Abstract: Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, revolutionary groups emerged in Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador and, to a lesser extent, in Honduras and Costa Rica. With the third wave of democratization that swept the region in the 1980s and 1990s, many of these revolutionary movements have transformed themselves from revolutionary party to political party. In this paper, I explore the electoral performance of parties that find their roots in the guerrilla movements: the Democratic Unity Party in Honduras; the United People party in Costa Rica; the FMLN, Democratic Party, and Renovating Movement in El Salvador; the FSLN and the Movement for the Renovation of Sandinismo in Nicaragua; and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit in Guatemala. I find that the movements that encountered the greatest success during their revolutionary period have also found the greatest success in electoral competition (FSLN and FMLN). None of the splinter parties from these groups who tried to occupy the political center have fared as well though (MRS, PD and MR). Finally, two parties that trace their roots to failed guerrilla movements in Honduras and Costa Rica have managed to persist as political parties (PUD and PU) while the future of the URNG as a political party is unclear.
Introduction

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, revolutionary movements emerged to challenge for state power throughout the globe. One author has even gone so far as to label this period the “age of revolution” (Goodwin 2001:3). Several notable studies have sought to explain the emergence of these movements and their outcomes in Central America (Goodwin 2001; Paige 1997; Baloyra-Herp 1983; Barry 1987; LaFeber 1993; Landau 1993; Vilas 1988; Wickham-Crowley 1989, 1992). While the outcome of these movements are often approached in terms of military success or failure, I am interested in taking the outcome of revolutionary movements in a new direction taking into account the electoral performance of these former revolutionary groups. One of the more interesting characteristics that many of these movements share is the tendency of the former revolutionary parties to transform themselves into political parties following the cessation of armed conflict. It is these groups, and their transformation from revolutionary party to political party, that is the subject of this paper.

Central America provides an ideal geographic region to conduct comparative analyses on both the causes and performance of revolutionary movements. It is also an ideal location to investigate the electoral performance of these former revolutionary movements. The region includes failed revolutionary movements who have attempted to reinvent themselves as political parties in Honduras and Costa Rica. Several small revolutionary groups in Honduras, having failed at mobilizing significant numbers in violent opposition to the regime, accepted a government amnesty and returned to the country in hopes of achieving their objectives through the ballot box. In Costa Rica, revolutionary groups were even less successful than in Honduras. Some of them joined the United People party after poor performance in mobilizing the left for revolutionary violence.
In Guatemala and El Salvador, revolutionary movements did not succeed in overthrowing the incumbent regime though they were successful enough to negotiate a political settlement. These groups agreed to disarm and enter the political arena as political parties thereby accepting electoral politics as the route to power. In El Salvador, five guerrilla groups formed the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) in 1980. Twelve years later, the FMLN and the government of El Salvador signed Peace Accords at Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City ending the civil war that had cost the lives of anywhere from 75,000-100,000 Salvadorans and marking the beginning of the FMLN transition to political party. Since 1992, the FMLN has gone on to challenge the dominant political party, ARENA, in presidential elections while making tremendous inroads at the legislative and regional level since 1994.

In Guatemala, following thirty-six years of civil war resulted in the deaths of over 200,000, the internal displacement of 1,000,000 and the forced exile of over 100,000 Guatemalans, the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit (URNG) and the government of Guatemala signed the Firm and Lasting Agreement finally bringing about an end to the conflict in December 1996 (Guatemala: Never Again 1999). The URNG began the legal progress of becoming a political party on June 18, 1997 and were formally inscribed as a political party December 18, 1998.

Finally, in Nicaragua, we have a victorious revolutionary party who were eventually voted out of office. In July 1979, a coalition of opposition groups spearheaded by the Sandinista Liberation Front (FSLN or Sandinistas) overthrew the last of the Somoza dynasty. The Sandinistas went on the win the 1985 elections, an electoral process considered free and fair (though by no means perfect) by many international observers including the Contadora countries (Colombia, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela) and Socialist International though not in the eyes of
the United States (Robinson and Norsworthy 1985). The Sandinistas finally lost power in 1989 when it was defeated at the polls by the National Opposition Union (UNO). Since their loss in the 1989 elections, the Sandinistas have remained the second strongest party in Nicaragua.

In this paper, I intend to explore the transition of former violent opposition groups to electoral politics in Central America. First, I will discuss some important issues related to the transformation of former revolutionary movements into competitive political parties. Second, I will identify those revolutionary groups that took up arms against their government in the post-World War II period and those groups that have made a subsequent transformation into a political party. Third, I will explore issues related to the “success” of these groups as political parties in terms of both their persistence and electoral performance. In the final section, I conclude with some thoughts regarding potential explanations for the persistence and electoral performance of former revolutionary groups as political parties.

