     | +                                      | articles about political parties and their platforms   | same/different, original/predictable   |
| 3β   | policy-based polarization    | +                                      |  |  |
| 4α   | policy evaluation            | +                                      | policy measures, creation of new institutions  | solutions (or lack of) to current issues of the population   |
| 4β   | party-led grievances         | -                                      | the parliamentary opposition (see 2αβγδ)   | grievances/end of grievances, unaddressed issues, activism, rallies, participation outside of party system |
| 4γ   | public protests              | -                                      | trade unions, workers' strikes, social movements   |  |
| 4δ   | state of the economy         | +                                      | national economy, public debt, inflation, unemployment...  | good/bad, improving/worsening, stagnant/buoying  |
| 4ε   | opinion of pol. institutions | +                                      | the Parliament, politicians at large, corruption scandals, public administration, public agencies... | approval/disapproval, support  |
| 4η   | participatory reforms        | +                                      |  | democracy/authoritarianism, accessibility of politics  |

NOTES  
\*all mechanisms can be coded positively or negatively, with no exclusions  
\*\* if the hypothesis of a mechanism's impact on turnout is a (+), it means that when the coding is applied positively it should increase turnout (stronger opposition, more polarization, better policy, better economy, credible institutions). The contrary is true for mechanisms that have a (-), as a stronger majority, public protests and continued grievances are supposed to depress turnout.

Operationally, the 1994-1998 legislature was divided in 40 periods. *Salient* events are marked when the difference between positively and negatively coded articles for a mechanism exceeds 1/10 of all articles in a period. Following figures 1-2-3 represent the main events and trends for the majority, opposition and

national institutions. Coefficients are a percentage of all articles with political content.

### **Breakdown: the 1994-1998 events**

Five elements, detailed in the following subsections, led to the dramatic fall of voter participation in the 1998 Costa Rican election by simultaneously damaging credibility and competition. Their impact is visible in Figures 1-2-3, where each article can move the line upwards, downwards, or keep it steady, according to its coding. First, the *Banco AngloCostarricense* (BAC) scandal undermined institutional credibility, made the parties look corrupt, and devalued competition. Second, the Figueres-Calderón pact erased ideological differentiation and internally divided both parties without increasing credibility. This collaboration resulted in the bipartisan elite group that would rule the country for the next 20 years. Third, the *Liberación* majority became irreparably divided, as its leadership disregarded activists and the 1998 presidential candidate came from the internal opposition. Fourth, within the opposition, a weak *Unidad* had a blundering presidential candidate who lacked enthusiasm, while third parties were irrelevant. Last, the continuous occurrence of corruption and mismanagement scandals shattered institutional credibility.

#### *The Banco Anglo Costarricense scandal*

A massive scandal around mismanagement in public *Banco Anglo Costarricense* exploded unexpectedly in June 1994. The crux was in several risky BAC purchases of foreign bonds, which resulted in losses of around 10B *colones*.<sup>2</sup> Rumors of public intervention to stop losses – which would have made taxpayers cover for politicians' mistakes – began only three months into the new presidency, in June 1994.<sup>3</sup> In August, it emerged that BAC directors had known of risky operations since 1992 and an unauthorized intermediary had sold the bonds.<sup>4</sup> Avoiding a bailout, on September 14 the government announced BAC's closure, signaling that crimes would be punished.<sup>5</sup> Its proclamation on Independence Day (Raventós, 1995) created some short-lived momentum, as the public and the press approved.<sup>6</sup> Yet, this decision left many unemployed and destroyed the credibility of public finance. In addition, the main parties' proven involvement made them look corrupt. For PLN, in the 1980s President Figueres had partnered with the López brothers, who had sold risky Venezuelan public bonds to *Banco Anglo*.<sup>7</sup> For PUSC, the Calderón administration had known about BAC's issues for months, having nominated all the managers that went to trial. Media coverage was fierce and sensationalistic (Raventós, 1995) and highly damaged perceptions of honesty in the public sector.

