Democracy after War: Causes and Consequences of the 1948 Civil War in Costa Rica

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1 Introduction

Costa Rica is recognised as Latin America’s oldest and most stable uninterrupted democracy.¹ In fact, among the developing countries, the longevity of its democratic rule is only matched by India.² Ruled by a presidential government, for over fifty years—after the Civil War of 1948—the country has experienced democratic elections with widespread popular participation, and regular rotation of rulers and parties.³ Thirteen elections have taken place since the civil war.⁴ According to different survey studies, 77 per cent of Costa Ricans believe that democracy is preferable to any other kind of government,⁵ 70 per cent claim to participate in transparent electoral processes,⁶ and almost 87 per cent think that it is important to vote in the national elections.⁷ Indeed, Forrest Colburn has grounds to describe Costa Rica as ‘arguably the region’s most successful democracy.’⁸

Central to this nation’s political regime has been the strength of its institutions, most notably, the electoral processes, the parliament, and its well-institutionalised party system.⁹ The origins of Costa Rica’s liberal democracy and the identity of its contemporary political parties have roots that go back to the end of the nineteenth century,¹⁰ but, as argued by John Booth, ‘…the regime consolidated itself only in the aftermath of the 1948 Civil War’—Costa Rica’s central political cleavage.¹¹

¹ Knight 2001; Seligson 2001b; Booth 1998, Chap. 1.; Peeler 1985. The other very stable Latin American democracies, Chile and Uruguay, have suffered relatively recent breakdowns of their democratic rule: 1973-1990 in the former and 1973-1985 in the later.
² India has a democratic history dating almost from its independence in 1947. However, democratic rule in this country nearly suffered a breakdown between 1975 and 1977. For works assessing transition to democracy in Costa Rica see, Booth 1998; Chaps. 3-4.; PEN 2001, Chap. 2.
³ One of the best known democracy rating systems, the Freedom House Index, has consistently given Costa Rica one of its highest rankings. For details see, Freedom House 2003.
⁴ General elections were held in 1953, 1958, and every four years thereafter. In each election Costa Ricans choose their President, two Vice-Presidents, 57 Congressmen, and their municipal authorities.
⁵ Costa Rica, along with Uruguay, have consistently registered the highest and most stable figures in terms of support for democracy in Latin America since the mid-1990s. Latinobarómetro 1996-2003.
⁶ The perception of fraud-free elections is not as high in the other Central American countries. The corresponding figures are 60 per cent for Nicaraguans, 56 per cent for Panamanians, 48 per cent for Guatemalans, 46 per cent for Salvadorians, and 45 per cent for Hondurans. PNUD 1997, p. 23.
⁷ Rodríguez et al. abril 2002, Cuadro 11, p. 22.
⁸ Colburn September/October 2002, p. 11. Costa Rica’s democratic ‘exceptionalism’ has also been highlighted in, Camp 2001; Colburn and Sánchez 2001; Booth and Walker 1999; Peeler 1998; Seligson and Booth 1995; Rouquié 1994; Diamond 1993.
⁹ According to Mainwaring and Scully, Costa Rica, Chile, and Uruguay have the most institutionalised party systems in Latin America. Mainwaring and Scully 1995, p. 1.
¹⁰ For an analysis of Costa Rica’s political history since its independence see, Obregón-Quesada 2000.
¹¹ Booth 1999, p. 460.
No other social or political event has had as much influence in the way academics analyse and understand the development of this country’s democratic institutions. In fact, the civil war is responsible for dividing the political history of Costa Rica into two phases: the ‘First Republic’ (1889-1948) and the ‘Second Republic’ (1948- ). In order to understand how this Central American nation has developed into the region’s most stable democracy it is central to explore what prompted the 1948 conflict, and how the outcomes of the civil war enhanced the evolution of its democratic institutions. Thus, this study assesses, first, the main economic and, particularly, political reasons that drove a political crisis to escalate into a civil war. Afterwards, it analyses the major institutional reforms undertaken after the armed conflict. These reforms are greatly responsible for the development of a proficient civilian political class, respected electoral institutions, well-institutionalised political parties, and a balanced distribution of power.

Specifically, this historical case study is divided into five general parts. Firstly, an introduction explains its objective. Secondly, the central events that culminated in the 1948 Civil War are briefly reviewed. Thirdly, a more substantive analysis of the reasons which prompted the conflict is presented. Fourthly, the key political outcomes of the 1948 battle are examined. Emphasis is placed on the main political reforms and ‘party families’ that emerged and developed after the armed conflict. Finally, the study ends with a set of conclusions regarding the political legacy of the Civil War of 1948. Democracy is not adopted, it is developed. As it will be demonstrated, Costa Rica’s current democratic strength is not an exception to this maxim.

2 The Pre-War Events

The 1940s were certainly a critical decade in Costa Rican politics. During these years the governing oligarchy’s control over the electoral arena and state resources was challenged. Division within the elite and progressive social reforms, compounded with serious political and economic flaws by the government (electoral frauds, corruption, nepotism, persecution of political adversaries, and fiscal mismanagement),

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13 This idea is discussed in, Sánchez 2003b.
created an “explosive” political ambience. This environment precipitated a scramble for political allies that ultimately produced two contending groups racing to obtain political control.

One of these groups—the one in office—was a movement headed by the Partido Republicano (PRep), whose leader was reform-oriented President Rafael Ángel Calderón-Guardia (1940-1944). It also included the Communist Party under the name of Partido Vanguardia Popular (PVP)—headed by Manuel Mora—as well as the Church, represented by Monsignor Víctor Manuel Sanabria. The opposition alliance was integrated by the new Partido Social Demócrata (PSD), whose central figure was José Figueres-Ferrer, and by the most conservative members of the oligarchy (bankers, entrepreneurs, cafetaleros [coffee producers], etc.) represented by the Partido Demócrata (PD) and the Partido Unión Nacional (PUN).

These coalitions were formed on the basis of common enemies rather than because of shared social, economic or political objectives; and, in the case of the opposition alliance, overlooked the existence of fundamentally conflicting projects. As claimed by Fabrice Lehoucq, Costa Rican politics during the 1940s were characterised by the disputes of political groups trying to retain or win power, not by antagonistic class projects. In fact, there was a more substantial conflict between the social democratic program of the PSD and the anti-statist stance of the PUN (its coalition partner), than between the PSD’s ideas and the social christian/socialist project, supported by the government alliance. However, the urge to oppose a shared electoral enemy that was trying to monopolise power masked the conflicting agendas in the opposition alliance. Not surprisingly, once the civil war ended, the Social Democrats and the conservatives became political adversaries.

After two consecutive PRep’s governments, known as the “eight-year regime” (Calderón-Guardia [1940-1944] and Picado [1944-1948]), the opposition alliance

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14 The participation of a leftist movement running the Executive was a novelty in local politics. Hence, the Left had no problem agreeing to change its name in order to mask the obvious contradictions between the catholic and communist members of the coalition.

15 Both the PUN and the PD represented Costa Rica’s conservative oligarchy. Once in alliance one cannot really distinguish between them. Thus, from now on references to the PUN, the stronger of the two parties, will include members of both movements.

candidate, Otilio Ulate, won the 1948 election. He succeeded with 55.3 per cent of the votes, against 44.7 obtained by Calderón-Guardia—who was looking for a second chance in office.\(^{17}\) However, the Republican-Communist coalition retained the majority in congress. There were charges of fraud from both sides. The Electoral Tribunal declared Ulate the winner, but later, due to significant irregularities,\(^{18}\) the new congress nullified the presidential election. After the failure of several attempts by the Electoral Tribunal, Monsignor Sanabria, and PRep and PUN members to reach an agreement, the civil war started. Claiming to fight in order to re-establish the country’s democratic tradition, Figueres and his Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN [consisting of approximately 600 men]), engaged in an armed confrontation with the government. Following six weeks of warfare and around 2000 deaths, Figueres’ army overthrew the regime.

3 The Civil War of 1948: Reasons for the Conflict

The previous section briefly assessed the main events leading to the civil war. However, it is still not clear why the contending bands were unable to negotiate a peaceful solution which could have prevented the 1948 political crisis from ending in an armed conflict. Why have commentators claimed that war would have taken place sooner or later?\(^{19}\) This section will analyse the main causes that motivated the battle.

