

The cost of politics in **El Salvador**

Implications for political
participation and development

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Translated from Spanish by Arturo Velasco
Delgado

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Preface

Hanns Seidel Stiftung labels its work under the motto “in the service of democracy, peace and development”. The German political foundation has been part of international development cooperation for more than three decades and is represented by its projects in seventy countries around the world – the Central American nations have been no exception. Hanns Seidel Stiftung supports various initiatives working hand in hand with local partners, through consulting, training, international exchange and academic research, in order to contribute to the improvement of the political reality in each of the countries.

In Central America, our objective is to promote dialogue on political, economic and social challenges, based on the concept of an impartial State that seeks to build decisions through democratic pluralism. To achieve this, it is necessary to improve citizen participation in decision-making and to support leaders who contribute to democratic consolidation, sustainable development and transparency. In this sense, Hanns Seidel Stiftung also seeks to facilitate processes aimed at modernizing electoral institutions, in order to strengthen those mechanisms that promote citizen participation and institutional control.

In order to achieve a positive impact in the political sphere of the countries of the Northern Triangle of Central America, it is necessary to have a better understanding of the institutions, norms and customs that influence electoral processes, and of the difficulty of getting involved as a citizen interested in politics, so that this can contribute to necessary reforms in the electoral justice system and the various elements that compose it.

Therefore, the work “Cost of Politics”, promoted by Hanns Seidel Stiftung in collaboration with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, is a fundamental contribution to understand and strengthen democracies in the region.

This research addresses important aspects of the legal and institutional framework for administering the electoral process, the influence of national and international political powers, factors such as violence and systematic anti-transparency efforts, among others. At present, these dynamics facilitate practices of political patronage and exclusion in the political culture and electoral process, which raises the material and symbolic barriers to entry for those who would like to play a role in their country’s political landscape.

The objective of this study – the estimation of the costs of doing politics actively and professionally – is achieved through an innovative approach that considers the “cycle” of a politician, starting with the initiation of political activities, following internal party elections and culminating in the beginning of an official appointment. Knowledge of the factors that hinder involvement in politics helps in the formulation of approaches to overcome them and to build a pluralistic and transparent democracy.

The high costs of political participation in the Northern Triangle of Central America disproportionately affect historically marginalized population groups, especially women. Greater political inclusion of these groups would not only serve particular interests, but society as a whole. Democracy is an ongoing process that is built day by day.

Promoting the strengthening of electoral and political systems through fostering an informed debate generates opportunities for citizens' inclusion in the making of transcendental decisions for their country. With this study we hope to contribute to these debates, and to the necessary transformations in favor of a responsible political culture based on ethical and democratic values in the region.

San Salvador, July 30, 2021

Demian David Regehr

Regional Representative for Central America and the Caribbean
Hanns Seidel Stiftung

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Introduction

Getting into and staying in politics in El Salvador requires significant and elevated material costs for those who wish to do so. Therefore, not just any average or ordinary citizen can do so successfully. The main drivers that raise these costs are the current legal and institutional framework, the intervention of national and transnational *de facto* powers, multidimensional violence and corruption, as well as clientelistic and patriarchal practices historically rooted and naturalised by the collective imagination. While recognising the difficulties that are found in several proposed institutional and customary reforms to improve the cost of Salvadoran politics, these improvements are urgent. However, their viability depends on possible changes in the political party system and the legal framework, and, above all, long-term social investment to consolidate a democratic and participatory political culture, oriented towards political responsibility and accountability.

Methodology

In accordance with Westminster Foundation for Democracy's 'Cost of Politics' approach, information was obtained on the different phases of the electoral cycle, from the decision to participate in politics and the selection of the candidacy, to the exercise of public office as an elected representative, including the experiences of electoral campaigning. Such information was obtained from two main sources. For desk research, secondary sources were used, including scientific and opinion articles, electoral observation mission reports and evaluations from international organisations, such as Transparency International and Sydney and Harvard Universities' Electoral Integrity Project.

Furthermore, and, given the holistic 'Cost of Politics' approach, there were interviews with specialists in the field and people with experience of the true cost of politics in El Salvador. In-depth conversations, using a battery of structured questions, took place in order to obtain a consistent approach to the topics of interest. A total of fifteen interviews were conducted remotely, due to the COVID-19 pandemic health conditions. Of these, twelve were conducted with political actors and three with academic and electoral specialists. Three of the fifteen informants are electoral specialists and also have experience as political actors. Among the latter, we considered women and men deputies, active candidates, and former candidates with campaign experience but who did not obtain the contested post. Gender balance and representation from the various political parties in the country were sought. In total eight women and seven men were interviewed, covering a wide range of ages from 27 years old to over 60 years old, including members and former members of: the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional, FMLN), Nationalist Republican Alliance (Alianza Republicana Nacionalista, ARENA), New Ideas-GANA (Nuevas Ideas-GANA, PNI), Democratic Change (Cambio Democrático, PCD) and VAMOS (PV).