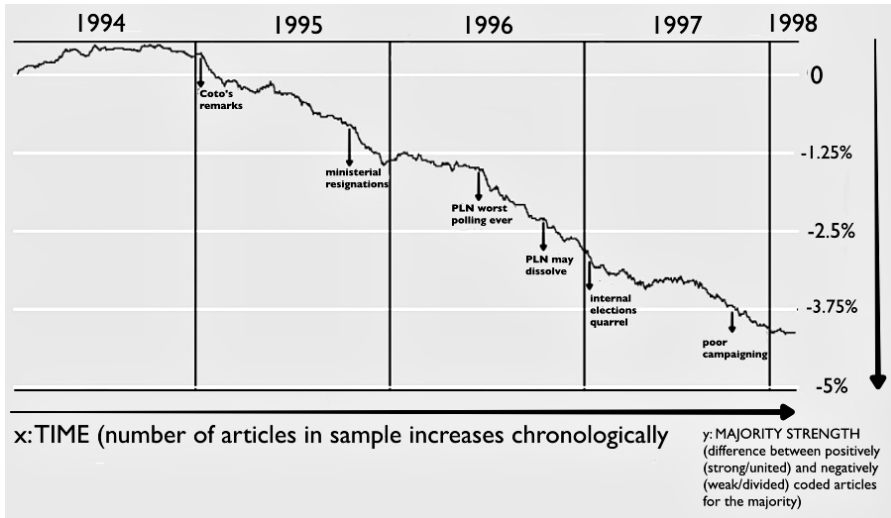
### *The Figueres-Calderón pact*

After having fought about neoliberal adjustments during the campaign, the two main parties started collaborating on a third *Structural Adjustment Plan* (PAE III) in September 1994,<sup>8</sup> with the media reporting that PLN was going to betray its electorate. On February 25, 1995, the IMF extended a credit line, but then the World Bank rejected the plan for PAE III the next week.<sup>9</sup> A weak majority then faced negative economic projections, including 19 per cent inflation. Consequently, on April 29 the government signed a governing pact – or a *deal with the devil* – with PUSC,<sup>10</sup> a historical compromise that aimed at economic development.<sup>11</sup> On May 1, President Figueres apologized for his inability to steer an ungovernable country, an unequivocal signal of weakness.<sup>12</sup> Since Costa Rica had no coalition history, the electorate saw it with suspicion, since the process had lacked internal democracy. A mid-May commentary found baffling that the two parties that a year prior accused each other of incarnating “the neoliberal ogre” and “foul-mouthed, arbitrary militarism” would govern together.<sup>13</sup> An initially uncertain public opinion soon turned to disapprove the pact. Unfortunately, policymaking remained problematic under co-government, while the national ideological field collapsed under foreign pressure for cuts, showing the emptiness of campaign boasting.<sup>14</sup> As for competition, instead of empowering the opposition, the pact made it co-responsible for a bad economy, as Costa Ricans saw PUSC as an accomplice.<sup>15</sup> In August 1995, the pact also divided third-party *Fuerza Democrática*, when parliamentary leader Gerardo Trejos was expelled for voting for the bipartisan tax package against his leadership<sup>16</sup> (see Figure 2) and fellow MP Rodrigo Gutiérrez quit soon after.<sup>17</sup>

### *PLN's internal crisis*

The following paragraphs show how the majority became weak and divided during the 1994-1998 period. *Liberación* had long been in turmoil. Arias' adoption of neoliberal policies had threatened the party's pro-state leaning and the 1990 electoral loss divided the party. A modernist pro-business current took over after the 1992 Convention, led by José María Figueres Olsen, the party founder's son. Figueres won the 1994 party primaries, but neither of his rivals – Marguerita Peñón and Jorge Miguel Corrales – endorsed him. He was elected President on February 6, 1994 with a mere 1.9 per cent margin, and PLN also came first by 4.2 per cent, gaining 28 Congress seats. To avoid a minority in the 57-member Congress, Juan “Cachimbal” Brenes of *Partido Unión Agrícola Cartaginés* (PUAC)<sup>18</sup> joined the majority in May, in exchange for agricultural investments.

Figure 1: Competition, sum of majority mechanisms in Costa Rica (1994-1998)



As Figure 1 shows, this fragile majority only had unity and stability in 1994, reaching the highest mark with the BAC closure in September. Its position already deteriorated when, in the autumn of 1994, the Congress negotiated a third Structural Adjustment Plan (PAE III), mockingly dubbed *PAE à la Tica*.<sup>19</sup> A warning from the strong internal opposition came in January 1995 when party secretary Walter Coto Molina publicly exposed the government's ruthless public sector cuts.<sup>20</sup> Opinion polls already judged the *Liberacionistas* very negatively,<sup>21</sup> leading to a March cabinet reshuffle.<sup>22</sup> Then on April 4, PLN announced it would open the party charter to privatization,<sup>23</sup> which exacerbated internal party divisions together with the May 1995 bipartisan pact. Following negative economic projections in the summer,<sup>24</sup> at the crowded September 15 Independence parade, a group of high school students confronted the president and kept insulting him until his security detail removed him.<sup>25</sup>

In 1996, José Manuel Corrales' power started growing within *Liberación*. His lifelong membership and anti-corruption reputation made him a credible Presidential candidate with anti-establishment credentials. Corrales' strategy of "convert[ing] himself into a candidate in opposition to the government party"<sup>26</sup> fostered internal divisions. While early polls showed a head-to-head between Rodríguez (PUSC) and Corrales,<sup>27</sup> only 26.8 per cent declared sympathy for PLN in May 1996, a 14 per cent year-on-year fall.<sup>28</sup> "A political cancer" was devouring PLN through pre-electoral infighting and poor leadership.<sup>29</sup> Another ongoing quarrel was the membership's request for open primaries, which the Figueres campaign had promised. The final straw came therefore in August when the party's *Asamblea Plenaria* confirmed a nomination-based system for Congressional candidates.<sup>30</sup> Chaos ensued as "never before a government had

contributed so much [...] to the being ashamed [...] of one's own party among hundreds of thousands of partisans".<sup>31</sup> In October the media predicted the splitting or disappearing of a PLN divided among party activists and its leaders.<sup>32</sup>

After presidential pick Carlos Castillo withdrew his pre-candidature in February, the remaining candidates Coto and Corrales belonged to the internal opposition. Participation was low in the June primaries, but Corrales won with a reassuring 73 per cent,<sup>33</sup> and a subsequent poll showed a huge recovery putting him at 29 per cent against 25 per cent for Rodríguez.<sup>34</sup> Then, on July 2 the Internal Tribunal for Elections (TEI) detected anomalies in PLN's internal election, invalidating 39 voting tables.<sup>35</sup> Corrales approved a repeat, stalling the process<sup>36</sup> until the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) cleared irregularities on August 18, officially making Corrales the PLN candidate<sup>37</sup>, but then also validated the indirect election of parliamentary candidates, dampening the grassroots' enthusiasm.<sup>38</sup> In November it became public that PLN was basically surrendering, as it scheduled only 35 campaign events, against PUSC's 67.<sup>39</sup> Appeals to unity went unheeded, and finally, split-ticket voting in 1998 gave Corrales a respectable loss with 44.6 per cent, while PLN had its worst electoral performance ever at 34.8 per cent.