In general terms, the reasons acknowledged as the causes of the war include: economic mismanagement, corruption and political repression by the government, a class conflict due to the eight-year regime’s progressive social reforms influenced by the Left,\(^{20}\) and, most importantly, the electoral fraud in 1948.\(^{21}\) As it will be shown, these elements were enough of a reason for a political opposition to emerge and even for the civil war to get started. Nevertheless, the armed confrontation could have been

\(^{17}\) Thibaut 1993, p. 201.
\(^{18}\) For details see next section.
\(^{19}\) Aguilar-Bulgarelli 1993, p. 258.
\(^{20}\) Among them more saliently: the establishment of a social security system, offering unemployment, health, accident, and old-age benefits (1941); the creation of the Universidad de Costa Rica (UCR) (1941); and central constitutional reforms which established a set of social guarantees (Capítulo de Garantías Sociales [1942]) and a labour code (1943). This code guaranteed a minimum wage, an eight-hour workday, the right to unionise, the right to housing, basic safety and sanitation conditions in the workplace, and the priority of national workers over foreigners.
prevented or stopped, had the contending bands not been divided—particularly the opposition group—while they were trying to reach an agreement after the election. Other factors such as, Figueres’ conviction that warfare was the only way to end the eight-year regime, as well as the position taken by international actors (especially the U.S. Government) and the feebleness of the military, added the necessary elements for the political crisis to develop into a civil war.

3.1 Economic Mismanagement and Corruption

To begin with, one of the common explanations for the mounting popular discontent against the government was its economic failures, and the constant corruption and nepotism charges levelled against Calderón, his public officials, and friends. As revealed by Aguilar-Bulgarelli, instead of undertaking the fiscal reform that was promised, Calderón’s government had no restraints in terms of public spending, and used it to benefit his supporters.²² Among the corruption charges were a series of contracts for public works (construction of roads, schools, governmental buildings, etc.) that were granted to companies owned by Calderón’s friends without public auction processes, and the government’s direct financing of the PRep’s candidate during the 1948 election. Commentators have even defined the eight-years regime as a failed attempt to establish a corrupt dictatorship.²³

Furthermore, the eight-year regime was censured for not having any economic plan to ease the recession that the country was enduring due to the Second World War, and for its failure to develop new products in order to diminish the country’s dependency on coffee exports. Finally, businessmen were very irritated by governmental inefficiency in controlling illegal trafficking of all sorts of goods.²⁴ In Aguilar-Bulgarelli’s words, ‘the country was suffering a real economic crisis.’²⁵ The mismanagement of the public budget is shown in Table 1, where the government’s revenue, its expenditure, and its deficit from 1940 to 1943 are illustrated.

²² Aguilar-Bulgarelli 1993, p. 119.
²³ See for instance, Cañas 1982.
²⁴ Aguilar-Bulgarelli 1993, pp. 122-128.
²⁵ Aguilar-Bulgarelli 1993, p. 125. This and all the translations from Spanish-language works or interviews (cited from Spanish sources in the bibliography) are my own.
3.2 Class Division and Political Repression

In addition to economic failures and corruption, a so-called ‘class division’ prompted by the government’s progressive reforms, PRep’s alliance with a Communist Party, and the repression against members of the oligarchy (especially those of German, Italian, or Spanish descent), is regarded as another element that motivated the war.\textsuperscript{26}

This materialistic explanation of the armed conflict understands the political crisis as a class struggle in which the government and the Left, bolstered by urban and rural working classes, confronted an opposition alliance. This alliance was supported by members of repressed foreign communities, by international and local ‘owners of capital’ disgruntled by the social reforms and the influence of the Left in the government’s policies, and by a growing middle class, frustrated by the insufficient economic development of the country.\textsuperscript{27} The social and economic contradictions of these two contending bands, and the systematic repression of the government against its opponents, would have made it impossible for the 1948 political crisis to find a peaceful resolution.

It is true that most members of the oligarchy opposed the government in one way or another, and that the PRep was supported by many members of the working class. As demonstrated by Jacobo Schifter, during the electoral processes in 1946 (mid-term legislative elections) and 1948, the PRep got the majority of its support in San José (the capital, where most of the urban working class lived), and in the poor rural provinces of Puntarenas, Limón (both holding the country’s banana plantations) and Guanacaste. On the other hand, the opposition alliance received most of its support in Heredia, Alajuela, and Cartago, provinces prominent in those days for their coffee plantations and the corresponding oligarchy.\textsuperscript{28} In fact, the 1940s ought to be regarded not only as time of political reform and crisis, but also as a social turning point, marked by the massive incorporation of the working class into the political system.

\textsuperscript{26} See for example, Rojas-Bolaños 1979.
\textsuperscript{27} Schifter 1982, p. 134.
\textsuperscript{28} Schifter 1981, pp. 82-87.
However, it would be misleading to consider the 1948 cleavage solely as a war of class-conflict. As proved by Lehoucq, members of the ‘dominant class’ did not show a decisive opposition to the government, as their interests were both positively and negatively affected by its policies. The oligarchy’s disagreement with the social reforms and a new progressive tax policy, by no means a generalised position in the sector, was surely mollified by governmental decisions to guarantee a minimum price for coffee and eliminate the tax on coffee exports. At the same time, local entrepreneurs were certainly satisfied with Calderón’s decision to pass a law protecting new local industry from international competition. Moreover, the contending bands cannot be regarded as pure class movements because members of different ‘classes’ could be found fighting for both sides. In Shifter’s words:

‘It is inadequate to regard the civil war as a product of class polarisation...The working class and the middle-high class were certainly polarised during the battle. However, they were not categorically divided. Members of different classes could be found in both bands.’

Certainly, the 1948 episode cannot be regarded as a social cleavage. In fact, Costa Rica’s central cleavage was basically political in nature. As contended by Jonas-Bodenheimer, Costa Rica’s civil war was not a social revolution, but a struggle between two groups which battled over the control of the political apparatus. Backing this conclusion, war veteran Omar Zumbado categorically asserted that, ‘in 1948 we fought for political reasons, not for ideological or social differences.’

The 1948 Civil War divided the country between calderonistas and figueristas or ulatistas, not between ‘owners of capital’ and ‘proletariat.’

Hence, it is not accurate to claim that members of the oligarchy—the ‘owners of capital’—functioning as a class presented a coherent opposition against the eight-year regime. And even if most of them consistently criticised the government, supported the opposition alliance, and were unquestionably worried by the Left’s influence on the PRep’s policies, it would certainly be a mistake to claim that the oligarchy, acting as a ‘conscious class,’ organised a political movement ready to use force in order to

29 Lehoucq 1998, pp. 104-123.
overthrow a regime that was governing against its interests. In fact, as will be shown, members of the PUN (the party representing the oligarchy) were always willing to negotiate a peaceful solution with the government in order to avoid an armed conflict.

3.3 Electoral Fraud

In addition to the government’s ‘mistakes’ and the opposition of the oligarchy, another important catalyst to the civil war was the significant irregularities in the 1948 election. Bruce Wilson reflects the views of many commentators when he asserts that the central causes of the war were the violence and the rampant electoral fraud surrounding this election.\(^{33}\) Fraud claims were made by the opposition both during the presidential election in 1944 and the mid-term legislative election in 1946. Even the Left’s leader, Manuel Mora, admitted that, ‘a real school of fraud had been established in Costa Rica.’\(^{34}\) However, contrary to what had happened before, the electoral fraud in 1948 was not tolerated.

The denounced fraud in 1944 and 1946 led the opposition group to organise a commercial ‘lockout’ general strike (‘Huelga de los Brazos Caídos’) in 1947, in order to demand that Picado’s administration guarantee a fraud-free electoral process in the coming year.\(^{35}\) The opposition succeeded when Picado accepted their demands. Without the support of the Left, the government and the opposition signed a pact which stated that: 1) both sides would accept the decision of the Electoral Tribunal (the final declaration still remained a congressional prerogative), 2) the two groups would share the responsibility for the fairness of the election (the opposition appointed the three members of the Electoral Tribunal and the president of the National Registry, while the government stayed in control of the police and the armed forces), and 3) the armed forces would be under the control of the winning candidate twenty-four hours after the Electoral Tribunal has announced its decision.\(^{36}\) The fact that the government signed such a disadvantageous agreement reveals its systematic loss of popularity, and the strength of the opposition alliance.

\(^{33}\) Wilson 1998, p. 34.

\(^{34}\) Aguilar-Bulgarelli 1993, p. 142.