I Context

After the coup d'état against President Arturo Araujo in 1931, El Salvador began a long period of authoritarian control by the armed forces. It was not until the 1972 presidential elections that there was a glimpse of possible change. In that election, José Napoleón Duarte, candidate for the National Opposing Union (Unión Nacional Opositora, UNO), was expected to emerge as the winner. In spite of improper use of public resources to favour the government, electoral fraud and the very recent formation of the opposition

coalition, the vote count favoured Duarte. However, and without justification, the Central Elections Council (Consejo Central de Elecciones) suspended the transmission of the results for three days. After this blockade, a victory of the ruling party was announced.¹

Discontent increased as the regime intensified repression. For example, in 1972 President Colonel Arturo Armando Molina ordered the armed forces to intervene and occupy the University of El Salvador, for being 'a nest of communists'.² Spaces for criticism, freedom of expression and opposition closed. Further electoral fraud in 1977 confirmed this. The post-electoral protests in Parque Libertad in San Salvador were repressed by the National Guard and the police, leaving an estimated 100 to 300³ injured or dead. Polarisation shortly followed, leading various groups to search for radical alternatives.⁴ The possibilities for dialogue and participation were now close to none.

In this context, on 10 January 1981 the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) announced the start of its 'general offensive'⁵ against the government and the army. Thus began a bloody civil war between the government and FMLN guerrillas, marked by profound human rights violations, government repression and assassinations of leaders from diverse groups (farmers, students, politicians, and religious leaders), leaving more than 75,000 dead⁶ or missing people, mainly civilians. This offensive and the conflict with the government lasted until 16 January 1992, when the Chapultepec Agreements were signed in Mexico City.

With the signing of the peace agreements, the long-awaited possibility of power rotation through elections emerged. The military returned to their headquarters and the FMLN guerrillas became a political party. At the same time, the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA), a recently created institutional right-wing party, increased its influence in the country. At this point, the FMLN and ARENA became the two main contenders in the 1994 presidential elections. In 2009, after 20 years of ARENA rule, Mauricio Funes, from the FMLN, won the presidency, closing the cycle opened in 1972 and confirming that, in El Salvador, election results are not determined by force, but by a majority of votes.

The FMLN-ARENA bipartisanship dictated Salvadoran politics since the 1990s, being the symbol of the transition to democracy and the end of the civil war. Nevertheless, in the last few years the political system has given way to new players, with the registration of new parties such as Grand Alliance for National Unity (Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional, GANA) and Democratic Change (Cambio Democrático, CD), and the enabling of independent candidacies,⁷ which led to the first ever election of an independent candidate for the Legislative Assembly in 2018. The 2019 presidential elections deepened this trend, with the victory of popular former mayor of San Salvador, Nayib Bukele, of GANA. With 53.1 per cent of the vote, Bukele won the presidency in the first round and left FMLN and ARENA far behind, who barely accounted for 46.13 per cent of the total vote between them.

Even though the end of the conflict brought along a new electoral regularity, democracy has not been without flaws. Thus, although El Salvador often prides itself on having a more developed institutional framework than other Central American countries, national institutions are still weak.⁸ A fragile rule of law with little capacity for action and high levels of corruption and violence are a daily reality. In terms of corruption, and according to Transparency International, El Salvador ranks 113 out of 198 worldwide.⁹ In 2019 alone, corruption accusations were filed against three former presidents.¹⁰ Violence is another major challenge, partly a legacy of the conflict, partly the result of poverty and inequality, as well as an inefficient judicial and penal system,¹¹ and earned El Salvador the title of most violent country in the world in 2015.¹²

In politics, the above-described context translates into elections and political parties with low accountability, where candidates incur high costs, having to pay for everything; from posters to protection in order to move and campaign in areas controlled by organised crime. The significant progress of formal democracy since the 1980s and especially since the Chapultepec Agreements in 1992 must be accompanied by the end of causes that contributed to the war 40 years ago.

Politics and money

El Salvador presents important challenges and barriers that limit citizen participation in politics through candidacies. The imbalance among candidates, as shown by the different levels of access to state or political parties' economic or in-kind resources, the disproportionate influence of certain actors in politics, the importance of money for campaign competition, and the opacity and lack of accountability are just some of the factors that increase the cost of politics.

El Salvador has some of the weakest regulations in Latin America in terms of financing and oversight of political parties' and candidates' resources. The Political Constitution, the Electoral Code and the Political Parties Act establish rights and obligations, such as a system of public financing, prohibitions of certain sources of financing, and minimum requirements regarding access to information. However, beyond this there are no other limits or control mechanisms for money in politics, which affects the fairness and transparency of parties and campaigns and, therefore, the possibilities for citizen participation in politics. In addition, it can jeopardise the exercise of public functions by elected officials and make them subject to the influence of those who finance them.

In 2003, one of the first studies on the subject highlighted a phrase that sought to capture the state of political financing in El Salvador at that time: 'Politics is a business of politicians and they regulate it as they see fit for themselves.'¹³ It seems that, even after 15 years, this still rings true. Although the enactment of the Political Parties Act in 2013 included the regulation of private donations, free access to state media, and the obligation of parties to provide citizens with information on income and expenditures, the control system is still insufficient.

Firstly, public financing, known as political debt, is destined only for contending political parties and is limited to campaign activities. This means that this amount can only be used by groups presenting candidates and cannot be used to finance any other activity outside the electoral campaign. Additionally, the political debt is delivered through an advance payment of 75 per cent, while the remaining 25 per cent is distributed once the results are declared final.