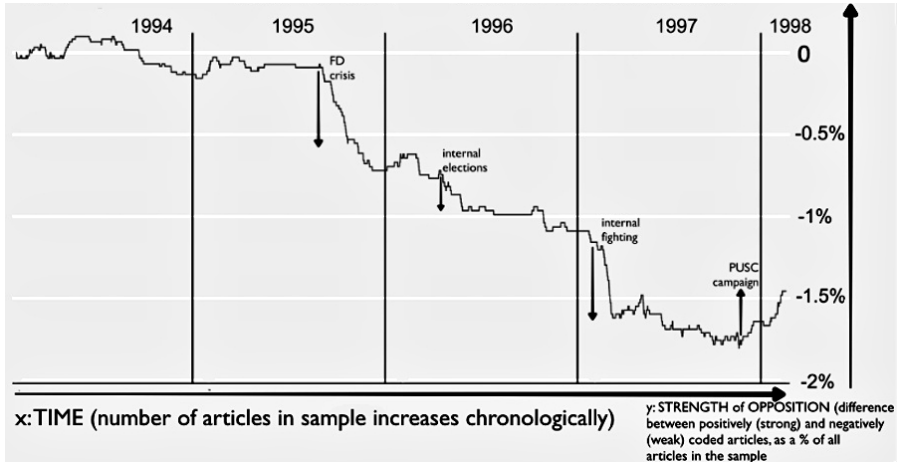
### *PUSC's simultaneous frailty*

After accounting for the majority's fall, it is important to offer a look at the opposition's parallel weakening. President Calderón had left,<sup>40</sup> satisfied with his accomplishments,<sup>41</sup> being approved by over half of Costa Ricans. Then the good performance (47.7 per cent) of PUSC's candidate Miguel Ángel Rodríguez in the 1994 election produced full two-party balance.<sup>42</sup> Yet, except for the final campaign period, the opposition-focused discourse was constantly negative. As the Figure 2 shows,<sup>43</sup> it turned negative in late 1994, before plummeting in 1995. Early on, the Banco Anglo Costarricense affair stained the outgoing administration's image. Calderón denied involvement in the bank's decisions, but admitted to knowing in 1993 about catastrophic investments, as he had nominated the managers under investigation.<sup>44</sup> Within weeks, it also became known that BAC loans had funded PUSC's campaign in 1993.<sup>45</sup>

In 1995 an internal fight around the election of a new secretary erupted.<sup>46</sup> Meanwhile, Rodríguez sought compromise with PLN as a *de facto* leader,<sup>47</sup> while the internal oppositions wanted a leadership reset.<sup>48</sup> Then the pact with Figueres negatively impacted the party, feeding internal divisions. In September, the party was accused of having voted tax raises with the government in exchange for subsidies to Rodríguez's cattle ranches.<sup>49</sup> Rodríguez denied a new national livestock fund (Fonagan) was meant to help him.<sup>50</sup> Then 1996 started with a rapprochement between Fishman and Rodríguez,<sup>51</sup> who had become the *de facto* 1998 candidate. By June, Rodríguez was forecast at 38 per cent, 9 points over Corrales.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, PUSC's media coverage remained negative, and participation in internal district elections was low.<sup>53</sup> Rodríguez tried

policymaking in March by proposing a high-level commission for a phone-taping scandal,<sup>54</sup> but, unsupported, he had to withdraw it and shamefully admit his *faux pas*. Many worried about him replicating the power concentration seen under Calderón.<sup>55</sup> The leadership blundered again in October, when it expressed concern over the country's finances, which was considered irresponsible under co-government.<sup>56</sup> Last, when bipartisan support elected Sandra Piskz as *Defensor de los Habitantes* (ombudsman), many denounced it as a secret deal with PLN.<sup>57</sup>

Figure 2: Competition, sum of all opposition mechanisms in Costa Rica (1994-1998)