**Revolutionary Movements, Political Parties and Elections**

Why is it important to understand how former revolutionary movements fare at the ballot box? In a general sense, understanding the performance of former revolutionary parties is similar to understanding the emergence of any new political party in that they are often formed with the intent of replacing traditional parties, they impact electoral competition regardless of their performance, and as new political parties, they often “threaten existing parties” forcing them to address issues and policies that they would rather avoid (Hug 2001, 1). In addition to these important reasons, studying the emergence and success of former revolutionary groups as political parties has even more implications than simply the study of new political parties.

First, in Central America the denial of nonviolent avenues of political change (i.e., effective political competition) was a contributory factor that led to revolutionary violence in the
first place. As Goodwin argues, “The development of popular revolutionary movements in
Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala did not occur, in short, until the authoritarian regimes in
those countries had made it absolutely clear that they would neither cede power to their political
opponents through electoral means nor accede to the demands of nonviolent reformist
movements” (Goodwin 2002: 155). While there exists several structural explanations for the
outbreak of revolutionary violence in Central America, for many, it wasn’t until the path of
change through nonviolent opposition to the regime was foreclosed that large-scale violence
broke out. The inclusion of the former revolutionary group into a competitive political party
system signals the return, or initiation in most cases, of possible political change through
nonviolent means.

Second, there is the possibility that in the absence of electoral success, the group will
resort to armed conflict. If a revolutionary group disarms and is able to secure a place for itself
in the decision-making processes of government, this will not only decrease the likelihood of
renewed conflict between the group and the government, but might increase the likelihood that
other armed groups will also be willing to accept a political solution as opposed to continuing
armed confrontation. On the other hand, if the transition of a revolutionary group is an utter
failure this may have an impact on how likely other armed groups will perceive elections as
being in their interest. In Colombia, political parties that emerged out of guerrilla experience
such as the Patriotic Union and the AD-M19 suffered severe repression and assassination of both
political candidates and rank-and-file members following disarmament and during the electoral
campaign. Although probably not the primary reason why the Revolutionary Armed Forces of
Colombia (FARC) or the National Liberation Army (ELN) have failed to renounce violence, it’s
difficult to imagine that this would not play into their calculations. And it is not only other
revolutionary movements in Colombia that are impacted by the experiences of the Patriotic Union and the AD-M19. In an interview by Jesus Rojas with Commander Leonel Gonzalez, it is clear that the FMLN was fully aware of and concerned with the violence perpetrated against the Patriotic Union’s during its disarmament and electoral campaigning (Harnecker and Perales 1990).

Third, at the very least, when a revolutionary group disarms in order to participate in the democratic political process, it will lower the overall levels of political violence. Whether one views the emergence of revolutionary political parties as the source of violence in Central America or a reaction to the repressive nature of the state against the civilian population, armed revolutionary movements were active participants in the civil wars that engulfed the region and cost the lives of hundreds of thousands. While disarming and competing in elections does not necessarily resolve all the issues at stake, it should bring about an end to large-scale violence.

Finally, democracy is strengthened in several ways. Former revolutionary movements renounce violence as the path to state power while the government and pro-government forces ideally accept the former revolutionary movements as equal political opponents deserving all the rights and responsibilities of any political party in the country. Citizens, who could not find representation within legally sanctioned political channels and chose instead to pursue participation among the various revolutionary movements, now have the opportunity to pursue their political, economic and social goals through democratic politics.

In the next section, then, I will briefly review the history of former revolutionary groups that operated in Central America in the last half-century and identify those which have made the transition to electoral politics.
Guerrilla Transitions to Electoral Politics

While the FMLN in El Salvador, the FSLN in Nicaragua and the URNG in Guatemala are the three most clearly recognizable revolutionary movements in Central America, they are not the only ones to have disarmed and tried their hand at electoral politics. Revolutionary movements also formed in Honduras and Costa Rica and, though, not nearly as successful militarily, they have also participated in democratic politics. In the rest of section, I am going to present a brief review of the revolutionary movements that emerged in Central America and have subsequently transformed themselves into political parties.¹

Costa Rica

Though Costa Rica remained democratic throughout the second half of the twentieth century and avoided large-scale revolutionary violence, several small revolutionary groups did engage in violent attacks against Costa Rican property and the embassies of both the United States and Honduras (Gross 1995). In the end though, none of the groups posed a serious threat to the sovereignty or survival of the democratic regime and their revolutionary life was short-lived.