On the other hand, in 2013 the Political Parties Act in El Salvador included, for the first time, measures to regulate private financing. The Act established ceilings for contributions from natural and legal persons, and does not allow anonymous contributions or donations from sources such as unions, religious institutions, or parties and governments from other countries. However, it did not set limits for certain donations or contributions, nor, fundamentally, set limits (general or specific) for campaign expenses.¹⁴

Finally, the Act establishes that political parties must keep their accounts and have internal audits on the use of public and private financing, as well as provide citizens with reports on the use of the funds obtained upon request. However, there is no obligation to submit reports on a regular basis and follow certain standards. Auditing is left to the discretion of the parties themselves and there is no provision for the existence of a control organ or unit to investigate, monitor and, if necessary, sanction the improper use of resources.

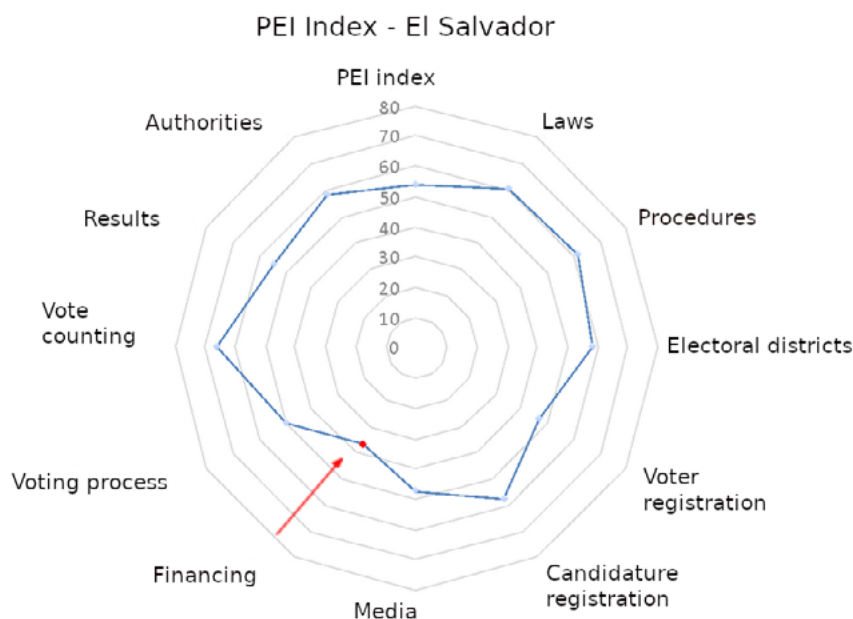
This last point restricts transparency in politics and affects equity throughout the electoral cycle, especially for those with limited or no access to resources. Nevertheless, beyond the need to update and strengthen the legal framework, in practice El Salvador presents other challenges that are not so easy to regulate, among which the following stand out: vote buying (in 2019, 17 per cent of the population in El Salvador reported having been offered money or materials in exchange for their vote),¹⁵ the influence of illicit funds in campaigns, and the disproportionate capacity of certain groups and individuals (the so-called *de facto* powers) to influence politics.

An example of this is the influence of organised crime. Whether through intimidation, coercion or negotiation, the role of these groups in politics, especially at a local level, is undeniable. Their influence has been seen in numerous activities, such as campaign financing, providing security or access to certain areas for candidates, and even coercing voters to favour a specific candidate. Some politicians have described it as ‘a reality that comes with political operations in certain parts of the country’.¹⁶

The above illustrates just some of the factors that increase the cost of politics, especially for the average citizen. In this sense, the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity Index (PEI Index) of the Universities of Sydney and Harvard gives us the first clue to the main challenges of political cost that will be detailed in the following section. This index evaluates the integrity of an election throughout the entire electoral cycle, which means it does not focus only on what happens on election day, but also on what happens before, during and after it, which is consistent with the comprehensive approach to the ‘Cost of Politics’. Thus, it evaluates 11 central aspects that include, among others, the legal framework for elections, voter registration, the campaign media, the performance of electoral authorities and, of course, the important component of money in politics.

Figure 1 shows that political financing is the worst-rated of 11 components evaluated in the PEI index for El Salvador. With a score of 36.4/100, political financing registers a low level of integrity, which implies inequity in the access and use of financial resources for candidates and parties and a lack of transparency and accountability in their use.

Figure 1: PEI index and political financing, El Salvador



Source: Based on data from the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity Index (PEI Index)

In turn, this component is made up of five indicators: equal access to public financing, equal access to private donations, transparency in accounts publication, the influence of wealthy individuals, and inappropriate use of public resources in campaigns. Figure 2 shows the results for these five indicators, on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 represents the lowest and 5 represents the highest integrity level. As we can see, there is little transparency and accountability in El Salvador. In addition, access to resources for parties and candidates is unequal and those with the most resources exert a disproportionate influence in politics.

Table 1: Political financing by indicators, El Salvador

	Equitable access to public subsidies	Equitable access to political donations	Transparent Accounts	Rich people buy elections	Improper use of state resources
El Salvador	3.1	2.1	1.9	2.8	2.5

Source: Based on data from the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity Index (PEI Index)

This of course has an impact on the cost of politics, especially for underrepresented groups and for citizens without enough political or economic resources. Usually, in order to campaign, and even before that, to join a political party and obtain a candidacy, substantial resources are required, normally beyond the reach of the average person and not provided by the state or political parties, especially in the case of local offices. The following section details the elements that have an impact on the cost of politics in El Salvador and, therefore, determine the barriers the common citizen faces with regards to political participation.