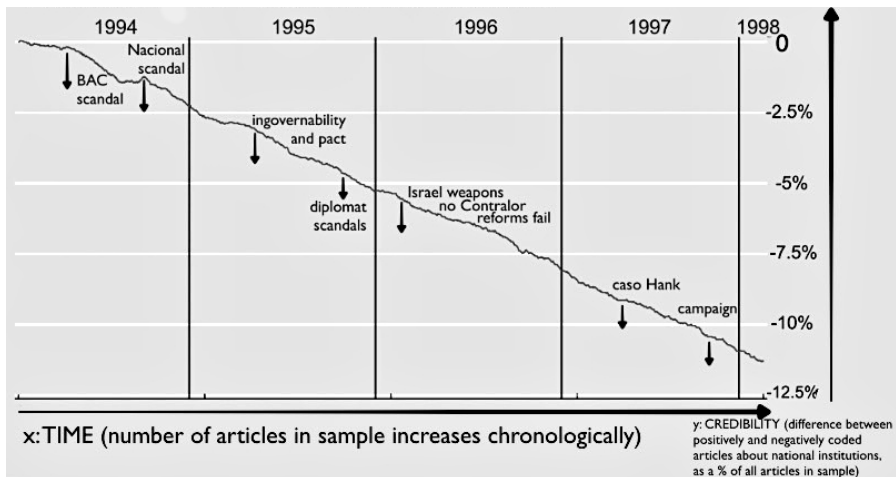


By February 1997 PUSC's advantage shrunk to 4 per cent,<sup>58</sup> and the majority claimed it had peaked.<sup>59</sup> This precluded to local primaries for PUSC parliamentary candidatures characterized by verbal and physical attacks among aspirants.<sup>60</sup> Afterward, the minor currents made divisive allegations that *calderonistas* and *rodriguistas* had established quotas to preserve their chances.<sup>61</sup> In general, PUSC needed more enthusiasm and while Rodríguez was competent and entrepreneurial,<sup>62</sup> he lacked charisma and seemed afraid of losing.<sup>63</sup> After losing May's municipal elections, party leaders fired their campaign managers. Subsequent polls brought Rodríguez's advantage to 9 per cent over Corrales, but on May 24, 1997 newspapers reported a *rendezvous* in Toluca, Mexico between him and Carlos Hank.<sup>64</sup> A former Mexican Minister, Hank was under investigation by the U.S. government over alleged money laundering. Corrales attacked his rival and Rodríguez clumsily apologized.<sup>65</sup> After the scandal, a July poll was too close to call.<sup>66</sup> Still, in summer the majority became so weak that PUSC regained a double-digit advantage in October and maintained it in the largely uneventful pre-electoral period. The nomination of two female vice-presidential candidates was also positively received.<sup>67</sup> Ultimately, the pact, bitter internal divisions, and the *caso* Hank led to abstention in an electorate forced to choose a weak opposition over a weaker government.

### Never-ending political scandals

As Figure 3 highlights,<sup>68</sup> political credibility fell constantly throughout the legislature. Initially, the BAC scandal negatively oriented the discourse, then continued evidence of public corruption and mismanagement continued the trend. After the BAC closure in September 1994, an investigation revealed that *Banco Nacional* (BN) had also lost over 1B *colones* conceding risky loans.<sup>69</sup> Four top BN managers were immediately suspended<sup>70</sup> and the case received prolonged coverage. November 1994 brought the revelation four alleged criminals of Venezuelan citizenship had been deported in the suspension of *habeas corpus*, without consulting the Supreme Court and with the Justice Ministry asking the OIJ (Judicial Investigation) deputy to deceive his superiors.<sup>71</sup> Weak explanations and executive opaqueness were seen as signs of institutional deterioration.<sup>72</sup>

Figure 3: Credibility of national institutions in Costa Rica



In 1995, discourse on institutions stayed negative after the deficit/GDP ratio rose to -7.1 per cent and interest rates over 30 per cent:<sup>73</sup> Costa Ricans complained in opinion polls. In a February survey, 69 per cent believed only some public servants to be honest, and a staggering 94 per cent thought the government gave little or no attention to citizens' opinions. A June Unimer survey estimated that 48 per cent of Costa Ricans felt politically disillusioned.<sup>74</sup> Several commentaries mentioned how lacking credibility was the issue hurting citizen participation.<sup>75</sup> In October, 71 per cent recognized a need for new political formations and would help create one.<sup>76</sup> Last, a December article on abstentionism resulted in a flood of letters arguing that there was nobody to vote for.<sup>77</sup>

That same year saw intense public protests. In February, a long, contentious strike at the Puntarenas hospital took center stage. Even doctors were accused of using *biómbos*<sup>78</sup> to profit within the public system.<sup>79</sup> In April/May, another prolonged strike demanding payment of government pensions paralyzed the Limón



hospital.<sup>80</sup> The unions called a third strike in electric utility ICE to protest its collaboration with Millicom, a telephone corporation suspected of mismanagement. This protest's anti-corruption nature elicited unprecedented positive coverage as "*una huelga justa*".<sup>81</sup> Then July's teachers' strike against a pension accruals' reform drew massive crowds for six weeks.<sup>82</sup> A prominent union leader explained how demonstrations transcended teachers' issues and were the only way to protest the Figueres-Calderón pact.<sup>83</sup>

1996 events showed scarce transparency and lacking care. In May, *Contralor*<sup>84</sup> Samuel Hidalgo blocked a massive armaments purchase from Israel, citing insufficient funding in the Civil Aviation. In response, the government officially denied access to archives and registers related to money laundering, drug trafficking, and weapon purchases, which shattered all transparency in the use of public funds. To aggravate matters, the controversial Hidalgo was up for re-election,<sup>85</sup> and Costa Rica remained without a *Contralor* for weeks.<sup>86</sup> In the summer attention shifted to public campaign finance (*deuda política*),<sup>87</sup> which neither party wanted to discuss before primaries and whose cancellation would have benefited organized crime.<sup>88</sup> In August a commission capped contributions to an enormous 0.19 per cent of GDP.<sup>89</sup>