Of those that took up armed struggle, a faction of the Revolutionary Movement of the People, “which to some extent represented a Costa Rican guerrilla option” participated in a leftist coalition, United People, in the 1978 and 1982 elections. Following these two elections, the group suffered internal differences over the role of violence in promoting social and economic change in Costa Rica. These differences eventually resulted in the Movement of the New Republic’s split from the Revolutionary Movement of the People (Redding 1986). The

¹ Since the revolutionary groups in Honduras and Costa Rica did not play as important a role in their country’s histories relative to the other three countries, there is much less information. As a result, most of the discussion will revolve around the groups in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala. I do not want to exclude these groups because I believe that the poor performance of these groups as revolutionary groups likely has much to do with their performance as political parties – an explanation I intend to take up in another paper.
Movement of the New Republic chose to continue to pursue political, social, and economic
reform through the use of democratic processes while the Revolutionary Movement of the
People continued to espouse the guerrilla option. In 1986, the Movement of the New Republic
participated in elections alongside other Marxist-Leninist groups under the United People
coalition.

*El Salvador*

In El Salvador, several guerrilla groups emerged in opposition to the regime during the
1970s. The Popular Forces of Liberation – Farabundo Martí was the oldest guerrilla group
having formed in 1970. It remained the largest guerrilla group until 1983 before it was surpassed
by the ERP (Gross 1995). The People’s Revolutionary Party (ERP) formed in 1972 and its
membership was characterized as “ultraradical” with a large middle class and female following
(Gross 1995). By the mid-1980s, the ERP had become the largest and most violent of the
revolutionary groups in El Salvador. The Armed Forces of National Resistance (FARN) grew
out of a division within the ERP in 1975, but similar to the ERP, pursued a military strategy of
urban warfare. The Revolutionary Party of the Workers of Central America (PRTC) was formed
in 1976 and operated primarily in the capital of San Salvador. The PRTC initially formed
because of its dissatisfaction with strategy and performance of the already existing guerrilla
groups (Gross 1995). Finally, the Armed Forces of Liberation (FAL) formed during the 1977-79
period. It primarily consisted of individuals from the Communist Party of El Salvador who no
longer believed in the possibility of achieving victory through elections.

In October 1980, these five guerrilla groups merged to form the Farabundo Martí
National Liberation Front (FMLN). For the next twelve years, the FMLN battled the
government of El Salvador in a bloody civil war until both sides recognized that a military
victory by either side was not a likely scenario in the near future. On January 16, 1992 the FMLN and the government of El Salvador signed several peace accords at Chapultepec Castle, Mexico City to bring about an end to a civil war that had cost the lives of over 75,000 Salvadorans. As part of the accords, the FMLN was to transform itself into a political party and compete in the electoral process. On December 14, 1992, the FMLN was officially inscribed by the TSE as a political party and competed for the first time as a political party in the 1994 “elections of the century.” Although there were serious differences among the separate groups that made up the FMLN, they succeeded in keeping them relatively muted until after they participated in the 1994 elections.

Guatemala

During the second half of the century, Guatemala suffered more violence than any other country in Central America. From 1960 until 1996 an estimated 200,000 Guatemalans were killed or “disappeared” during a war between various revolutionary movements and the Guatemalan government. The Rebel Armed Forces (FAR) is the oldest guerrilla group in Guatemala having begun activities in the early 1960s. The FAR counted on 500 combatants at its maximum and was nearly eradicated by the Guatemalan military in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the late 1970s, the FAR “managed to regroup and reemerge, [though] the FAR was unable to remain the dominating guerrilla organization in Guatemala, since new guerrilla movements formed that were more effective in organizing the country’s indigenous majority” (Gross 1995: 107).

The Guatemalan Labor Party/Revolutionary Armed Forces (PGT/FAR) formed in 1968 as a result of the merger of the Guatemalan Labor Party and disgruntled members of the Rebel Armed Forces. By the end of the late 1970s, the PGT/FAR had “formally abandoned guerrilla
warfare,” though some of its members broke with the organization in 1981 and helped form the URNG in 1982 (Gross 1995: 110). The Revolutionary Organization of the People in Arms (ORPA) began operations in 1971 and soon became one of Guatemala’s two strongest guerrilla groups counting on the support of over 2,000 combatants at its height. The Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) became active in 1972. Like the Revolutionary Armed Forces and the Revolutionary Organization of the People in Arms, the EGP also formed as a response of dissatisfaction with the Rebel Armed Forces. Until the Guatemalan military’s “scorched earth” campaign of the early 1980s, the EGP had become Guatemala’s strongest guerrilla group.

On February 8, 1982 the FAR, ORPA, EGP and members of the PGT formed the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit (URNG). According to some analysts, active Guatemalan guerrillas numbered between six and eight thousand while counting on the support of up to 500,000 supporters in the early 1980s (Jonas 1991: 138). By the late 1980s and early 1990s, guerrilla numbers had been greatly reduced to somewhere between two and three thousand (Halloran 1987; Taylor and Marshall 1996) which seriously effected both its leverage in negotiating a settlement with the Guatemalan government and military and its performance as a political party. On December 29, 1996 the URNG and Guatemalan Government signed the final peace accord at Guatemala’s National Palace. Almost two years later, the URNG was officially inscribed as a legal political party on December 18, 1998.