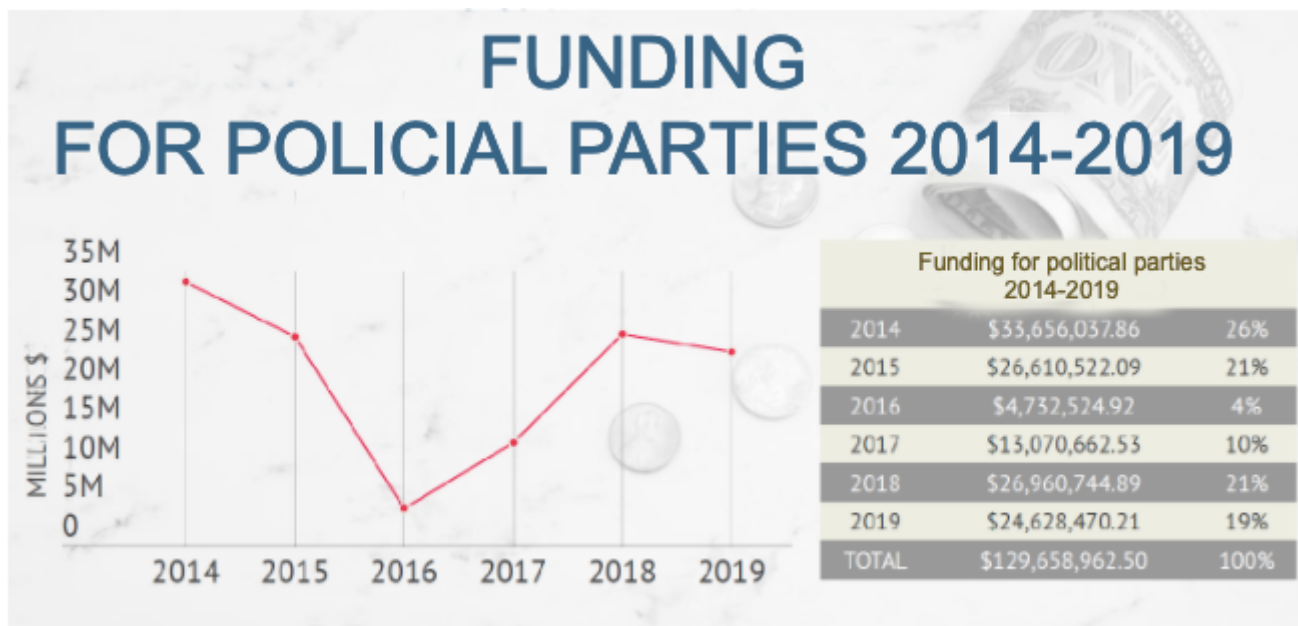
II The current drivers of the cost of politics

39.98 million US dollars were invested in the organisation and conduct of El Salvador’s 2018 legislative and municipal elections;¹⁷ and for the 2019 presidential elections, the total amounted to 37.5 million US dollars.¹⁸ According to the Salvadoran Supreme Electoral Court (Tribunal Supremo Electoral, TSE), the cost of each vote cast before the 2019 presidential election was estimated at 5.27 US dollars.¹⁹

According to information from the civil society organisation Citizenship Action (Acción Ciudadana, AC), in its ‘Transparency 2020 and Political Financing 2019 Index’, the total amount of political party financing in 2019 was 24.6 million US dollars. Of that amount, 52 per cent came from public funding and 48 per cent from private funding.²⁰ However, as was established in the ‘Background’ section, and as confirmed by the majority of the 15 interviews conducted for this document, it is very possible that the data on political financing in El Salvador is inaccurate. The political reality points to and contributes to the fact that the amounts are much bigger. Nevertheless, the real amount is unknown, due to, among other issues, problems of opacity, weaknesses in accountability, and the lack of verification elements (institutional, legal, financial) for the reliability of private financing information, as well as deficits in the quality of information on donors and the use of public and private resources.

Despite the lack of precise data to accurately measure the overall cost of participating in politics in El Salvador, there is an agreement among various sources that it is very high. The following image shows the amounts of funding for political parties for the period 2014 - 2019.

Figure 2: Funding for Political Parties



Source: Citizen Action (2020), slide #9.

The cost of politics in this country can also be measured using the data from the previous image for 2019 and comparing it with the country's GDP for that same year, estimated at 27 billion US dollars.²¹

As shown in this section, an important driver for the high costs of politics are the clientelistic practices that, throughout Salvadoran history, have been established between the population and candidates for elected office, public authorities or executive, legislature, and local government positions. It is part of the political culture that candidates and political authorities are expected to give some material gift to voters in exchange for their support. Despite this, it is also known that these gifts do not guarantee the support of the electorate.

On the other hand, the salaries and other income or bonuses (such as representation and travel expenses) received by those who hold positions of political authority in the main public decision-making bodies²² do not seem to compensate for these clientelistic practices or the investments required to run for and successfully participate in electoral processes. This is a situation that raises doubts about the conditions to which these candidates and authorities may be subjected to by their potential financiers, as well as about material obstacles that prevent the majority of the country's citizens from even thinking about the possibility of participating in politics.