In the electoral year, institutional credibility remained negative with prominent instances of corruption and mismanagement exposed. In May 1997, the *caso* Hank erupted and since Rodríguez led the 1998 Presidential polls, it undermined the credibility of a two-party alternation.<sup>90</sup> In an April UNIMER survey, 45 per cent of responders believed that things would worsen,<sup>91</sup> because of corruption (77 per cent) followed by "politicians, political system" (63 per cent).<sup>92</sup> Scandals had started with Anglo and Civil Aviation, but had since included illegal loans by BICSA,<sup>93</sup> favoritism in MOPT concessions<sup>94</sup> and ex-MP Ricardo Villalobos' arrest for cocaine.<sup>95</sup> Citizens felt betrayed by politicians and met appeals to electoral participation with apathy.<sup>96</sup> In August 1997 those committed to non-vote rose to 30 per cent.<sup>97</sup> As campaigns were set up, a huge gap between commitments and achievements meant that candidates' promises were ignored.<sup>98</sup> The only Corrales-Rodríguez televised debate had a mere 1.5 per cent audience share: Nobody cared. In the final month, pundits tried shaming potential non-voters as parasites and killers of democracy.<sup>99</sup> Finally, as the electorate understood the sclerotization of politics, a record 30 per cent chose to abstain: The consequences for Costa Rica would be profound.

### **Aftermath: Costa Rican politics after 1998**

As Table 2 showed, these events brought several irreversible consequences. The main political transformations witnessed by Costa Rica after the 1998 election were permanently lower electoral participation, voting volatility without single-party parliamentary majorities, PLN abandoning its ideological focus to occupy the political center, and a newfound legitimacy for public protests. Elements of continuity – which illustrate the capture of Costa Rican politics – were found in

PLN-PUSC alternation, a centrist political discourse, and the implementation of neoliberal economic reforms. 1994 saw the last high-participation election in Costa Rican history, with an 81.1 per cent electoral turnout. The most straightforward and most important transformation brought by the 1994-1998 watershed is therefore represented by continued low turnout in national elections. This is crucial to the permanence of the new political equilibrium because it lowered the number of votes needed to win an election. The organizational advantage of the two main parties proved crucial in closing access to the presidency. Even the third-party success of *Partido Acción Ciudadana* (PAC) and *Movimiento Libertario* (ML), breaking the strong bipartidism, left disenfranchised voters indifferent.

Table 4: Stylized facts on Costa Rican elections

| year   | voter turnout | turnout change | legislative vote % party shares (seats out of 57) |           |           |               |
|--|---------------|----------------|---|-----------|-----------|---------------|
|  |               |                | PLN   | PUSC      | PAC       | others [name] |
| 1978   | 81.2          | +1.3           | 38.9 (25)   | 43.4 (27) | -         | 7.7 (3) [PU]  |
| 1982   | 78.6          | -2.6           | 55.2 (33)   | 29.1 (17) | -         | 6.4 (3) [PU]  |
| 1986   | 81.8          | +3.2           | 47.8 (29)   | 41.4 (25) | -         | 2.7 (1) [PU]  |
| 1990   | 81.8          | 0              | 41.9 (25)   | 46.2 (29) | -         | 3.1 (1) [PU]  |
| 1994   | 81.1          | -0.7           | 44.6 (28)   | 40.4 (25) | -         | 5.3 (2) [FD]  |
| 1998   | 70            | -11.1          | 34.8 (23)   | 41.2 (27) | -         | 5.8 (3) [FD]  |
| 2002   | 68.8          | -1.2           | 27.1 (17)   | 29.8 (19) | 22 (14)   | 9.3 (6) [ML]  |
| 2006   | 65.1          | -3.7           | 36.5 (25)   | 7.8 (5)   | 25.3 (17) | 9.2 (6) [ML]  |
| 2010   | 69.1          | +4.0           | 37.3 (24)   | 8.2 (6)   | 17.6 (11) | 14.5 (9) [ML] |
| 2014   | 68.4          | -0.7           | 25.7 (18)   | 10 (8)    | 23.5 (13) | 13.1 (9) [FA] |
| legend: PAC: <i>Partido Acción Ciudadana</i> ; PU: <i>Pueblo Unido</i> ; FD: <i>Fuerza Democrática</i> ; ML: <i>Movimiento Libertario</i> ; FA: <i>Frente Amplio</i> |               |                |   |           |           |               |

Starting from 1998, national voter turnout would be below 70 per cent. This also meant that all presidential candidates from that point on received only a plurality – not a majority – of votes. Even in the 2014 Presidential runoff when Luís Guillermo Solís obtained a resounding victory with 77.8 per cent of votes, that only represented 42.7 per cent of the electoral registry. Table 4 shows party votes and turnout in Costa Rica during 1978-2018, addressing this and the following point (7.2). In addition, until 1994, there was a strong correlation between abstainers and lower socio-economic status, while after 1998, a collective sense of disapproval led to the devaluation of politics and elections across class boundaries (Rodriguez et al., 2005).

After 1994, no President could command a congressional majority as even Figueres had to rely on PUAC's collaboration for the 1994-1998 legislature. Still, his party counted on a *bancada* of 28 MPs, a luxury that no other party would have from then on. PUSC obtained 27 seats in 1998, and numbers would be lower afterward. Therefore, executives never represented a national majority, further weakening the diminished popular mandate coming from low-turnout elections. This transformation started during the Figueres legislature, but a victory of Corrales in 1998 could have still steered the party to the left and recovered the relationship with the base. His loss certified the internal separation which led to the creation of *Partido Accion Ciudadana* (PAC) by Ottón Solís in December 2000. With PAC taking on opposition to international organizations, notably during the October 2007 referendum, PLN became the centrist party that its leadership desired. Especially after anti-corruption investigations damaged PUSC – with ex-Presidents Calderón and Rodríguez being incarcerated – PLN took a good chunk of its voters to win consecutive presidencies in 2006 and 2010. In particular, after lifting the ban on re-election, Oscar Arias' charisma returned him to the presidency, which established a centrist *Liberacionismo* in government after 8 years of opposition.