\(^{35}\) According to Jacobo Schifter, the strike was supported by 95 per cent of the commercial establishments and banks in San José. Schifter 1981, p. 108.

\(^{36}\) Schifter 1981, p. 76.
On the 28th of February 1948 (two days after the date stipulated by law) the Electoral Tribunal declared Otilio Ulate, the PUN/PSD coalition candidate, winner of an election riddled with irregularities. The PRep members, having renounced control over the electoral institutions, were very suspicious of the low turnout. It declined, as shown in Table 2, from 78 per cent in 1940 and 1944, to 56 per cent in 1948. At the same time, they were not prepared to accept that the highest levels of absenteeism in 1948 were registered in provinces they had won in 1946 (Limón, Puntarenas, and Guanacaste). The electoral results, as well as the reduction in turnout for each province between 1946 and 1948 are presented in Table 3.

[Table 2 here]

[Table 3 here]

Additionally, the calderonistas accused the National Registry of favouring the opposition by delaying the issue of identification documents to its supporters and speedily granting them to Ulate’s followers. Moreover, they strongly questioned the Electoral Tribunal, as it based its resolution—arguing time restrictions—on the results of telegrams sent by its delegates around the country, instead of counting all the votes. The decision of one of the members of the Electoral Tribunal to openly express his disagreement with Ulate’s victory finally led the government-controlled congress to nullify the presidential election.

The congressional decision produced an immediate reaction from the opposition, which accused the government of not honouring the pact signed in 1947. Furthermore, the ulatistas blamed Calderón’s supporters for a mysterious fire that destroyed part of the votes, and denounced systematic repression and constant intimidation by the police and armed forces against its supporters and leaders during the electoral process. These complaints acquired national notoriety when Ulate was imprisoned, and Dr. Carlos Luis Valverde, one of the most prominent opposition

37 The government claimed that this accusation was confirmed when the President of the National Registry, Benjamín Odio, joined Figueres’ army even before the Electoral Tribunal declared Ulate’s triumph.
supporters, assassinated. Commentators have argued that even though electoral fraud existed, it only affected the margin by which Ulate won and not the final result. By this time, however, the government was not willing to respect the electoral result, nor the opposition prepared to accept the congressional resolution. Hence, the possibility of resolving the 1948 political crisis via elections vanished.

### 3.4 Internal Division and Failed Negotiation

The aforementioned reasons were more than enough for a strong political opposition to form and even to initiate the hostilities, as indeed happened. However, as is acknowledged by several authors, both the PRep and the PUN were ready to negotiate a peaceful way out of the ongoing armed conflict. In fact, at the end of March 1948, when the war was already under way, Calderón and Ulate reached an agreement. Exhorted by Monsignor Sanabria, they accorded that the congress would appoint an honourable and mutually accepted person, Dr. Julio Cesar-Ovares—a Calderón supporter—to govern as an interim president for two years. After that, a new electoral process would have been organised. Thus, a peaceful way out of the crisis was still possible.

This compromise not only would have ended the hostilities, but also would have granted the PUN and the PRep a new chance to race for power. The Left did not have major objections to this arrangement as they were satisfied with their majority in congress and were even ready to admit electoral defeat in order to prevent the imminent war. However, this was not the case of Figueres, the PSD, and his ELN, the ones actually fighting to put an end to the eight-year regime. They did not accept the pact and carried on with the hostilities.

When the contending parties reached the mentioned agreement, the division in the opposition alliance was evident. The PUN’s pact with the government clearly did not

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40 See for example, Aguilar-Bulgarelli 1993, p. 255.
41 The civil war began on the 12th of March 1948, twelve days after the congress decided to nullify the elections, when Figueres’ ELN attacked a government battalion.
43 Aguilar-Bulgarelli 1993, pp. 159-160.
consider the PSD’s position, for which any possibility of the continuation of the existing regime was unacceptable. Their idea of a complete transformation of Costa Rican society through a social democratic programme would have been jeopardised by the proposed arrangement. Moreover, winning an armed confrontation would allow them to govern alone—as they later did for eighteen months—and implement their plan with no interference from the conservative PUN. Figueres’ intentions were later made clear when, as the leader of the victorious ELN, he stated, ‘Don’t think that I am going to hand over the presidency to Ulate or to any corrupt politician. I am coming to transform this country.’ Figueres did hand over power to Ulate, but only after laying the foundations for his political project during an eighteen-month de facto government.

As a matter of fact, some authors have argued that the nullification of the elections was just the excuse Figures needed to start his ‘revolution.’ It is true that the civil war was catalysed by the electoral fraud of 1948. Nonetheless, it could have been prevented, or at least peacefully ended, had the contending parties been able to negotiate a solution acceptable to the different groups. Figueres’ conviction that war was the only way to end the existing regime, in conjunction with favourable internal and international conditions to carry out his plan, generated the setting needed to start the hostilities.

3.4.1 Figueres’ Intransigence and the Legión Caribe

When analysing the failed negotiations one needs to bear in mind that Figueres had long been planning an armed rebellion to depose the eight-year regime. Since 1942, when he was expelled from the country by Calderón’s administration, Figueres launched several initiatives to acquire money and weapons in order to organise an

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44 Acuña 1974.
46 José Figures was imprisoned and then expelled from the country after pronouncing a heated speech at a local radio station where he strongly criticised the government. He lived in El Salvador and Guatemala for a while and finally stayed for two years in Mexico. Figueres was allowed to return to Costa Rica in 1944, after Calderón finished his administration. For the complete transcription of Figueres’ speech see, Figueres-Ferrer 1987, pp. 80-85.
insurrection. While in Mexico, he signed the Pacto del Caribe (Caribbean Pact) with other Central American ‘revolutionaries.’ The signers, leaders of the so-called Legión Caribe (Caribbean Legion), aimed to free the region from its dictatorships through an armed struggle. They decided that Costa Rica was the best place to start the liberation process, due to its weak military forces and the existence of more civil liberties, in comparison with other countries such as Nicaragua, Honduras, or Panama. The reformist Guatemalan President Juan José Arévalo strongly supported the Legión Caribe by allowing them to use Guatemala as an entrepôt for men, weapons, ammunition, and fuel destined for the ELN. John Patrick Bell has claimed that without the support of the Legión Caribe, Figueres would never have been able to organise a successful revolution.

With the backing of the Legión Caribe, Figueres was ready for war. His revolutionary plans are confirmed by his own words:

‘When I left Guatemala to live in Mexico, I was convinced that the Costa Rican situation could only be sorted out through an armed confrontation, for all the other ways were closed. This was my firm position in the following years, when dealing with politicians used to electoral manipulation or with the prudent notables of my country… I was convinced that the embryonic dictatorship (referring to the eight-year regime) could not have been eliminated through votes, but only with the strength of bullets… When I left Mexico, everything was ready to start the revolution of liberation if the electoral rights, as I expected, were violated again… For me, the armed struggle seemed inevitable.’

The support of the Legión Caribe and Figueres’ conviction that warfare was the only way to end the eight-year regime, should be regarded as another central factor explaining the 1948 Civil War.

47 A detailed description of Figueres’ efforts to organise the civil war is narrated by Figueres himself. Figueres-Ferrer 1987, pp. 51-121.
48 For a complete transcription of the Pacto del Caribe see, Aguilar-Bulgarelli 1993, pp. 307-312.
49 Bell 1979, p. 208.
50 This was how Figures ironically used to call many PUN leaders.
51 Figueres-Ferrer 1987, pp. 89-119.
3.4.2 The U.S. Government and a Weak Military

Figueres’ crusade was fuelled with a rising popular unrest that characterised Costa Rica throughout the 1948 electoral process, especially after the annulment of the election. The restlessness in the country is well illustrated by the comments of an anonymous ELN soldier, ‘The country was ready to follow the first one who fired a weapon.’ Additionally, Figueres’ movement benefited from the position taken by the U.S. government, as well as by the weakness of the Costa Rican army.

In terms of the international influence in the crisis, one central factor bolstering the ‘revolutionary’ movement was the position taken by the American Embassy. At a time when the Cold War was gathering momentum, the United States was not comfortable with the influence attained by the Left in the Costa Rican government. The U.S. took several actions in order to eliminate this influence and prevent Costa Rica from becoming ‘the Czechoslovakia of the Western Hemisphere.’ Firstly, they decided to appoint Nathaniel Davis as the new American Ambassador in the country. Mr. Davis came to San José from the U.S. Embassy in Moscow and was considered an expert on Communism. Davis adopted an energetically anti-communist posture, hostile to Picado’s government and favourable to the opposition.