If we add to the material, financial or economic costs other symbolic, moral, social, family or personal intangible costs incurred by people who wish to get involved in politics, it is essential to find in the following pages the main answers to a general question posed by this study: 'Considering the high costs of participating and staying involved in politics in El Salvador, what motivates you to do so?' Further to that question we also try to explore the main factors that raise those costs, as well as possible prospective proposals to remove those obstacles to citizen participation in the public affairs of the country.

III Politics as vocation, service and (or) business

Unlike other countries where participating in politics implies social recognition, greater professional prestige, and the honour of serving the common good of the majority of citizens, in El Salvador doing so entails considerable economic costs, as well as important professional, social, personal, and family sacrifices.

Taking this into account, there are multiple strategies that the interviewees have used to initially afford the high expenses necessary to carry out a competitive campaign within their political parties (primaries) and later, the even higher costs involved in the national campaigns to reach congressional seats or the presidency of the Republic.

A general strategy consists of investing or committing salaries, personal income, savings and economic and/or in-kind support from close family and friends. Other investments, such as personal loans or property mortgages, are rarely mentioned. It should be noted that having some current, accumulated or inherited wealth is practically indispensable to getting involved and staying involved in politics, given that the minimum investment for a competitive campaign for a congressional seat is estimated to be between 30,000-50,000 US dollars, although it is also indicated that the sum is almost always around 200,000 US dollars, and for the Presidency of the Republic the estimates range between 1-10 million US dollars.²³ Thus, from the outset, it would seem that access to politics is reserved for strata of the population with a high level of income or wealth, which limits the possibilities of political participation for a large part of the population, considering that the percentage of people in poverty in El Salvador in 2018 was 33.4 per cent.²⁴

Complementary fundraising activities are also frequent, such as raffles, bingos or face-to-face promotional tours. Nevertheless, the expectation of the population to receive something material in return, such as construction materials, groceries or cash, makes it practically unavoidable that these activities will also incur expenses.

As mentioned in the 'Background' section, corruption in public office, and the clientelistic culture between representatives and the represented, increase material costs. These behaviours are deeply rooted and normalised in the collective imagination and their intergenerational reproduction seems far from being reversed. For this reason, 'receiving something in return' is an item contemplated in the budgets of candidates, but generally overlooked in party budgets.

It is important to note that the interviewees agree that the material and intangible costs of Salvadoran politics can be attenuated or at least better carried with the support of family members and close friends.

Despite the fact that participating in politics is a source of social stigma and personal discredit, those who choose to do so also assume these and other risks, not only for the eventual fulfilment of their ideals, but also because the expectation of achieving 'something more than high salaries, when one reaches a government or parliamentary position, seems to be worth it'.²⁵ Possible benefits are trips abroad, or the possibility of giving jobs to people close to them. Different kinds of remuneration include per diems, bonuses for management positions, but also payments for matters that can be criminally typified as influence peddling, embezzlement or illicit enrichment, or rather '...what has been uncovered as cases of corruption in recent years and which are even present in reports of international organisations'.²⁶

Institutionality 'versus' transparency, equity and inclusion

As stated at the start of this report, El Salvador has recently approved legal and institutional reforms to regulate the financing of electoral campaigns and political parties. These reforms, which took place in the last decade, are considered weak and insufficient. When applied, they contribute slightly to improving the transparency of public financing (public debt), but have done little or nothing to institutionalise a culture of transparency and accountability, nor to address problems of fairness in competition or pluralistic inclusion for the political participation of most citizens.

It is common to hear in academic circles, and from civil society organisations as well as from members of more recently created political parties that *'opacity and inequity begin precisely in the electoral regime.'*²⁷ Most of the people interviewed agree with this assessment. These weaknesses are also denounced in several documents or studies issued by the international system; as an example, a report on Latin American comparative legislation indicated from the beginning of the entry into motion of the Political Parties Act the following:

*'Among the shortcomings of the electoral system in relation to political campaigns, we can identify: 1) the laxity of sanctions for non-compliance; 2) the limited role of control and monitoring by the entities in charge, such as the Supreme Electoral Court (TSE), the Electoral Prosecutor and the Court of Accounts; 3) the lack of regulation of publicity and accountability principles, which are the fundamental basis of any financing system; [...] Finally, all regulations are of general application for political parties, [but] the individual role of the candidate is not considered.'*²⁸

Lacklustre controls and inspections, and ineffective sanctions for punishing irregular conduct are mentioned by all those interviewed. According to a candidate for Congress *'sanctions are rather an incentive to commit crimes... it is better for a party to pay a small or ridiculous fine than to comply with legal norms [because]... they are not exemplary at all.'*²⁹

A lack of transparency and institutional weakness affects the functioning of TSE, which does not have a specialised technical team to carry out effective control or inspection tasks; but it is a weakness in practically the entire political regime. Based on what was said by most of the people interviewed, accountability and inspections of the whole political cycle (not only in electoral matters) are also deficient in other instances such as the Comptroller's Office or the Attorney General's Office. The weakness in accountability mechanisms in politics is also rooted in the absence of social practices for citizens to demand accountability from political authorities or representatives, perhaps also aggravated by civil society's organisational fragility.

However, opacity and inequity also begin in the party system and its internal life. The principle of party autonomy to self-regulate translates into the absence of intraparty accountability, as well as internal normative and customary dynamics that (in most parties) favour candidates who can contribute important resources to the organisation. This situation is notorious when allocating places on lists or ballots of candidates for the national election, since the first places in the party are generally assigned to those who can bring in the most money.