The 1995 strikes transformed Costa Rican political discourse, as the mainstream media had previously painted all public protests as anti-democratic and manipulated by union leaders and communists. Yet, the corruption scandals of 1994-1998 made it increasingly untenable to argue that the demonstrations were unjustified. During the 8 years of PUSC government (1998-2006) social movements coalesced and protests' frequency increased, with growing public and media support. The ratification of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) then became a unifying cause, catalyzing existing movements through big marches that grew numerically, most notably in November 2005, October 2006, and February 2007 (Raventós, 2008). Despite their narrow loss in the October 2007 referendum on CAFTA – the first ever in the country and the only of its kind in the region – protesters showed the existence of a possible alternative consensus. Finally, the movement's dialectic success was visible in the 2013-2014 electoral campaign, which politicized socio-economic inequality for the first time, chipping away at the country's egalitarian myth (Carballo Chaves, 2015). Finally, the 1998-2014 years also showed continuities with the 1978-1998 period which overall helped to maintain this new equilibrium.

The two traditional parties won the presidency in 1998, 2002 (PUSC), 2006, and 2010 (PLN) before a third party could break their hegemony, despite the formation of PAC and ML and a lack of parliamentary majorities. This was crucial for the maintenance of points 1-4 above. If, for example, PAC's Ottón Solís had won the Presidency in 2002 – he was 5 points away from a runoff – or 2006 when he lost by less than 20,000 votes, turnout may have recovered, with social movements finding an institutional outlet. These outcomes preserved the *captured democracy* perception, reinforced by the narrow win of the *sí* in the 2007 CAFTA referendum, despite the enormous success of the grassroots *no*

campaign, which had only 1/9 of the resources of its mainstream opponents (Raventós, 2008).

The myth of Costa Rican centrism survived the past 40 years. Even Luís Solís third party victory in 2014 owed to a successful self-portrait as a moderate candidate with academic credentials and ultimately as a credible centrist (Carballo Chaves, 2015). This discourse also affected the internal democracy matters that rocked PLN and PUSC in the 1994-1998 legislature, where the grassroots wanted to steer their parties into polarized positions and away from the leadership's centrism. Even after the recognition of a *recurso de amparo electoral* (protection petition) by the TSE in 2000, self-regulation of political parties has remained limited in the country (Ramírez Granados, 2010). Because of this, the leaders' control over PLN and PUSC worked to preserve the mild conservatism adopted in 1994-1998 for the following two decades. In other words, under two-party alternation where both lacked internal democracy, the capture of the political system by bipartisan elite groups could continue.

Overall, leftist opposition to bipartidism remained weak. Social-democratic *Fuerza Democrática* lost its 3 Congress seats in 2002 and the far-left coalition *Pueblo Unido* already had in 1994. Neither would recover, reducing opposition to neoliberal reforms. We know nowadays that prominent politicians and ministers from PLN and PUSC belonged to developmental organizations of neoliberal persuasion, such as CEFSA, CINDE, and the *Academia de CentroAmerica* (Blanco Lizano, 2010). PAC's creation in 2002 partially filled the void, but its leadership remained ideologically ambiguous. Therefore, Costa Rica respected its structural adjustment plans and remained committed to public sector cuts. This would also change at a new political watershed in 2014 when Solís won the presidency and the "new left" formation *Frente Amplio* gained 13 per cent of votes.

## Conclusions

This work fills a gap concerning sudden democratic deterioration signaled by falling voter turnout, happening without a transition to an authoritarian regime or party system collapse. In other words, it highlights the process towards a *captured democracy* – an institutionalized democracy detached from the public that serves an elite's political preferences – through the combined reduction of competition between parties and the institutional credibility of national politics. Even if the outcome was not a landslide victory, party competition fell because of the main parties' weaknesses and the absence of alternatives. Simultaneously, the continuous appearance of public political scandals erased the legitimacy of national politics as a whole. This treatment is innovative because (1) it combines for the first time a series of elements that had previously been treated only in isolation; (2) it situates the 1994-1998 period as central, as opposed to a literature largely focused on 2002 and beyond; (3) in its systematic way of organizing a large amount of information across categories; and finally (4) in the presentation

of the Costa Rican case as exemplifying a much broader phenomenon. Its methodology and argument should spark scholarly interest in explaining other political watersheds in Latin America.

An important question to be addressed before concluding: What is gained by adopting this non-traditional approach? From a general standpoint, this methodology examines the same events to which the electorate was exposed without any a posteriori re-interpretation. In the Costa Rican case, explanations of the participatory breakdown of 1998 were attributed to the two-party system's strength, not to its weakness. Moreover, centering the BAC scandal as the main critical juncture is a necessary move: Even if it took place four years before the 1998 election, it still had incredible weight in determining its turnout and outcome. Another similar example is offered by the public protests of 1995, unusual in their strength and temporal span, and which predate by years following transformations.