*Honduras*

Though Honduras did not suffer revolutionary violence to the extent of Guatemala, Nicaragua or El Salvador, revolutionary groups did form and operate from the early 1960 until the early 1990s. The Morazán Front for the Liberation of Honduras (FMLH or FMLNH) counted on the support of three hundred combatants at its zenith and engaged in sporadic
guerrilla attacks in the 1960s and 1970s (Booth and Walker 1999; Ruhl 2000). The FMLNH became much more active beginning in 1979. The Popular Movement of Liberation “Cincheros” (MPLC) was founded in 1980 when several members of the Communist Party of Honduras abandoned the “reformist approach” to political change (Gross 1995). Its maximum strength was estimated at no more than 100 members (Gross 1995). The third major Honduran revolutionary movement was that of the Popular Revolutionary Forces Lorenzo Zelaya (FPR-LZ). Like the MPLC, the FPR-LZ was also founded in 1980 and counted no more than 100 active members at its height (Gross 1995). In 1983, the MPLC, FPR-LZ and FMLNH joined with two other guerrilla organizations (PRTCH and unknown) joined to form the National Directorate of Unity (DNU) in order to coordinate their opposition to the Honduran government though it does not appear that they undertook any joint action (Gross 1995; Booth and Walker 1999). The FMLNH announced their intention to abandon armed struggle in May 1990, but were still active as of late 1991 (Gross 1995).

In 1991, the Honduran government announced an amnesty program for political prisoners and guerrillas in exile. Several of the former guerrillas from four different groups agreed to abandon the armed struggle and coalesce into a new political party (Booth and Walker 1999: 137). In January 1994, the Patriotic Renovation Party (PRP), the Revolutionary Honduran Party (PRH), the Party for the Transformation of Honduras (PTH), and the Morazanist Liberation Party attained legal recognition as the Democratic Unification Party (PUD). The PUD first presented candidates in the November 1997 Honduran elections.

Nicaragua

Nicaragua experienced one of the few successful social revolutions in world history. In 1961, Tomás Borge, Carlos Fonseca Amador and Silvio Mayorga established the National
Liberation Front in opposition to the Somoza regime. In 1963, the movement renamed itself the Sandinista Liberation Front (FSLN). For roughly the next twenty years, the FSLN suffered a series of military defeats and internal splits before reuniting again in 1979. In July of that year, the FSLN joined with other opposition groups to overthrow Somoza and the National Guard during which somewhere between 40,000 and 50,000 Nicaraguans died. By early 1980, the FSLN emerged as the dominant force within the new government and announced its intentions of postponing national elections until 1985 (Booth and Walker 1999: 82). Elections were finally held in November 1984 when the FSLN and other opposition political parties competed in national elections for both president and the National Assembly. Since November 1984, the FSLN has competed for national elections both as an incumbent and opposition political party.

Conclusion

Though several revolutionary movements emerged throughout Central America during the second half of the twentieth century very few of them have succeeded in transforming themselves into successful political parties capable of competing regularly in competitive democratic elections. In Costa Rica, former revolutionary movements have found a home in the United People party. In El Salvador, the five guerrilla groups that initially formed the FMLN entered electoral politics in the 1990s. In Guatemala, the URNG was officially inscribed in December 1998. In Honduras, several former revolutionary groups took advantage of a government amnesty to return to Honduras and form the Democratic Unification Party. In Nicaragua, the FSLN has “undergone a three-stage transformation from a guerrilla movement to a vanguard party in power to an opposition party” (Smith 1997). In the next section, I am going

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2 Local elections took place in Nicaragua shortly after the revolution, but in this paper I am dealing with those since the 1984 elections.
to elaborate on the electoral success of these groups both in terms of their persistence and electoral performance as political parties.

**Political Party Success**

One of the most difficult problems in thinking about the performance of the Central American revolutionary movements is conceptualizing what it would mean for these groups to be (or have been) successful. In strictly military terms, the FSLN successfully overthrew the Somoza regime in cooperation with other opposition groups. For the next decade, the Sandinistas ruled Nicaragua and went about implementing its revolutionary program. But ten years into their rule, they could not defeat the US backed contra insurgency and eventually lost power in the 1989 election to a coalition of opposition groups. But their most long-term success might be their contribution to Nicaraguan democracy in first, overthrowing the Somoza regime and second, their peacefully handing over the reins of government following their loss in the 1989 presidential elections. The FMLN, on the other hand, did not defeat the government of El Salvador and in the end “settled” for a negotiated compromise. While the FMLN never achieved power during the revolution “the transition to democracy would not have taken place in either country when it did, as it did, and with the same consequences in the absence of sustained popular mobilization” (Wood 2000: 5). Whereas one can debate the positives or negatives of the consequences of revolutionary activity in Central America, I am more concerned with the performance in the nascent democratic regimes in which they participated as political parties.