Favouring certain pre-candidates or candidates within political parties is not only due to pecuniary criteria; it also occurs due to the blessing or patronage of certain party leaders, which is considered vital for people who have real aspirations to be elected. Likewise, the electoral regime states that the subjects of public funding are the political parties, not the candidates, which means that it is at the discretion of political party authorities to decide who gets the funding, and how much they get. So the candidate depends on the favour of their parties in order to receive material support. This is another source of inequity but also of opacity, since the resources that individual candidates may receive are generally not susceptible to control or oversight.

Each political party defines its own rules for financing itself and financing candidacies. There are interesting differences, as indicated by those interviewed. FMLN collects a monthly quota from those who have been elected. The smaller parties, or those recently founded, have their main financiers as their leaders. Big business leaders have been a historical source of financing for ARENA and as a member of Nuevas Ideas Party (participating in 2019 with the 'GANA' insignia) indicated, *'almost all of us were financed by President Bukele and his patrimony... I understand that he also got a loan of around US\$2 million to help us in the 2019 campaign.'*³⁰

The assessment made by the small emerging parties regarding these problems, which is that they have originated with - or at least not been solved by - the current legal-institutional system, seems plausible. Based on their judgement, up until the most recent elections all these weaknesses or shortcomings served a purpose, or were beneficial, for the bipartisanship, and, because of this, the proposals for legal reforms to improve them did not have the political viability to be approved.

The valuable contribution from abroad and other alleged sources

One of the main drivers of the cost of politics in El Salvador is the economic support that candidates and political parties receive from their compatriots living abroad, known as the 'Salvadoran diaspora'.³¹ This finding should not come as a surprise considering that remittances sent by these people to their families are one of the main sources of income for the country's economy; in 2019 it received 5.6 billion US dollars, equivalent to 20.8 per cent of GDP.³²

Based on data from El Salvador's General Directorate of Statistics and Census (DIGESTY), in 2019 the total population of the country exceeded 6.7 million inhabitants,³³ but there is no consensus among specialists or unequivocal data that accurately determines the number of people who make up the diaspora. However, it is estimated that in the United States of America alone, there are between 1.5 to 3 million people who would fall into this group.

Table 2: United States: Salvadoran migrants and migrants of Salvadoran origin, selected years

Year	Salvadoran migrants living in the United States (DESA)	Population born in El Salvador living in the United States (ACS) ^a	Population of Salvadoran origin in the United States (ACS) ^b
1990	465 433	NA	NA
2005	997 858	1 104 390 ^a	1 474 342 ^b
2010	1 192 423	1 214 049	1 829 798
2015	1 347 952	1 352 357	2 171 894
2017	1 392 663	1 401 832	2 310 784

United Nations, based on the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (DESA), **Trends in International Migrant Stock: The 2017 revision, 2019** (United Nations database, POP/DB/MIG/Stock/Rev.2017) <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates17.asp>.

^a ACS figure is for 2007.

^b ACS figure is for 2007. Source: R. Padilla Pérez, V. Quiroz Estrada y F. G. Villarreal (2020), page 23

Source: R. Padilla Pérez, V. Quiroz Estrada y F. G. Villarreal (2020), page 23

The data displays in a broad way the dimension or magnitude of the factor ‘remittances from the diaspora’ in the cost of politics in this Central American country. This element is considered as part of the development of the Salvadoran political system, and, particularly, of the daily work of political parties, candidates, national and local governments and electoral campaigns.

A unanimous conclusion among those interviewed is that financial or logistical contributions from abroad are essential to pool resources for political parties and their electoral processes, but also to sponsor projects or public works executed in the country.

It should come as no surprise, then, that rulers and political contenders not only see the diaspora as a vital source of income for their purposes, but also as influencers of their immediate circles inside El Salvador, on important issues such as voting decisions, support or rejection of the politicians’ work, and the fulfilment or non-fulfilment of campaign promises.

However, this dynamic between the diaspora and the country’s national politics is not exclusively inter-familial, personal, circumstantial or spontaneous. It has an important organisational component in El Salvador and in the countries where Salvadorans live, so that for example in the United States: ‘[...] there are branches of political parties in cities such as Los Angeles or Washington, among many others.’³⁴

To summarise, Salvadoran politics (and its costs) cannot be thought of without the presence and influence of resources coming from the diaspora. One example is that several local governments have cooperation agreements with individuals and organisations of ‘hermanos en el exterior’,³⁵ especially those based in the United States. Therefore, it is not surprising that politicians and their parties explicitly develop strategies and activities aimed at obtaining their funds and support, both in electoral processes and in the exercise of public power.