Beyond these cases, attention towards watershed elections related to voter turnout (*electoral revolutions*) has already resulted in other publications both in a Central Asian context and in broader comparative perspective (Lioy & Dawson, 2020; Lioy, 2021). These rare occurrences constitute substantively important cases, which reshape a country's political trajectory. Within Latin America, in the 2013 Chilean elections a lack of credible institutional reforms and discontent towards the party system led to a dramatic fall in voter turnout (-35 per cent). The introduction of voluntary voting played a role, but turnout fell among all social strata and newly enfranchised voters deserted the polls. This destabilized post-2013 Chilean politics, with massive public protests and new political arrangements. Other notable participatory breakdowns across Latin America, deserving of scholarly attention, include Ecuador (1991 and 1997), Colombia (1991), and Paraguay (2003). All of these countries would soon witness periods of turmoil, predated by these dramatic falls in voter turnout.

Last, looking back to Costa Rica, a similar analysis can cover other politically salient periods, to measure political discourse changes beyond the 1994-1998 legislature, especially for what concerns the critical juncture represented by the third party victory in the 2014 election. In parallel, this transition's local aspects can explain how it both transformed and reinforced the rural-urban cleavage, something that this paper lacked the proper space to discuss. Optimizing the research methodology through a computer-based reading of the source materials, followed by automatic processing and machine learning techniques for coding, would certainly speed up the process and free time for detailed analysis.

\* \* \*

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**Acknowledgements:** The author would like to thank professor Erin Beck for strongly encouraging him to do archival work in Costa Rica in June and July 2019 and also the Center for Latino and Latin American Studies (CLLAS) of the University of Oregon for financing seven weeks spent taking photos of newspapers at the Biblioteca Nacional in San José through a generous summer research grant.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Cordero, J. F. "Democracia Cautiva" *La Nación*, 28 January 1998. For the remainder of the article, the source in the endnotes is *La Nación*.
- <sup>2</sup> US\$ 150 billion in 2020.
- <sup>3</sup> Ángulo, Marcela "El pueblo paga" 8 July 1994.
- <sup>4</sup> Noguera, Y. & Martin, R. "ATF operó sin estar autorizada" 9 August 1994.
- <sup>5</sup> "Fin al Banco Anglo" 15 September 1994.
- <sup>6</sup> Mayorga, A. "Mayoría respalda cierre" 18 September 1994§ and "La muerte del Banco Anglo" 15 September 1994§.
- <sup>7</sup> "Figueres hermético sobre hermanos Lopez" 2 July 1994.
- <sup>8</sup> Mendez, W. & Álvarez, A. "Llegó el consenso en la Asamblea" 13 September 1994.
- <sup>9</sup> Barquero S., M. "Socollón económico" 3 March 1995.
- <sup>10</sup> "Sorpresivo acuerdo" 29 April 1995.
- <sup>11</sup> Figueres Olsen, JM & Calderon F., RA "Al pueblo de Costa Rica:" 29 April 1995.
- <sup>12</sup> Álvarez Ulate, R. "País se hace ingobernable" 2 May 1995.
- <sup>13</sup> Ulibarri, E. "La clave mayor del acuerdo" 14 May 1995.
- <sup>14</sup> Ulibarri, E. "Ideologías y partidos" 29 September 1995.
- <sup>15</sup> Álvarez Ulate, A. "El PUSC agitado por pacto" 16 August 1995.
- <sup>16</sup> Matute, R. "No me voy del Partido" 1 September 1995.
- <sup>17</sup> Fernández, M. & Matute, R. "Gutiérrez abandona Fuerza Democrática" 6 October 1995.
- <sup>18</sup> Martín, R. & Matute, R. "Cachimbal afianza a Liberación" 29 April 1994.
- <sup>19</sup> Chaverri Soto, D. "PAE a la Tica: mala renegociación" 22 October 1994.
- <sup>20</sup> Méndez Garita, W. "Coto pide cambios a Figueres" 13 January 1995.
- <sup>21</sup> Herrera, M. "Cae apoyo a Figueres" 6 February 1995.
- <sup>22</sup> "Cambios en Gobierno" 8 March 1995.
- <sup>23</sup> Álvarez Ulate, A. "PLN ensaya nuevo rumbo" 4 April 1995.
- <sup>24</sup> Barquero S., M. "Gobierno proyecta inflación de 19%" 6 September 1995.
- <sup>25</sup> "Estudiantes encararon a Figueres" 16 September 1995.
- <sup>26</sup> Ulibarri, E. "La estrategia de Corrales" 14 January 1996.
- <sup>27</sup> Matute, R. "Rodríguez y Corrales codo a codo" 10 February 1996.
- <sup>28</sup> Herrero, M. "Liberación está más pequeño que nunca" 17 June 1996.
- <sup>29</sup> Guevara, J. D. "Cáncer político afecta al PLN" 23 June 1996.