Secondly, the Department of State demanded that Nicaraguan dictator, Anastasio Somoza, stop his interference in Costa Rica’s internal affairs. Somoza had decided, with Picado’s approval, to send his Guardia Nacional (National Guard) into Costa Rica in order to protect the border between the two countries and support the government. The Nicaraguan dictator had grounds to fear a possible victory of the revolutionary movement, as it was reasonable to believe that with Figueres in power his regime would be the next target of the Legión Caribe. Finally, the United States not only knew and did nothing to obstruct the military aid received by the ELN, but also blocked the Costa Rican government’s efforts to acquire military provisions. As explained by Teodoro Picado in a letter communicating his resignation of the

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53 That was how Víctor Haya de la Torre described Costa Rica in a speech at Yale University in 1948. For more details see, Cerdas-Cruz 1992, pp. 293-294.; Schifter 1981, p. 133.
54 For further details on the American participation in the 1948 Costa Rican Civil War see, Schifter 1982, pp. 135-201.
presidency to Mora and Calderón, ‘incontestable forces are absolutely determined to make us lose the battle.’ It is hard to deny that the U.S.A. was happy to clear the way for a revolutionary movement seeking to unseat a coalition government with leftist participation.

The revolutionary movement also benefited from the vulnerability and the internal division of the armed forces. It is worth noting that the Costa Rican army had grown progressively weaker since the end of the First World War. Rodolfo Cerdas-Cruz acknowledges that in 1922 the U.S. State Department reported that a civilian police was gradually substituting the country’s army. By 1931, American authorities in Costa Rica indicated that the nation’s army was practically non-existent.

On top of its feebleness and its inability to get weapons due to the American blockade, the government forces were divided into three distinct groups. One group, denominated the Unidad Móvil (Mobile Unit), responded to Picado’s orders, the civil police was loyal to Calderón, and those known as the Brigadas de Choque (Hit Brigades) or the ‘linieros’ were led by Manuel Mora and the Communist Party. It was this last group, mainly integrated by banana plantation workers, that presented the greatest resistance to Figueres’ ELN. Furthermore, there is evidence that the government did not fully trust the armed Left. Mora’s accusations regarding Picado’s unwillingness to supply them with weapons were confirmed when the ELN captured munitions still in their original boxes stored in various government quarters. The weakness and internal division amongst the government’s armed forces should be taken into consideration, not only as a factor that eased the ELN victory, but also as an element that may have convinced Figueres to start his crusade in the first place.

In sum, among the commonly noted factors responsible for the civil war one finds: the government’s economic failures, its corrupt practices, the opposition of the oligarchy, the mounting social violence and constant repression of the government’s political adversaries and, as a catalysing factor, the subsequent electoral frauds, especially the

one in 1948. These elements motivated the formation of a strong political opposition and even the outset of the armed hostilities.

Nevertheless, a peace agreement that would have stopped the civil war could have been reached if it had not been for the division in the opposition alliance and the inability of negotiators to satisfy the objectives of Figueres and the PSD. This was no easy task, as it involved terminating the eight-year regime, a position that most certainly would not have been accepted by Calderón. At the same time, it entailed convincing Figueres to retreat from a war that he regarded as the only way out of the crisis and that, if successful, would have given him and his group the chance to govern alone—with no PUN interference. Moreover, the aid he was receiving from the Legión Caribe, the position of the United States, and, most importantly, the weakness of the government’s armed forces, were elements that surely convinced him to carry on with his plan, and provided reasons for his final victory.

Thus, the political setting in Costa Rica previous to the civil war was characterised by an increasing American intervention, and by a presidency built upon a very controversial coalition, a weak—easily influenced—parliament, very ‘fluid’ parties forming unstable coalitions, a feeble and divided military, and ineffective electoral institutions. This institutional configuration proved to be highly inefficient in controlling political tensions, safeguarding constitutional guarantees, and preventing an armed confrontation after the dubious 1948 election. This, in conjunction with the mutual hatred of the two most important leaders of the contending parts (Calderón and Figueres), made war virtually inevitable.

4 The Civil War Outcomes: Political Reforms and Party Families

As indicated, after six weeks of warfare the ELN ousted the government. This marked the end of the eight-year regime. The losing alliance successfully negotiated the preservation of their social reforms. At the same time, the PUN supporters wanted Ulate to be declared president at once, fearing a Figueres dictatorship. Furthermore, PSD members were ready to take advantage of the war’s outcome and eager to get into office and start implementing their social democratic project. This general post-war uncertainty came to an end when Figueres and Ulate signed a pact in 1948. It
appointed Figueres to head a *de facto* Governing Junta for at least eighteen months, and stated that afterwards Ulate would assume office. Eighteen months later, after having called for a Constituent Assembly—dominated mainly by PUN members—and Figueres kept his word.

The fact that Figueres signed and respected the pact when he had complete military control of the country shows not only the veracity of his democratic principles, but also the significance of other contextual factors and political pressures that surely influenced his decision. Among them one finds: 1) the logical contradiction of leading a dictatorship after claiming to fight to rescue democracy, 2) the fact that most of his supporters were indeed Ulate’s followers (they had voted for him in the 1948 election and were later recruited by the ELN to fight against the fraud), and 3) political pressures from the U.S. demanding that Figueres not continue with the Legión Caribe’s plan (one he had agreed on) to get rid of other dictatorships in the region. Ceding power to Ulate would have been a strategic move not to involve Costa Rica in this enterprise.

In any case, at that moment the country presented all the ingredients needed for the establishment of a military dictatorship. This, however, did not happen. On the contrary, one of the most important democratic precedents of Costa Rica’s political history was settled when the winning candidate of the 1948 election assumed office in 1949. This opened the door to a succession of reforms that created the institutional framework needed for the consolidation of democracy in Costa Rica.

Politically speaking the main effects of the 1948 war can be divided into two general processes: the approval of central political reforms, and the formation and evolution of Costa Rica’s main ‘party families.’

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59 The forty-five seats of the Constituent Assembly were allocated as follows: 36 for the PUN, 6 for the Partido Constitucional, 4 for the PSD, and 1 for the Partido Confraternidad. Salom 1991, p. 85.
60 Peeler 1996, p. 78.
4.1 Political Reforms

The post-war period was a time of reform. The country’s political setting was mainly influenced by four of these reforms: 1) the weakening of the presidency and strengthening of the assembly, 2) the abolition of the army, 3) the implementation of major electoral reforms—including a reinforced electoral tribunal—and 4) the banning of communist parties from electoral activities. This last measure—and its implications—which countered with the general democratic transition prompted by the other reforms, will be analysed in the coming section. The present section assesses the other three.

In the first place, the 1949 Constituent Assembly protected the institutional interests of the legislative branch and weakened the powers of the presidency. This contrasts with the cases of most Latin American countries and can be explained as a constituents’ reaction against the presidential power abuses (particularly electoral manipulation) characteristic of pre-1948 Costa Rican politics.61

The key measures taken to weaken the presidency were: 1) subjecting presidential emergency powers to assembly approval by a two-thirds majority, 2) eliminating the president’s veto on national budget, 3) mandating an eight-year intervening period before an ex-president could serve again,62 4) commanding that all conventions and treaties be subject to assembly approval, 5) explicitly prohibiting the pocket veto and any executive refusal to sign legislation passed over presidential objections, 6) providing for the interpellation and censure of cabinet members, 7) removing any presidential prerogative in the election of the Supreme Court judges, making it an undisputed congressional responsibility, and 9) demanding the president ask the assembly’s permission before leaving the country.63 In the words of John Booth, ‘The

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62 Presidential reelection was ultimately banned by a constitutional reform in 1969. However the Constitutional Court struck down this reform in 2003, and the country went back to the original 1949 rule. For details see, La Nación 26 de junio 1969; La Nación 5 de abril 2003.
1949 Constitution grants the Legislative Assembly powers that makes it one of the strongest legislatures in Latin America.\(^{64}\)

The weakening of the presidency and the strengthening of the congress meant a single capable leader was no longer enough to lead a party, let alone a government. The support of competent party members, able to integrate a coherent and efficient party caucus in parliament became crucial. The aforementioned reforms led to the reinforcement of parties’ cadres and resulted in stronger, more participatory parties, where it was not so common—as used to happen—for single figures to gain complete control. Politics thus became more a collegiate rather than a personalistic business.