According to practically all the people consulted, the diaspora's resources and influence are fundamental for the success or failure of candidacies and political careers. This means that the proselytising trips and tours to the United States, mainly to raise funds, are part of the 'parallel' budgets (costs) of the electoral campaigns of candidates and of all political parties, including the recently founded party of the current president of the Republic. In regard to this, several people interviewed highlighted that *'...during the 2019 presidential election, a large part of the diaspora was tired of the bipartisanship of ARENA and the FMLN too, which is why they decided to support the alternative of GANA-Nuevas Ideas and its candidate Nayib Bukele.'*³⁶

But it is not only the resources of the diaspora that seem to intervene from the outside in the costs of politics in El Salvador. People interviewed mention that it is a recognised, public, and notorious fact that the two so-called traditional or older parties have been historically supported or financed by other external agents. On the one hand, there are indications that ARENA has sponsorship linked to the networks associated with big national businesses. On the other hand, there are indications and ongoing judicial processes that seem to show how the FMLN has received direct and indirect support from ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of America) member countries, specifically through the company 'ALBA Petróleos El Salvador'.³⁷ All this not only hinders the possibilities of a more equitable and pluralistic participation of many population groups or citizens in politics in this country, but also affects the management of public office. Those candidacies financed by these resources will have to pay off the investment - usually in kind, through public contracts - made by their sponsors.

Violence, organised crime and corruption: other leading and conditioning de facto powers

Violence is a structural element in the costs of politics in El Salvador. It is a factor that raises symbolic and material costs. It has diverse expressions from physical violence to psychological violence suffered by politicians and their closest associates. Its patterns and expressions are multidimensional and, unfortunately, many of them are considered almost natural or inherent to the historical reality of the country. This is an aspect that is mentioned throughout the interviews and that is sustained by various national and international reports.

Violence in Salvadoran politics has indirect impacts, such as bullying, gossip, family pressures and workplace harassment. But it can also include direct physical aggression, intimidation, kidnapping or blackmail. Likewise, it is paradoxical that the new information technologies and specifically online social networks are instruments increasingly used to bring politicians and citizens closer together. However, the people interviewed also indicate that these new media are systematically used to spread slander, defamation and fake news that not only affect the political ambitions or careers of individuals but also their honour and family relationships.³⁸ Violence, along with organised crime and its links to corruption, are elements embedded in political life in El Salvador. The most evident is its regrettable presence in events that cause the country to be considered among the most violent in Latin America.³⁹ This presents obstacles to improving the perception of the fight against corruption.

Among its many other harmful effects on society and the economy, the influence of violence on politics increases the material and symbolic costs for those who wish to run for and remain in elected office or in public decision-making bodies. However, it is important to distinguish that within organised crime as a category two kinds of organisations and activities can be confused: the *maras* (or gangs) on one hand, and

more so-called 'white collar' crime which includes drug trafficking and the money laundering 'industry' on the other. Although gangs may also be involved in drug trafficking and money laundering, they are different in their purposes, modes of action and organisation.

Both indeed operate outside the law and systematically attack the lives, dignity, and property of citizens. Their influence mechanisms are based on various forms of violence. Undoubtedly, both are serious threats to human development and to the democratic rule of law.

Gangs or 'maras' are mostly involved in common criminal activities, such as robberies, murders, extortion, threats, intimidation, and 'trade' wars between each other. Their activity tends to be more visible, direct and locatable in more clearly identified territories. As mentioned above, drug trafficking and money laundering activities are generally located in the area of so-called 'white-collar crime' with a presence throughout the national territory (not locatable in specific territories) and transnational links. And although they may coincide with gangs in the direct execution of physical violence, they prefer to use indirect mechanisms of influence, persuasion, co-optation and coercion at various levels of public decision-making processes and before involving diverse political authorities.

It is not the aim of this report to delve into the calamities caused by gangs and drug trafficking in El Salvador and other countries in the region, especially in the so-called 'Central American Northern Triangle' (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador),⁴⁰ but to highlight that all the interviewees point to both entities as factors that increase the cost of politics.

The rise in costs involves a wide range of commitments that must be fulfilled, such as: the payment of favours, the commitment not to use security forces in irregular activities, the implicit cession by state and local governments of the control of territories, the shelving or omission of judicial investigations or legal processes against gangs or organised criminals, the institutional placement of bureaucratic personnel in line with their interests, the weakening of legal and institutional mechanisms to combat them, the concession of public works, and so on.

With regards to electoral processes, several candidates and former candidates mentioned that organised crime either makes it easier for them to access, or prevents them from safely accessing, certain territories to carry out campaign work. Members also influence the voting decisions of communities or people under their control. Interviewees mentioned that there have been, or they have heard of, cases where documents necessary to vote have been stolen, and direct and indirect threats to potential candidates to prevent their participation, among other examples.

Although the participation of organised crime in the country's politics is recognised, it is understandable that most of the people interviewed are scared and say they have not personally or directly experienced the 'cost of dealing with these groups'; however, they do recognise and explain in detail the experiences of 'other people and cases' in this regard.

IV Outlook

Based on the documentary research and in-depth analysis of the 15 interviews conducted for this report, we conclude that the material and symbolic costs of entering and remaining in politics in El Salvador are very high. Likewise, these costs pose extremely difficult obstacles to overcome for the effective political participation of any average citizen in their fundamental right to seek to be elected in a democratic political system.

The search for substantive improvements for this situation implies important reforms to the current legal system and to the institutional framework in charge of organising and managing electoral processes, as well as imparting the respective jurisdictional functions. In this regard, substantive modifications are proposed to the Electoral Act, the Political Parties Act and even the Political Constitution of the Republic, such as the neutralisation⁴¹ of the electoral body,⁴² the creation of a solvent and professional comptroller's office and supervision of the financing of campaigns and political parties within the electoral body, assuring its administrative, financial and political autonomy.