- 30 Méndez Garita, W. "Delegados vencen a cúpula del PLN" 1 September 1996.
- 31 Fonseca, E. "El PLN secuestrado" 9 September 1996.
- 32 Herrera, M. & . Matute, R. "PLN en lucha contra su fin" 13 October 1996.
- 33 "Corrales candidato" 2 June 1997.
- 34 Guevara M., J. D. "Corrales sube; Rodríguez baja" 19 June 1997.
- 35 Matute, R. Ch. & Guevara M., D. "Anomalías sacuden al PLN" 2 July 1997.
- 36 "Corrales dispuesto a repetir el proceso" 2 July 1997.
- 37 Matute, R. & Barquero, M. "Ahora soy candidato" 19 August 1997.
- 38 Guevara M., J. D. "Registro valida decisión del PLN" 27 August 1997.
- 39 Matute, R. "Advierten error del PLN" 4 Nov 1997.
- 40 Herrera, M. "Calderón despiden con alta popularidad" 27 April 1994.
- 41 Villalobos, C. "Con la satisfacción del deber cumplido" 8 May 1994.
- 42 Suñol, J. "Causas de la derrota" 11 February 1994.
- 43 Here, the y-axis represents the difference between positively and negatively coded opposition-related articles as a percentage of the total.
- 44 Matute, R. "Calderón niega parte en decisiones del BAC" 27 July 1994.
- 45 Villalobos, L. & Gutiérrez, F. "PUSC en deuda millonaria con BAC" 17 August 1994.
- 46 Álvarez Ulate, A. "Ovidio Pacheco gaña secretaria del PUSC" 6 March 1995.
- 47 Álvarez Ulate, A. "PUSC 'unge' a Rodríguez" 23 April 1995.
- 48 Méndez Garita, W. "Fishman pide dimitir a cúpula del PUSC" 14 August 1994.
- 49 Álvarez Ulate, A. "Choques desgarran al PUSC" 5 September 1995.
- 50 Matute, R. "Rodríguez se desahoga" 11 September 1995.
- 51 Álvarez Ulate, A. "PUSC cierra filas con Rodríguez" 2 February 1996.
- 52 Herrera, M. "Rodríguez gana ventaja" 17 June 1996.
- 53 Méndez Garita, W. "PUSC tras masiva votación" 13 February 1996.
- 54 Matute, Roland "Grupo de alto nivel indagará escuchas" 29 February 1996.
- 55 Matute, R. "Escuchas avivan lío electoral" 3 March 1996.
- 56 Fonseca, E. "El cogobierno del PUSC" 20 October 1996.
- 57 Matute, R. "Rumores de pacto caldean al PUSC" 27 February 1997.
- 58 Herrera, M. "Leve ventaja de Rodríguez" 21 February 1997.
- 59 "Rodríguez tocó techo" 23 February 1997.
- 60 Matute, R. & Gutiérrez, F. "Dura pelea por diputaciones del PUSC" 6 March 1997.
- 61 "PUSC defiende consulta" 10 March 1997.
- 62 Herrera, M. "Rodríguez proyecta fuerte imagen" 19 May 1997.
- 63 Angulo, M. "La campaña de Calderón" 17 March 1997.
- 64 Segnini, G. "Controversial cita entre PUSC y político mexicano" 24 May 1997.
- 65 Villalobos, C. "Rodríguez admite error" 25 May 1997.
- 66 Camacho, H. L. "CID-Gallup da empate a candidatos" 23 July 1997.
- 67 Matute, R. & Guevara, J. D. "Fischel y Odio a vicepresidencias" 7 October 1997.
- 68 Here, the y-axis represents the difference between positively and negatively coded articles regarding the national institutions as a percentage of the total.
- 69 "Investigarán cúpula del Nacional" 13 November 1994.
- 70 "De nuevo la banca estatal" 16 November 1994.
- 71 "Una censurable artimaña" 25 November 1994.
- 72 Fonseca, E. "De guasones y mordazas" 28 November 1994.
- 73 Mejía, A. F. "Menos gasto público o crisis" 11 March 1995.

- <sup>74</sup> Herrera, M. "Apatía carcome a Ticos" 18 June 1995.
- <sup>75</sup> "Otra urgente reforma" 18 June 1995.
- <sup>76</sup> Martínez, M. "Decepción golpea a partidos" 10 October 1995.
- <sup>77</sup> Muñoz de Antillon, F. "Apoyo al abstencionismo" 28 December 1995.
- <sup>78</sup> Used to hide from sight those receiving better-than-average care at public hospitals.
- <sup>79</sup> "Una huelga inhumana" 11 February 1995.
- <sup>80</sup> Ramírez, A. & Mora, E. "Estancado conflicto en Limón" 28 April 1995.
- <sup>81</sup> Cordero, J. F. "Una huelga justa" 17 May 1995.
- <sup>82</sup> Álvarez Ulate, A. "Acuerdan fin de huelga" 17 August 1995.
- <sup>83</sup> Ramírez, A. & Solís, M. I. "Esta huelga es crucial" 17 July 1995.
- <sup>84</sup> *General Auditor*.
- <sup>85</sup> Mendez Garita, W. "País sin Contralor" May 8 1996.
- <sup>86</sup> Chacon, L. "Inflación llegó al 0.76% en abril" May 8 1996.
- <sup>87</sup> Matute, R. "Incierto recorte a deuda política" 18 July 1996.
- <sup>88</sup> Murillo S., V. H. "Deuda política e intenciones" 20 July 1996.
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- <sup>90</sup> Cordero, J. F. "El bochorno Hank" 28 May 1997.
- <sup>91</sup> Herrera, M. "La decepción va a las urnas" 20 April 1997.
- <sup>92</sup> "Preocupación en cifras" 20 April 1997.
- <sup>93</sup> *Banco Internacional de Costa Rica*.
- <sup>94</sup> *Ministerio de Obras Públicas y Transportes*.
- <sup>95</sup> Herrera, M. "Corrupción paralizante" 20 April 1997.
- <sup>96</sup> "La sanción de los votantes" 25 July 1997.
- <sup>97</sup> Herrera, M. "Abstencionismo al acecho" 23 August 1997.
- <sup>98</sup> Formoso, M. "La política del arcángel" 19 October 1997.
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