And while there are many ways in which we can conceptualize success for revolutionary movements, the same can be said for conceptualizing success for a political party. A political party could define its success in terms of electoral performance. What percentage of the vote (or percentage of seats) is the party able to capture at the local, state or national levels of
government? At the other extreme, new political parties could also measure their success in terms of how successfully they have been able to stay true to their original programmatic goals while influencing the formation of public policy regardless of their electoral performance (Rose and Mackie 1988: 534). In between the two extremes, of course, is a new political party that maximizes its electoral performance while minimizing the difference between its ideal goals and its programmatic goals. Though there is strong reason to suspect that the tradeoffs involved in electoral success versus ideological consistency have played a major role in determining the trajectory of the former revolutionary groups in Central America and elsewhere, for present purposes, I am focusing on their electoral performance.

Costa Rica

The Revolutionary Movement of the People formed the United People (PU) coalition along with the Popular Vanguard and Socialist parties to contest the 1978 and 1982 elections. In the 1978 presidential elections, the PU coalition won 2.7% of the national vote (Base de Datos Políticos de las Américas 1999). In the 1982 elections, the PU was moderately successful. In elections for the assembly the PU coalition captured three seats while for the presidency it increased its vote share from 2.7% to 3.4%. Following the electoral showing, the PU coalition “made plans to widen its support by moderating its ideology, abandoning hard-line Marxism for ‘progressive,’ ‘nationalist’ (anti-imperialist) ideas” (Chalker 1995: 114). Following the 1982 elections, differences of opinion in the Revolutionary Movement of the People between one group that favored the “clandestine, guerrilla option” and another group which favored the more “traditional means sanctioned by Costa Rican formal democracy” (Redding 1986:17) resulted in a party split. The group committed to democratic competition renamed itself Movement of the
New Republic and again participated with United People in the 1986 presidential and legislative elections.

Even though all three leftist parties that made up the coalition had undergone significant transformations and had removed the “more radical elements” that supported violent opposition (Redding 1986: 17), PU presidential candidates garnered less than one percent of the national vote in both the 1986 (0.57%) and the 1990 (0.65%) elections (Base de Datos Políticos de las Américas 1999). Following a number of years of inactivity, PU reappeared again in the 1998 legislative elections capturing 1.1% of the national vote though not enough for a seat in the legislature (Base de Datos Políticos de las Américas 2001). While the PU party has managed to persist under various guises, it has done very little more than that never again approaching its electoral showing in the early 1980s.

*El Salvador*

Since the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front’s transformation into a political party, it has participated in the 1994, 1997, 2000, and 2003 elections for the Legislative Assembly solidifying its position as one of the two most important parties in Salvadoran politics. While the 1994 “elections of the century” symbolized the end of armed conflict, it also marked the beginning of the FMLN as an *electoral* force in Salvadoran democratic politics. In the elections, the FMLN won 21 out of 84 seats (25%) while the incumbent ARENA (Nationalist Republican Alliance) won 39 (46%) of the seats in the Assembly.³ Since the 1994 elections, the FMLN has consistently improved upon its electoral performance. The FMLN captured 27 seats (32.1%) representing all but one department in the 1997 elections. In 2000, the FMLN won a plurality of seats with 31 (37%) followed closely by ARENA with 29 (34.5%) even though

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³ The number of seats controlled by the FMLN would eventually reduce to 14 with the defection of seven deputies to form the PD.
ARENA captured a higher share of the total national vote (36% to 35.2%). In the most recent elections of March 2003, the FMLN retained the same number of deputies (31) but their lead over the second most represented party in the Legislative Assembly increase from two to five.

The FMLN typically presents candidates in all departments under their own party label, though sometimes in coalition with other left of center parties such as the Democratic Convergence (CD). This was the case for the presidential elections of 1994 in which the FMLN joined with the CD to present a unified candidate, Rubén Zamora. In the first round of the elections, the FMLN-CD candidate attained 25.6% of the voted which forced a second round of voting since the ARENA candidate did not attain the required majority for a first round victory. In the second round, the Zamora was soundly defeated 68.3% to 31.6%. While the FMLN showed significant gains for the assembly in its second attempt, it did not improve significantly in the 1999 presidential elections. The FMLN candidate, Facundo Guardado, captured 28.88% of the vote. This was insufficient to force a second round of voting as the ARENA candidate, Francisco Flores, attained over 50% of the vote.

Since the transition of the FMLN to electoral politics, it has suffered two serious defections that have led to the formation of alternative political parties on the left. The Democratic Party (PD), led by former guerrilla leaders Joaquin Villalobos and Ana Guadalupe Martínez, formed when members associated with the National Resistance (RN) and Revolutionary People’s Army (ERP) left the FMLN. While the PD had seven deputies in the 1994-1997 Assembly, it was only successful in getting one deputy elected in the March 1997 elections having attained less than one percent of the national vote. It subsequently merged with the CD, the Popular Labor Party (PPL), the Movement of Christian Democratic Unification
(MUDC), and the Faith and Hope (FE) Party to form the United Democratic Center (CDU) in 1998.