Improvements are also suggested to other institutions such as the Comptroller's Office or Court of Accounts, the Ministry of Finance, the Attorney General's Office and even the Judiciary to guarantee the probity of their actions and legal-normative effectiveness. For example, an interconnected and improved information system should be created between these entities and the TSE, so that important matters such as the integrity of donor sources, the legality of the resources, the veracity of reports by individuals and political parties, as well as improving the inter-institutional coordination, can be achieved.

On the other hand, we propose modifications to the regulations on private funding, seeking to make sources of funding and donors more transparent, and to exercise better control over the accounting and internal audits of political parties. Likewise, it is essential to improve the legal and institutional framework to regulate and control the costs of candidates. Additionally, it is proposed that ceilings or reasonable limits to private donations should be established, to increase public funding, and to remove from obscurity the donations that are made directly to candidates and that do not go through party control or accounting.

While it is true that the current legal framework dictates that political parties must keep their accounts and have internal audits on the use of public and private funding, as well as provide citizens with reports on the use of the funds obtained upon request, internal audits are left to the discretion of the parties themselves. Furthermore, the obligation to submit reports regularly and to follow clear set procedures is not established. For this reason, we insist on the need to encourage citizens to systematically demand accountability from political parties and those who hold positions of public authority.

It is also necessary to strengthen the legal framework to overcome the difficulties that currently exist in the control of resources coming from the diaspora, so that matters such as the value of contributions, the exact identification of sources or donors, and identifying donations made to candidates that are not processed in the accounting or other party control mechanisms, are removed from obscurity.

In order to generate greater opportunities for the participation of historically marginalised or excluded population groups, several intra- and supra-party reforms that improve the specific financing of youth, ethnic groups, people with disabilities and, mainly, women are proposed. An example of such a proposal is the responsibility to generate an earmarked budget for women's education, training and leadership activities.

These and other formal or legal proposals must be backed by deep transformations in the so-called ‘political culture’ and in other social practices, as of now naturalised or tolerated, but which are incompatible with a sustainable and self-sustaining democratic political system.

The necessary changes, like the current problems, are systemic. Therefore, the solution is multidimensional and interdependent, especially with regard to violence directed against women.

Violence has a woman’s face

People who want to participate and stay involved in politics know that at some point they will be victims of some kind of violence, but this does not mean that this scourge is the same for all or carries the same costs for all groups.

Violence definitely has a ‘woman’s face’. It is interesting to note that El Salvador has been one of the Central American countries with the most legal initiatives proposed and approved to improve women’s political participation and representation. However, enormous asymmetries, inequalities and obstacles to the achieving of these goals persist.

The vast majority of the eight women interviewed agree that, initially, the decision to get involved in politics needed the ‘backing, support and collaboration’ of a man; mainly from their partners, their fathers or male political leaders.

However, several of them recognise that these endorsements were not spontaneous or simple, but rather as a result (in many cases) of existential and family dilemmas or disputes: ‘At first, they tried to convince me that it was too much of a personal, professional, and even family sacrifice for my husband and children.’

It is understood from the statements of women that the main motivation they have to participate in Salvadoran politics is public commitment, almost a kind of sacrifice ‘...to open the way for others and to improve the conditions for those who come after me...’.

It is also essential to tackle the various forms of corruption, clientelism, and the interference of national and transnational *de facto* powers, as well as to establish a new culture of political responsibility and accountability in formal and informal educational processes and systems. Without this anchoring of new political cultures and democratic social capital, it will be difficult for institutional reforms to be effective.

The feasibility of approving and implementing the necessary changes to improve the costs of politics in El Salvador depends on the will of all socio-political and economic actors in the country, starting with the citizens (both those in the country and abroad), organised civil society, formal powers or public institutions, the market and its actors and, of course, the political parties. Regarding this, several of the people interviewed agree that the changes observed in the political party system may be a window of opportunity to advance these reforms or improvements.

V Summary

Getting involved and staying involved in politics in El Salvador implies high material and symbolic costs for those who wish to do so. Therefore, average or ordinary citizens cannot easily be successful. The current legal and institutional framework, the intervention of national and transnational *de facto* powers, multidimensional violence and corruption, as well as clientelistic and patriarchal practices historically rooted and naturalised by the collective imagination, are the main drivers that raise these costs.

There are nuances or mitigating factors in these drivers due to specific individual conditions such as background or social class, available economic resources or wealth, educational level, age, territoriality, family, political patronage, networks of financiers, social capital, and gender. One could say there are also nuances due to the differences between political parties. The party system and the organisation or internal life of the parties act as independent variables or intervening factors in attenuating these costs and in facilitating or hindering reform processes and improvements to these conditions of the political system.

Notwithstanding the difficulties or obstacles found in different proposals for institutional and customary reforms aimed at reducing the cost of Salvadoran politics, there is general agreement that these improvements are urgent. However, their viability depends on possible changes in the political party system, in the legal framework and above all, a long term commitment to consolidate a democratic and participatory political culture aimed towards political responsibility and accountability.

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³⁰ Interview with a person currently in the Executive Branch, PNI, December 2020.

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⁴¹ Translator’s note: in terms of being independent of political parties.

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Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) is the UK public body dedicated to supporting democracy around the world. Operating directly in 33 countries, WFD works with parliaments, political parties, and civil society groups as well as on elections to help make countries' political systems fairer, more inclusive and accountable.

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