In the second place, the Governing Junta headed by Figueres decided to abolish the armed forces—his own Ejército de Liberación Nacional. Later, the 1949 Constitution prohibited a standing army. According to Figueres himself, ‘Never a winning army was so promptly disbanded and retired to civilian life after successfully carrying out its duty.’\(^{65}\) The proscription of the armed forces distinguishes Costa Rica from most of Latin American countries,\(^{66}\) making it impossible for military groups to develop into political actors and for coups d’etat to become part of the country’s political dynamics.\(^{67}\) As a result, the monopoly of the political arena was left to civilian groups whose only legitimate vehicles to access power were political parties. The absence of an army not only has limited the struggle for political power to parties via democratic elections, but also has shaped the national democratic culture.\(^{68}\)

In the third place, the post-war years witnessed the approval of major electoral reforms. To begin with, in 1949 the mid-term legislative elections were eliminated, concentrating the presidential, legislative, and municipal contests into one single process. This increased the influence of the presidential candidate and his party over


\(^{65}\) Figueres-Ferrer 1987, p. 345.

\(^{66}\) Following the results of a plebiscite, a constitutional reform in 1995 also abolished the armed forces in Panama.

\(^{67}\) Urcuyo-Fournier 1990, p. 166.

\(^{68}\) For different studies about Costa Rica’s political culture see, Booth and Seligson 1993; Seligson 2001a; PEN 2001, Chap 13.
the legislative and municipal elections results. This phenomenon, defined by Shugart and Carey as ‘electoral concurrence,’ 69 not only produced a stronger party discipline in congress, 70 but also has become one of the central elements reinforcing the formation of a two-party system in Costa Rica. 71

Additionally, in 1949 the Costa Rican electorate was expanded when voting restrictions for gender and race reasons—the only ones remaining—were eliminated. Moreover, in that same year the voting age was set at twenty (in 1971 it was lowered to eighteen). 72 A broader and more geographically dispersed electorate 73 left no alternative to parties but to create stronger internal organisations, and to start a process of decentralisation which would permit the mobilisation of voters throughout the whole national territory. More voters meant further organisation and important logistic efforts for political parties.

Graph 1 clearly depicts the increasing trend in citizens’ electoral participation resulting from these reforms in the post-war period (marked with a black line). This rising trend ended in 1998, when Costa Rica’s electoral setting entered a stage of flux caused by the erosion of citizens’ partisan loyalties, or ‘partisan dealignment.’ 74 In any case, following Robert Dahl, the political ‘inclusiveness’ achieved by the aforementioned electoral reforms eventually led to a more representative government based on an inclusive demos. 75

Finally, another central electoral reform took place when the 1949 Constitution reconstituted the Electoral Tribunal, creating the Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones

69 Shugart and Carey 1992, pp. 221-239.
70 However, John Carey has highlighted that the Costa Rican major parties’ legislative fractions still lack the copartisan cohesion that they ought to have. The absence of punitive sanctions in order to enforce party lines may be a reason for this phenomenon. Carey 1996, pp. 148-153.
71 The effects of electoral concurrence in the Costa Rican party system are discussed in, Sánchez 2001, pp. 140-143.
72 Lehoucq 1998, pp. 53-55.
73 Most of the black population in Costa Rica lives in the province of Limón, on the Atlantic coast in the southeastern part of the country.
74 Following Pippa Norris, partisan dealignment is defined as, ‘the weakening of affective, habitual and stable party loyalties among the electorate.’ Norris 1997, p. 86. For an in-depth study about dealignment in Costa Rica see, Sánchez 2003a
(Supreme Electoral Tribunal [TSE]). This entity, defined by Deborah Yashar as ‘the real novelty of Costa Rica’s political institutions,’ was given exclusive responsibility and absolute political and financial independence for the organisation, direction, and vigilance of acts relating to suffrage. The TSE magistrates are appointed by the Supreme Court of Justice. The TSE operates the Civil Registry, the other key electoral entity in Costa Rica—also reconstituted in 1949. This latter institution keeps and updates the general citizens registry, elaborates the electoral roll, and issues a mandatory national identity card that serves as the identification document during elections. This institutional engineering has proven highly efficient for organising transparent electoral processes in the country.

The TSE may also investigate charges of political partiality by public employees, file criminal charges against persons violating electoral laws, scrutinise and validate electoral results, and control the police forces during electoral periods. Furthermore, it regulates campaign organisations’ compliance with the electoral law, monitors executive branch campaign neutrality, and disburses public campaign subsidies. The TSE’s effectiveness in conducting elections has virtually eradicated the incidence of fraud. This provides the country with elections globally reputed for their fairness and honesty. It is no wonder that the TSE—referred to in Costa Rica as the ‘fourth branch of government’—has served as a model for most electoral institutions in Latin America.

An efficient, trustworthy, and independent electoral institution generates stability for political parties. According to Mainwaring and Scully, stability in the rules and nature of inter-party competition is the most important condition for the institutionalisation of

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76 Originally, the Electoral Tribunal and the National Registry were created by an electoral code promulgated in 1946.
77 Yashar 1995, p. 93.
80 For further details about the Costa Rican Civil Registry see, Castro-Dobles 1997.
81 In 1998, 94 per cent of all Costa Ricans that had reached the voting age were registered to do so. Rovira-Mas enero-junio 1998, p. 16.
83 For more details about the prerogatives and responsibilities of the TSE see, Constitución Política de la República de Costa Rica 1999, Arts. 99-104. For analyses of the role of the TSE in the Costa Rican political system see, Villegas-Antillón 1987; Murillo 1983.
a democratic party system.\textsuperscript{85} Regularly organised, pristine elections with clear and generally accepted rules dissuade party leaders from investing time in searching for ways to manipulate or circumvent the processes. They also motivate parties to generate longer-termed political strategies and institutions capable of accomplishing them. There is no doubt that the electoral reforms of 1949 (especially the TSE) have played a central role providing the conditions for electoral stability and, therefore, for the progressive institutionalisation of the party system in Costa Rica.

Graph 2 illustrates how the percentage of citizens registered to vote has been increasing since the 1953 elections, the first ones to be organised by the TSE. It also shows how low and stable levels of absenteeism have prevailed in Costa Rican elections for much of the period. The strengthening of political parties, the reforms that permitted the expansion of the electorate, a reliable TSE, and the absence of any military involvement should all be given due credit for the country’s political stability.

\textbf{Graph 2 here}

\section*{4.2 Party Families}

Apart from the alluded to reforms, the civil war left another nuclear legacy of socio-political dimensions: it divided the country into two conflicting political bands. This division, acknowledged by Oscar Fernández as the ‘foundational conflict’ of the Costa Rican party system,\textsuperscript{86} was later transformed into popular support for distinctive parties or party coalitions. Mitchell Seligson correctly observes that:

‘Despite numerous studies attempting to discover the socio-economic correlates that explain party votes, historical party loyalties, most likely dating from the civil war of 1948, remain the most important factor.’\textsuperscript{87}

In a similar vein, Deborah Yashar has highlighted the influence that the central figures of the 1948 events have on political parties. In her words:

\textsuperscript{85}Mainwaring and Scully 1995, pp. 4-5.
\textsuperscript{86}Fernández 1996, p. 155.
\textsuperscript{87}Seligson 1987, p. 173. Susanne Jonas-Bodenheimer and Constantino Urcuyo also support this thesis. However the latter argues that after more than fifty years and almost a complete generational change, the political identities dating from 1948 are losing their centrality. Jonas-Bodenheimer 1984, p. 37.; Urcuyo-Fournier 2000, p. 4.
‘Partisan alliance in the post-1948 period in large part reflects affinities for the main political figures who emerged during the 1942-1948 reform period and for positions adopted during the civil war itself. To this day, the two major party blocks identify with the individuals around whom 1940s politics revolved: Calderón…and Figueres...’

Indeed, Costa Rica’s main parties have developed around the leading figures of the 1948 battle.

So strong has been the political influence of these two leaders that both of their sons have recently occupied the presidency—Rafael Ángel Calderón F. (1990-1994) and José María Figueres O. (1994-1998). This led Fernández to argue that the main parties in contemporary Costa Rica (the Partido Liberación Nacional [PLN] and the Partido Unidad Social Cristina [PUSC]) are administering an electoral machinery based on ‘inherited charismas.’ Even though they constitute one of the better institutionalised party systems in Latin America, the historical origins of Costa Rican parties do not allow them to escape their share of personalism.