In April 2002, Facundo Guardado (the FMLN’s presidential candidate in the 1999 presidential elections) along with other disenchanted members of the FMLN left to form their own political party. On October 11, 2002 the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) formally inscribed the Renovating Movement (MR) as a political party. The MR defines itself as a party of the “democratic left, social-democratic and heir to the traditions of the popular organizations of the last thirty years.” In the March 2003 elections, the MR attained less than 2% of the national vote and will most likely cease to exist as a political party in its present form as it did not attain the 3% minimum threshold as required by Salvadoran electoral laws.4

Three Salvadoran political parties claim to be heir to the revolutionary movement of the 1980s. As successful political parties, though, only the FMLN can rightfully claim this achievement. The FMLN has participated in four municipal and legislative elections attaining well over any threshold separating institutionalized parties from “ephemeral” or “flash” parties. Neither the PD nor the MR was capable of surviving to compete in a second election, let alone attaining the four or five percent electoral threshold it would need to eventually become institutionalized.

Guatemala

Eighteen months after having formally begun the process of becoming a political party, and sixteen years after the FAR, EGP, PGT and ORPA united, the URNG was officially inscribed by the Citizens Registrar of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) as a political party on December 18, 1998. The URNG entered civilian life much weaker than it had been both earlier in its history and in comparison with the FMLN and FSLN. As a result, the URNG

4 As of March 21 it was still unclear whether the MR would receive one seat in the Legislative Assembly.
frequently spoke of the need for a coalition of the left to compete in the November 1999 elections. For the legislative and presidential elections the URNG formed part of the New Nation Alliance (ANN) with the Democratic Front for a New Guatemala (FDNG) (which later withdrew from the alliance), the Democratic Leftist Union (UNID) and the Authentic Integral Development Party (DIA). In the legislative elections, the coalition won 9 out of 113 (8%) congressional seats. The ANN coalition only won seats in six of the nation’s twenty-two departments, as well as one from the capital district and two from the national list (TSE)\textsuperscript{5}. In the presidential elections, the URNG candidate of the ANN, Álvaro Colom Caballeros, won only 12.3\% of the vote and did not qualify for the second round of the presidential elections. While the URNG became the third most represented political party in Guatemala in the last election, it has only participated in a single election making it difficult to draw too many conclusions from its sole contest. The results of its first electoral showing (8\% of the seats in the assembly and over 12\% of the presidential vote) in combination with the organization’s longer history and mass following does make it more likely for the URNG to persist than most “new” political parties.

\textit{Honduras}

In January 1994, four of the former revolutionary movements in Honduras gained legal recognition as the Democratic Unification Party (PUD) and began preparing for the 1997 national elections (La Prensa November 1997). In November 1997, the PUD presented Matías Funes (former member of the Patriotic Committee “Francisco Morazán and founder of the PRP) as their presidential candidate. Funes won 1.2\% of the national vote garnering more than one percent in six of eighteen departments (Political Database of the Americas website, Honduras)

\textsuperscript{5} The ANN alliance won one seat each in the departments of Guatemala, Quetzaltenango, Huehuetenango, Quiché, Alta Verapaz, and San Marcos.
In the November 1997 congressional elections, the PUD received 2.3% of the national vote and successfully captured one seat from FCO Morazan in the congress. The PUD also fared well in Colon (12.7%), La Paz (5.9%) and Santa Barbara (3.6%) though not well enough to capture a congressional seat.

Matías Funes again represented the PUD in the 2001 presidential elections again capturing 1.2% of the national vote. In elections for the congress, the PUD improved significantly from their electoral performance of 1997. The PUD raised its national vote total from 2.3% in 1997 to 4.5% in 2001 and its seats in the congress from 1 to 5 making it the third largest “force” in the congress. While the PUD has improved its electoral performance in 2001 it does not pose an immediate threat to overcoming one of the two dominant Honduran parties (the Liberal Party and the National Party) though it is capable of playing a significant role in the country’s politics along with other third parties. In the 2001 elections, the National Party captured 61 seats and Liberal Party 55 seats. Therefore the twelve seats held by the remaining political do place them in a strategically important location and might improve their chances on improving future elections.

Nicaragua

The Sandinistas (FSLN) have the longest electoral history of any former revolutionary movement in Central America having participated in several elections since the revolution of 1979. The FSLN participated in Nicaragua’s 1984, 1990, 1996, and 2001 presidential and legislative elections. In the new regime’s first national elections in November 1984, the FSLN won a resounding victory in presidential and legislative elections. Though certain political parties boycotted the elections in protest against what they considered an unfair advantage of the FSLN and the fact that the United States Government considered the elections fraudulent, many

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6 The PUD won 3% of the votes in FCO Morazan.
in the international community believed the elections to be reasonably free and fair (Socialist International, Washington Office on Latin America, the International Human Rights Law Group). In elections for the National Assembly, the FSLN won 61 out of the 96 total seats with 62.3% of the vote running on a platform stressing the FSLN role as the “vanguard of the revolution” (IHRLG and WOLA 1984). At the presidential level, the FSLN candidate, Daniel Ortega Saavedra, easily defeated candidates from six other political parties with 62.8% of the national vote (IHRLG and WOLA 1984).

In February 1990, Nicaragua again held presidential, legislative and municipal elections. Unexpectedly, the FSLN suffered defeat in the presidential elections against the candidate of the National Opposition Union (UNO), Violeta Barrios de Chamorro. The FSLN candidate, Daniel Ortega secured 41% of the vote to Chamorro’s 55%. After winning 61 seats in the 1994 elections, the FSLN was only able to hold on to 39 congressional seats in the new 92-seat National Assembly. At the local level, the FSLN won 31 municipal councils or about 24%.

The first post-war elections were held in October 1996 with the FSLN again finishing as the second most important political party. Daniel Ortega, the FSLN presidential candidate for the third consecutive election, lost to Arnoldo Alemán Lacayo of the Liberal Alliance (51% to 37.8%). In the legislative elections, the FSLN won 35 seats with 36.5% of the total votes. In local elections, the Sandinistas won 51 municipalities of the 145 mayoralties.

The fourth national elections since the fall of Somoza took place in November 2001. In legislative elections, the FSLN won 43 out of 92 seats with 42.2% of the votes (Base de Datos Políticos de las Américas 2002a). In the presidential elections, Daniel Ortega again lost with 42.3% of the national vote against the Constitutional Liberal Party candidate, Enrique Bolanos Geyer, who received 56.3% (Base de Datos Políticos de las Américas 2002b). The FSLN has
not been able to recapture the presidency since losing office in 1989, but it remains the second electoral force in Nicaragua and the only revolutionary group in Central America to serve in both government and opposition.

Similar to the FMLN in El Salvador, the FSLN has suffered its own schism over the direction of the party resulting in the formation of a new “center-left” political party. Even more so than the Democratic and Renovating parties in El Salvador, the offshoot of the FSLN has failed as a competitive political party. In late 1993, two “currents” formed within the FSLN divided over such issues as “Ortega’s leadership style, the violent tactics used by Sandinista organizations, and unresolved debates over party structure and program” (Butler, Dye, Spence with Vickers 1996: 31). The two divisions within the FSLN were the “Democratic Left” that supported Ortega and the “For a Sandinismo of the Majorities” that were more critical of Ortega and his control over the party apparatus. After failing to “reform” the FSLN from within, the current that had remained critical of Ortega and the FSLN relationship with violent opposition, finally broke away and formed its own political party in January 1995. The final split was spurred when former vice president Sergio Ramírez’s was removed from the Sandinista National Directorate and as leader of the deputies in the National Assembly (Patterson 1997).

In February 1995, this group proceeded to form the Movement for the Renovation of Sandinismo (MRS). The MRS had expected to win a significant number of local and legislative positions in the 1996 elections counting on voters who had also become disillusioned with the direction that the Sandinista party had taken (Butler et al. 1996). Though the MRS “did attract many of the best brains in the FSLN and its continued attacks on the ‘extremism’ of the FSLN would create problems for that party’s attempt to move towards the center as the elections approached” (Patterson 1997: 391), on election day in October 1996, the MRS captured only
1.3% of the vote leaving it with one deputy in the National Assembly. Following the January 2000 pact between the FSLN and the PLC that has made it more difficult for the emergence and persistence of new political parties, it will be very difficult for any third party to overcome these obstacles and challenge the main political forces.

**Conclusion**

In the 1980s, Central America was a hotbed of revolutionary activity. With the end of these civil wars in the 1990s, interest turned from explaining the origins of the violence to explaining their resolution in the form of negotiated settlements in El Salvador and Guatemala and electoral defeat as in Nicaragua. In this paper, I have set out to take a look at the transformation of the former revolutionary parties into political parties. I have identified political parties in Costa Rica (PU), El Salvador (FMLN PD, MR), Guatemala (URNG/ANN), Honduras (PUD) and Nicaragua (FSLN, MRS) that trace their roots to revolutionary movements of the seventies and eighties. The FMLN and FSLN have become the dominant legislative opposition parties in El Salvador and Nicaragua respectively. They have also gained control of some of the most important local posts particularly the FMLN, which has held the mayor of San Salvador for three straight elections. During the armed conflict, there were many internal divisions over strategy and tactics. While these sometimes came to the forefront, they did not result in severe divisions. In the post-war environment, though, both the FMLN and the FSLN has seen splinter factions break away from the original party and attempt to capture the political center (or center-left) by forming their own party. The PD, the MR and the MRS have failed to establish themselves as a minor political party. All three suffered resounding electoral defeats and failed to persist in their original form following initial electoral competition.
In Guatemala, the URNG entered civilian life in the late 1990s much weaker than they had been at their height in the 1980s. The URNG was also in a much weaker position than their revolutionary brethren in El Salvador or Nicaragua. The URNG’s electoral performance illustrates this fact. While the URNG secured enough votes to become the country’s third political party, after thirty-six years of civil war and fourteen years as the URNG, the URNG’s electoral performance was anything but stellar. While the future of Guatemalan electoral politics remains tenuous, the URNG has much competition on the left with which it will continue to vie for political space.