From an ideological perspective, the two political movements organised around Figueres F. and Calderón G., together with the Left—whose most notorious historical leader was Manuel Mora—integrate the three ‘party families’ that formed after the 1948 cleavage. It is only then, in Wilson’s words, that modern programmatic parties became a reality in the country. In order to understand the relevance of the political movements emerging in this period, their historical evolution, ideological position, and electoral performance is assessed.

4.2.1 Partido Liberación Nacional

The first important party family to emerge during this period was the social democratic one, blended in the Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN). Having its historical roots in the PSD, the PLN was formed in 1951 under Figueres’ leadership. The PLN is the oldest party in Costa Rican politics. Since its creation, it was

88 Yashar 1995, p. 82.
89 Fernández 1992, p. 36.
conceived as a social democratic movement, advocating state-led economic growth, social welfare guarantees, and redistributive economic policies.\textsuperscript{91} This well organised, permanent party controlled the country’s politics from the 1950s to the mid-1980s. The profound influence of the PLN in Costa Rican politics has induced analysts to argue that since 1953 the country’s political dynamics have been defined by a struggle between \textit{liberacionistas} and \textit{anti-liberacionistas}.\textsuperscript{92} Its pre-eminence from 1953 to 1986 led academics to characterise Costa Rica’s party system during this period as a dominant party-system,\textsuperscript{93} as a multi-party system dominated by one party,\textsuperscript{94} or, more precisely, as a ‘bipolar system with one strong party and a series of shifting ad hoc opposition coalitions.’\textsuperscript{95}

Ideologically speaking, these opposition coalitions (composed by PRep and PUN members) had a conservative orientation. Nonetheless until the beginning of the 1980s they lacked the internal cohesion to pose an alternative ideological project to that of the PLN. Therefore, from the 1950s until the beginning of the 1980s Costa Rica’s political situation was characterised, if not by an ideological affinity, by the inability of the opposition to seriously challenge the social democratic model. The PLN’s hegemony allowed them to develop a project that defined the country’s economic and social evolution during the second half of the twentieth century. Some even name the ‘Second Republic’ in Costa Rican politics the ‘Social Democratic Republic.’\textsuperscript{96}

After 1986 the PLN continues to be regarded—not without disputes—as a centre-left party. Despite the fact that its last two administrations (1986-1990 and 1994-1998) have been more receptive to neoliberal reforms, the PLN has succeeded in incorporating members of diverse ideological backgrounds. An amalgam of ideological positions going from hard core social democrats to non-doctrinary neoliberals, are represented in a party that has proven to enjoy an astounding

\textsuperscript{91} The PLN belongs to the Socialist International. Former President, Daniel Oduber, was Vice-President of this organisation.
\textsuperscript{93} Vega-Carballo 1989.
\textsuperscript{94} Mcdonald 1971, pp. 154-163.
\textsuperscript{95} Peeler 1998, p. 174.
\textsuperscript{96} See for example, Vega-Carballo 1992, p. 204.
ideological flexibility.\footnote{Building on Sartori’s work, Oscar Fernández has even described the PLN after 1994 as a ‘confederation of groups.’ Fernández 1996, p. 159.} As stressed by former Vice-President and PLN member Alberto Fait:

‘Ideologically speaking, the only social democratic belief that we all share in this party is that the economy should be at the service of society and not the other way around. We are all looking for ways to generate a better distribution of wealth, but no one is doing it by defending a dogmatic position.’\footnote{Fait 20 May 1992.}

This phenomenon, typical of Kirchheimer’s ‘catch-all’ parties,\footnote{Kirchheimer 1966.} has surely hampered Costa Rica’s moderate Left electoral performances, and permitted the PLN to go through a rather smooth ideological transition towards the centre of the ideological spectrum since the mid-1980s.

The PLN has participated in the thirteen national elections that have taken place since 1953, winning the presidency on seven occasions (1953, 1962, 1970, 1974, 1982, 1986, and 1994). Furthermore, it has obtained legislative majority in nine elections—six times absolute majority and three times relative majority—two of them (1958 and 1966) even after losing the presidency.\footnote{From 1953 to 1962 the Costa Rican assembly was formed by 45 deputies. Afterwards, the number was extended to 57.} It is worth noting that until 1982 all the PLN’s national presidents were at the same time founding members of the party, showing the importance that the civil war and its outcomes had on the definition of the party’s leadership. In fact, as revealed by Alberto Cañas (one of the surviving founders of the party and former deputy) the PLN’s strongest leader—Figueres senior—retained his power for almost thirty years after the armed conflict. One of Cañas’ anecdotes is quite illustrative:

‘After we lost the presidential elections in 1966 don Pepe [Figueres] decided that he wanted to be the party’s candidate again, even though it was Daniel’s [Oduber] turn. After encountering some internal opposition, he settled things by threatening to leave the PLN and forming a new party

\footnote{From 1953 to 1962 the Costa Rican assembly was formed by 45 deputies. Afterwards, the number was extended to 57.}'}
if things were not done as he wanted. After that, all the opposition vanished.\textsuperscript{101} Don Pepe and the PLN won the 1970 elections in what was Figueres-Ferrer’s third time as Head of State. The influence of strong personalities has been abated but by no means extinguished by the institutionalisation process undergone by the PLN.

As indicated, the Social Democrats had an overwhelming electoral dominance in Costa Rican politics until the mid-1980s. This electoral dominance was followed by a period of alternation in power with the PUSC, which lasted until 1998. The 1998 elections marked the beginning of an evident erosion in the PLN’s electoral support. This phenomenon was confirmed in the 2002 electoral process, when they not only lost the presidency for the first time ever after being in opposition, but also obtained the lowest support in history.\textsuperscript{102} After the 2002 fiasco, PLN members are bitterly trying to explain the reasons for their decline, and hoping that the process can be reverted.\textsuperscript{103}

4.2.2 The ‘Conservative Alliance’ (CA)\textsuperscript{104}

The political movements that emerged in the post-war period as the PLN’s opposition constituted the second of the party families. Ironically, previous electoral and war enemies, Calderón’s PRep and Ulate’s PUN joined forces after the PLN’s overwhelming victory in 1953.\textsuperscript{105} This alliance was possible because, first, the PUN distanced itself from the PLN and the PRep from the Left, and second, due to their common opposition against the PLN. The two parties remained personalistic organisations, revolving around the leadership of Calderón and Ulate until their deaths. With this alliance, Calderón’s social christian orientation and the strong

\textsuperscript{101} Cañas 17 May 1992. Daniel Oduber was the PLN’s presidential candidate in 1966 and in 1974. He lost the first election and won the second one.
\textsuperscript{102} For an analysis of the main trends and the central changes in Costa Rica’s electoral scenario see, Sánchez diciembre 2003.
\textsuperscript{103} Sánchez forthcoming.
\textsuperscript{104} I borrowed this name from Deborah Yashar. This is how she called the political groups that opposed the PLN before the 1986 elections. Yashar 1995.
\textsuperscript{105} With Figueres-Ferrer as their candidate, the PLN got 64.7 per cent of votes both at the presidential and legislative elections. TSE 2002.
loyalty of his followers, blended with PUN’s old elite support and their conservative and anti-state interventionist ideological credo.

The two parties gathered around the Social Democrats’ opposition in the 1953 elections, the Partido Demócrata (PD), and allied for the 1958 presidential election when they were able to beat the PLN.106 Their electoral defeat in 1962, after the PRep and the PUN decided to participate separately, convinced them that the only way to successfully confront the PLN was to coalesce. Hence, they created a stable coalition (Coalición Unificación Nacional [CUN]) that succeeded in 1966. The CUN was later substituted by the Coalición Unidad (CU) (formed by the Partido Renovación Democrática [PRD], the Partido Unión Popular [PUP], the Partido Demócrata Cristiano [PDC], and the Partido Republicano Calderonista [PRC]), which won the 1978 elections. Finally, in 1983, led by Rafael Ángel Calderón F. the CU members integrated into a permanent and coherent party, the Partido Unidad Social Cristiana (PUSC). This was possible after President Monge—from the PLN—and the opposition leader Calderón F. agreed to pass several controversial projects in congress; and, in turn, the PLN permitted the Electoral Code to be reformed so that the four parties that integrated the CU could unite under the banner of the PUSC without losing their right to state funding.107

The PUSC has quickly become the other important political party in Costa Rican politics. In fact, its first electoral appearance in 1986 marked the beginning of what Jorge Rovira-Mas has named the ‘two-party era.’ According to this author, from then on the Costa Rican party system has undoubtedly taken a bipartisan configuration.108

Contrasting with the CA’s previous electoral alliances, the PUSC promptly grew into a nationally organised and stable political group. Furthermore, it efficiently positioned itself as a centre-right party, keen to implement neoliberal reforms.109 However, by no means can one say that the PUSC assumes neoliberalism as a doctrine. Doing this would not be politically feasible in a party system characterised by its ideological moderation. In fact, a political setting dominated by two parties with no major

106 In 1953 the PRep participated as the Partido Republicano Nacional Independiente (PRNI).
107 For details of the political elite pacts that permitted the creation of PUSC see, Pérez-Brignoli 1999; Hernández-Naranjo 1999, pp. 142-175.; Rovira-Mas 1987, pp. 61-62.
109 Having an anti-state interventionist history (from the PUN’s influence) facilitated PUSC’s adoption of this ideological position.
ideological differences—PLN at the centre-left and PUSC at the centre-right—is one of the leading characteristics of Costa Rica’s party system since 1983. This has been regarded as one of the reasons for the country’s democratic stability, especially during the 1980’s economic and political turmoil in Central America.

Since its creation the PUSC has accomplished steady electoral gains. In 1990 it won the presidential election for the first time. In this same year they were able to acquire a legislative majority, a privilege that had only been enjoyed by the PLN since 1953. Its second electoral victory came in 1998, obtaining a relative majority in congress; and its third in 2002, with similar results in the Legislative Assembly. As indicated, alternation in power between the PLN and the PUSC characterised Costa Rican electoral results between 1986 and 1998. This tendency, which according to John Peeler appeared to be firmly entrenched,\(^{110}\) was broken in 2002 when the PUSC was able to re-elect itself in office for the first time in the history of PLN opponents.\(^{111}\)

4.2.3 The Left

Finally, the Left composes the last of the party families. The origins of the leftist movements need to be traced back to 1924, when Jorge Volio formed and led the Partido Reformista. Afterwards, in 1931, the Partido Comunista de Costa Rica (PCCR) was organised under the leadership of Manuel Mora. Before the 1940s, leftist groups had limited influence on governmental policy. As shown, this changed dramatically between 1942 and 1948 after the Left—renamed Partido Vanguardia Popular (PVP)—coalesced with Calderón’s PRep.

Even though it became an official party well before the armed conflict, the Left reached a major turning point after the civil war. Deviating from the other post-war democratic reforms, the 1949 Constituent Assembly decided to ban communist movements from electoral politics. Along with the proscription of the Left came the closure of many worker unions that supported the party. In fact, from 1948 to 1953

\(^{111}\) Sánchez diciembre 2003.
the number of unions registered with the Ministry of Labour fell from 204 to 74.\footnote{Yashar 1995, p. 80.} This prohibition lasted until 1975. The abrupt hindrance of an ascendant political party which played a central role in governmental policy during the 1940s, hampered the consolidation of what could have been a third strong party, easing the ideological debate in the country. Ironicaly, this undemocratic reform benefited the development of one of the pillars of Costa Rica’s democratic stability: a strong, ideologically moderated two-party system.

While banned from official participation the Left ran candidates under different party names in order to circumvent the prohibition. It succeeded in electing one deputy in 1962 with the Partido Acción Democrática Popular (PADP). Absent in the 1966 elections, the Left participated again in 1970 with the Partido Acción Socialista (PAS), and in 1974 with the PAS and the Partido Socialista Costarricense (PSC). The PAS elected two deputies in each election. From 1978 onwards—once the constitutional ban was lifted—the PVP restored its old name and implemented a series of electoral coalitions with other leftist parties that emerged in the 1970s (the PSC and the Partido de los Trabajadores [PT]). These three parties formed the Coalición Pueblo Unido (CPU). The CPU participated in the 1978 elections along with the Partido Frente Popular Costarricense (PFPC) and the Partido Organización Socialista de los Trabajadores (POST), and as the only leftist representative in the 1982 elections. It was during this period that the Left achieved its best electoral performance since 1948, obtaining four deputies in both elections. In 1978 three of them were elected from the CPU and one from the PFPC. In 1982 the four deputies belonged to the CPU.

However, in 1986 the CPU divided into two different coalitions, Coalición Pueblo Unido and Coalición Alianza Popular (CAP), and their performance worsened thereafter. Each coalition elected one deputy in that election, and only the CPU was able to attain a legislative representative in 1990. Other smaller parties also participated in that year, namely, the Partido del Progreso (PP) and the Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores en Lucha (PRTL). In 1994 the PVP offered a Left wing option; while in 1998 the Partido Pueblo Unido (PPU)—no longer a coalition—and the Nuevo Partido Democrático (NPD) entered the electoral race. In those same
elections (1994 and 1998) the newly formed Partido Fuerza Democrática (PFD) elected two and three representatives respectively.\textsuperscript{113}

The PFD does not present itself as a leftist movement, yet members from different sectors of this tradition make up the party. This political group started to show some signs of stability, which suggested that it might have initiated an institutionalisation process. However, it was seriously weakened by internal disputes prior the 2002 elections, and by the emergence of other more appealing third parties—most notably the Partido Acción Ciudadana (PAC).\textsuperscript{114} Certainly, PAC’s appearance also hindered the options of the Coalición Cambio 2000 (CC2000) and of the Partido Independiente Obrero (PIO), two other Left wing parties that participated in these elections. As a result, the Left ended with no congressional representation at all after the 2002 electoral process. This had not happened since the 1966 elections (when no leftist party participated). The Left’s disappointing results in 2002 seem to be the expected outcome of a longstanding tradition of internal conflicts and fragmentation.\textsuperscript{115}

In general terms, the Costa Rican Left—the PFD included—has proposed a moderate, reformist agenda instead of revolutionary goals.\textsuperscript{116} Among the factors that have contributed to its unimpressive electoral performance are: the political repression suffered after 1948, the lack of ideological and organisational unity, a highly anti-communist press, and constant tensions between Costa Rica and Revolutionary Nicaragua during the 1980s.\textsuperscript{117} Other factors hampering the Left’s electoral results surely include Duverger’s ‘mechanical’ and ‘psychological’ effects characteristic of two-party systems,\textsuperscript{118} the PLN’s ideological flexibility, the progressive transition of the majority of voters and of the two main parties towards the centre of the ideological spectrum, and, in the case of the 2002 elections, the emergence of a more appealing centre-left third party (the PAC). Consequently, after the 1948 Civil War and until the

\textsuperscript{114} The PAC got 26.2 percent of the vote in the 2002 presidential election and 22 per cent in the legislative one. This is the best result ever obtained by a third party in Costa Rica’s modern political history. Sánchez diciembre 2003  
\textsuperscript{115} La Nación 17 de febrero 2002. For further discussion on the history of the Left in Costa Rica see, Salom 1987; Merino del Río 1996.  
\textsuperscript{116} This moderation has driven other regional leftist movements to question whether the Costa Rican Left is communist at all.  
\textsuperscript{117} Chalker 1995, pp. 113-114., Booth 1999, p. 442.  
\textsuperscript{118} Duverger 1987, p. 252. Duverger’s effects and their bearing on the Costa Rican case are discussed in Sánchez 2001.
2002 elections, leftist movements have not posed a serious threat to the PLN and the CA—later the PUSC—political hegemony.

As a way of summarising the historical development of the Costa Rica’s electoral institutions and the performance of the main parties or coalitions of its party families, Table 4 shows the results of the country’s elections from 1953 to 2002.

[Table 4 here]

5 Conclusions

The 1948 Civil War has been the most influential social and political event in modern Costa Rican history. No conflict has so strongly polarised political life and taken as many lives. However, it was precisely after the civil war that the country began an uninterrupted process of democratic rule and institutional maturity. It would not be possible to understand Costa Rica’s current political configuration without studying the causes and outcomes of the civil war.

As demonstrated, the 1940s in Costa Rica were marked by abrupt change and contradiction. On the one hand, a reconfiguration of the country’s main political forces started to erode the monopoly of the oligarchy on the political system. Indeed, the Communist Party and the PSD provided the working classes and the middle sectors, respectively, with effective and relevant political representation. Moreover, the growing influence of the former offered Calderón-Guardia the support he needed to undertake major social reforms. These progressive reforms have played a central role in Costa Rica’s current social development and political stability. Nonetheless, on the other hand, the rule of the eight-year regime (1940-1948) was also marked by social tensions, political violence, corruption, economic mismanagement, and electoral fraud. In fact, the rampant irregularities that occurred in the 1948 election were the catalyst that drove the existing social and political unrest to evolve into a civil war.