In Honduras, the PUD’s history remains interesting and deserving of further research. There is little academic research on Honduran guerrilla movements, and less on their history as a political party, but they were able to increase their vote share and congressional seats from the first to the second legislative election in which they participated. Even more so than the Honduran revolutionary movements, there is little information about the revolutionary movement that took part in the PU alliance and the relation of forces within the alliance in Costa Rica. The PU did persist from 1978 into the early 1990s before disappearing for a few years. It returned to the scene in the late 1990s though its electoral performance came nowhere near its earlier results.

While the electoral performance (and only at national level here) of these groups is an important issue, it is not the only issue. In terms of the fortunes of these groups as political parties, persistence and electoral performance at the legislative and presidential level is only manner in which success can be approached. One can equally look at the effect that they have on public policy, their relationship with different social groups, and their relationship with the “masses” and “elites” that supported them during their history as revolutionary movements.
While I do not answer why these groups have seen differing levels of “success” at the executive and legislative level both within the state and across the region that is the obvious next step. Both the political violence and political party literature rely on many of the same theoretical justifications for explaining either the emergence or the success/persistence of new groups. Relative deprivation, resource mobilization, rational choice and state-based theories can and have been used to explain both the emergence of new revolutionary movements and new political parties. Ideology, leadership, organization, the existence and strategic actions of other political/revolutionary parties, and opportunity are also important explanatory variables in both literatures. There is a somewhat natural relationship between revolutionary party and political party that just hasn’t been addressed in the academic literature though hopefully this paper can begin to fill this void.
References


La Prensa of Honduras website. www.laprensahn.com/natarc/9711/elecc1.mth


URNG Official Website. www.urng.org.gt


## Central American Political Parties with Revolutionary Roots

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Party</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Military Outcome</th>
<th>Political Party Founding</th>
<th>Persistence</th>
<th>Legislative Elections</th>
<th>Presidential Elections</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FSLN</td>
<td>NIC</td>
<td>Victory</td>
<td>1979*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Main political party</td>
<td>Main opposition party</td>
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<tr>
<td>MRS</td>
<td>NIC</td>
<td>Splinter</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1.3% - 1 seat</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<td>SAL</td>
<td>Negotiated Settlement</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Main political party</td>
<td>Main opposition party</td>
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<tr>
<td>FMLN-PD</td>
<td>SAL</td>
<td>Splinter</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Merged with CDU</td>
<td>6.3% of vote</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<td>FMLN-Renovators</td>
<td>SAL</td>
<td>Splinter</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Uncertain</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
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<td>URNG</td>
<td>GUA</td>
<td>Negotiated Settlement</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Third political force</td>
<td>Third political force</td>
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<tr>
<td>United People</td>
<td>CR</td>
<td>Withdrew</td>
<td>1978; 1998</td>
<td>Change Coalition 2000</td>
<td>Less than 1%</td>
<td>Less than 1%</td>
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<td>Democratic Unification Party</td>
<td>HON</td>
<td>Amnesty</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Third political force</td>
<td>4th place with 1.2%</td>
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Electoral Performance in Central American Elections

Costa Rica

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<th>Presidential Elections (% of votes)</th>
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<tr>
<td>------</td>
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<tr>
<td>United People</td>
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El Salvador

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<th>Legislative Elections (% of seats)</th>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>FMLN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renovators</td>
</tr>
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<table>
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<th>Presidential Elections (% of votes)</th>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FMLN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renovators</td>
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Electoral Performance in Central American Elections (Cont’d)

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Guatemala

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<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>1999 Legislative Elections</th>
<th>1999 Presidential Elections</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>URNG (ANN coalition)</td>
<td>9 seats</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
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Honduras

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<tr>
<td>PUD</td>
<td>2.3% (one seat)</td>
<td>4.5% (five seats)</td>
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Nicaragua

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<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FSLN</td>
<td>63.5%</td>
<td>42.4%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>46.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>MRS</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FSLN</td>
<td>62.8%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>37.8%</td>
<td>42.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>MRS</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>0.4%</td>
<td>-</td>
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