This war could have been avoided if the electoral institutions would have worked properly, and/or if the contending parts would have had the institutional cohesion as to

\footnote{119 For details see footnote 20.}
reach a mutually acceptable agreement. Nevertheless, the prevailing international scenario and the country’s institutional configuration (i.e. a presidency built upon a very controversial coalition, a weak—easily influenced—parliament, very ‘fluid’ parties forming unstable coalitions, a feeble and divided military, and ineffective electoral institutions) proved to be highly inefficient in controlling political tensions, safeguarding constitutional guarantees and, thus, preventing the civil war.

The reasons that prompted, or that made impossible to prevent, the Civil War of 1948 clearly influenced Costa Rica’s political leaders when they were negotiating the war settlements and, especially, when central political reforms where promulgated after the armed conflict. Indeed, the foundations of the country’s democracy were established right after the war, once the country’s political class was convinced that the development of institutions was the most efficient way to accomplish their political goals.

In the first place, it is only after the end of the armed conflict that one can safely claim that Costa Rica started its democratic history and popular, competitive, fraud-free elections became part of the national political culture. In the second place, only after the battle was over was it clear that the oligarchy had lost its political monopoly, having to share power with the working sectors and, particularly, with the rising middle class. In the third place, it is after the civil war that central political reforms like the weakening of the presidency and the strengthening of the congress, and the banning of the army were accomplished. Moreover, it is during this period that key electoral reforms (which included the expansion of the electorate, the establishment of concurrent elections, and the reconstitution of the TSE and of the National Registry) provided a stable political environment suitable for strong political parties to develop.

In the fourth place, it is after 1948 with a divided country, that the main figures of the civil war—Figueres-Ferrer and Calderón-Guardia—created political parties or party coalitions in order to canalise their popular support. Even if centred around their leaders, these political groups also had clear ideological groundings (social democratic and social christian). Later, the two main parties—first the PLN and then the PUSC—
became strong institutions and developed the capacity to integrate under their banners diverse social, economic, and political groups.\textsuperscript{120}

Finally, on a darker note, it is during this period that the Communist Party was temporarily banned from electoral competition, losing its historical momentum and its organisational strength. Nonetheless, the Left’s exclusion certainly eased the way for ideological moderation and bipartism, two features greatly responsible for Costa Rica’s political stability during times of regional turmoil.

Costa Rica is arguably Latin America’s most stable democracy. This nation’s political system has been built on the institutions and the collective experience inherited from the civil war. The absence of a military, well-institutionalised parties, respected electoral institutions, and a strong parliament which assures a balanced distribution of power, have been central in promoting Costa Rica’s political stability. As shown, the formation and development of these institutions, and of a political class evidently conscious of their importance, are nuclear legacies of the Civil War of 1948.

\textsuperscript{120} This is, according to Sartori, a central characteristic of two-party systems. Sartori 1992, p. 244.
Graphs and Tables

Table 1. Costa Rican Government Revenue, Expenditure, and Deficit, 1940-1943
(millions of Costa Rican colones)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Government Revenue</th>
<th>Government Expenditure</th>
<th>Government Deficit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>43.2</td>
<td>-1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>53.0</td>
<td>-10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>62.1</td>
<td>-25.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>50.4</td>
<td>80.9</td>
<td>-30.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Exchange rate statistics for Costa Rica exist from 1950 on, after the Central Bank was created. However, before that year and until 1974 Costa Rica had a fixed exchanged rate. In fact from 1950 to 1962 it was established at 5.60 colones per U.S. dollar. Thus, it is possible to assume that no substantial changes occurred between the 1940s and 1950.

Sources: Based on Salazar 1981, pp. 79-80.; Aguilar-Bulgarelli 1993, pp. 119-122.

Table 2. Turnout in Costa Rican Elections, 1923-1948

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Electoral Year</th>
<th>Registered Voters (1)</th>
<th>Actual Votes (2)</th>
<th>Turnout (2/1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1923</td>
<td>96,551</td>
<td>71,545</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>116,993</td>
<td>70,281</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>117,641</td>
<td>70,447</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>129,700</td>
<td>88,324</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>139,219</td>
<td>108,145</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1944</td>
<td>163,100</td>
<td>126,606</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>176,979</td>
<td>99,369</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 3. Winner and Turnout Reduction per Province in Costa Rican Elections, 1946 and 1948

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Party with largest vote in 1946</th>
<th>Party with largest vote in 1948</th>
<th>Turnout Reduction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>San José</td>
<td>PRep</td>
<td>Opposition Alliance</td>
<td>-3.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alajuela</td>
<td>Opposition Alliance</td>
<td>Opposition Alliance</td>
<td>-0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heredia</td>
<td>Opposition Alliance</td>
<td>Opposition Alliance</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cartago</td>
<td>Opposition Alliance</td>
<td>Opposition Alliance</td>
<td>-2.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guanacaste</td>
<td>PRep</td>
<td>PRep</td>
<td>-9.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puntarenas</td>
<td>PRep</td>
<td>Prep</td>
<td>-20.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limón</td>
<td>PRep</td>
<td>Prep</td>
<td>-20.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Based on Schifter 1981, p. 82.
Graph 1. Voter Participation in Costa Rican Elections, 1897-2002

* Between 1914 and 1917 the country was ruled by the Tinoco brothers’ dictatorship. Sources: Based on TSE 2002; INEC 2002; Stone 1975, p. 236.; Thibaut 1993, pp. 183-209.; Núñez and Rosales 1999, p. 13.

Graph 2. Citizens Registered to Vote and Absenteeism in Costa Rican Elections, 1953-2002

Sources: Authors’ own calculations based on TSE 2002; Núñez and Rosales 1999, p. 13.
Table 4. Costa Rican Elections Results, 1953-2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Electoral Year</th>
<th>Party or Coalition</th>
<th>Pres. Elect. (% of votes and elected President)</th>
<th>Leg. Elect. (% of seats)</th>
<th>Absenteeism</th>
<th>% Population Registered to Vote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>PLN 64.7 (José Figueres F )</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td></td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>33.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PD 35.3</td>
<td>24.4</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PRNI 2.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>PLN 42.8</td>
<td>44.4</td>
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<td>35.3</td>
<td>33.7</td>
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<td>PUN 10.1</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prep</td>
<td>24.4</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>PLN 50.3 (Francisco Orlich)</td>
<td>50.9</td>
<td></td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>38.7</td>
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<td>Prep 35.3</td>
<td>31.6</td>
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<td>PUN 13.5</td>
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<td>1966</td>
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<td>18.6</td>
<td>36.6</td>
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<td></td>
<td>CUN 50.5 (José J. Trejos)</td>
<td>45.6</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3.5</td>
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<td>1970</td>
<td>PLN 54.8 (José Figueres F )</td>
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<td>16.7</td>
<td>39.5</td>
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<td>1974</td>
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<td>20.1</td>
<td>45.9</td>
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<td>3.4</td>
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<td>1982</td>
<td>PLN 58.8 (Luis A. Monge)</td>
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<td>53.9</td>
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<tr>
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<td>CU 33.6</td>
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<td>4.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>PLN 52.3 (Oscar Arias)</td>
<td>50.9</td>
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<td>18.2</td>
<td>55.6</td>
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<td>43.9</td>
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<td>18.2</td>
<td>57.2</td>
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<tr>
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<td>50.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>1994</td>
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<td>49.1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.8</td>
<td>3.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>PLN 44.6</td>
<td>40.3</td>
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<td>30.0</td>
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<tr>
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<td>PUSC 47.0 (Miguel A. Rodriguez)</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PFD 3.0</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>31.2</td>
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<td>PUSC 38.6 (Abel Pacheco (a))</td>
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<td>PFD 0.3</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Due to rounding, totals for each election may not add to 100 per cent.

(a) This presidential election was decided in a runoff where Abel Pacheco (PUSC) got 58 per cent of the vote, defeating Rolando Araya (PLN) who obtained 42.

Sources: Author’s own estimations based on TSE 2002; Núñez and Rosales 1999, pp. 9-17.
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