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To JACK and DAVID

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AGN</td>
<td>Archivo General de la Nación, San Salvador, El Salvador</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGS</td>
<td>Archivo de Gobernación Sonsonate, El Salvador</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMI</td>
<td>Archivo Municipal de Izalco, El Salvador</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMJ</td>
<td>Archivo Municipal de Juayúa, El Salvador</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMS</td>
<td>Archivo Municipal de Sonsonate, El Salvador</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARENA</td>
<td>Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (Nationalist Republican Alliance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CN</td>
<td>Colección de Nulos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FA</td>
<td>Fondo Alcaldía</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FO</td>
<td>Foreign Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRTS</td>
<td>Federación Regional de Trabajadores Salvadoreños (Regional Federation of Salvadoran Workers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FWTP</td>
<td>Frederick William Taylor Papers, UCLA Dept. of Special Collections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IFC</td>
<td>Ismael Fuentes Collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MG</td>
<td>Ministerio de Gobernación</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ORDEN</td>
<td>Organización Democrática Nacionalista (Nationalist Democratic Organization)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PB</td>
<td>“Pre-Burn” Collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCN</td>
<td>Partido de Conciliación Nacional (National Conciliation Party)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCS</td>
<td>Partido Comunista Salvadoreño (Communist Party of El Salvador)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PND</td>
<td>Partido Nacional Democrático (National Democratic Party)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRUD</td>
<td>Partido Revolucionario de Unificación Democrática (Revolutionary Party of Democratic Unification)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>---------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>RG</td>
<td>Record Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RGASPI</td>
<td>Russian State Archive of Social and Political History, Moscow, Russia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SI</td>
<td>Sección Indiferente</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRI</td>
<td>Socorro Rojo Internacional (International Red Aid)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SS</td>
<td>Sección Sonsonate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSV</td>
<td>Sección San Vicente</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USNA</td>
<td>United States National Archives, Washington, DC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WNRC</td>
<td>Washington National Record Center, Suitland, Maryland</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Any project in the works as long as this one will invariably accumulate much indebtedness. As I take this opportunity to consider the debts I have accrued along the way, I find it personally humbling and professionally eye-opening to realize the amount of support from individuals and institutions that is necessary to bring a project like this to fruition. Researching, writing, and revising are solitary efforts, but they only occur because of highly collective networks of support.

In a reverse chronology, I open with those who most recently helped to make this possible. The first is my home institution, Furman University, which granted me a yearlong sabbatical award for 2011–2012 that made time available for the final round of revisions. Since completing the initial version of this manuscript as a dissertation at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in 1997, I have worked steadily but intermittently over the years on revising it into a book. Meanwhile, I was drawn into various other projects on Salvadoran history. In fact, I was embarking on yet another of those for my sabbatical when Scott Mainwaring, editor of the series in which this book is being published, contacted me to tell me he had been working on a new study in comparative politics, and El Salvador was one of his cases. He suggested I submit my work to the University of Notre Dame Press. As a result, I directed a portion of my sabbatical leave towards completing the revisions to this project. I would like to thank Scott for his support and for encouraging me to set aside another new endeavor and focus on this one.

The research for this project was done under the auspices of various institutions and organizations. The Albert J. Beveridge Grant for Research in the History of the Western Hemisphere from the American Historical Association funded my exploratory trip to the Salvadoran archives. The
subsequent yearlong trip was made possible by a Fulbright grant, which also included trips to Moscow and London. The writing of the initial version of this study, my dissertation, was done with grant support from the history department and the graduate division at UC Santa Barbara, and from the Academy for Educational Development.

All of the publication projects that I have undertaken since arriving at Furman have informed this project and made it better and more contextualized. Thus, the research endeavors for those projects are somewhat synonymous with this one. Fulbright, once again, supported an extended research trip to El Salvador in 2005, and the Research and Professional Growth Committee at Furman has funded multiple short-term trips to El Salvador since my arrival in 1998. A grant from the Associated Colleges of the South’s (ACS) Faculty Renewal Program funded a research trip to El Salvador. Follow-up research in Moscow was made possible by the ACS’s Global Partners Project—Central Europe and Russia Task Force.

My participation on Furman’s Latin America study abroad program has also been a valuable asset to this project. Between 2004 and 2012, it kept me returning to El Salvador more or less annually. While my mission on those programs was to teach students, the necessity of creating opportunities for them provided me with many unexpected contacts and research threads that I later followed on my own.

I extend special thanks to Hector Lindo-Fuentes, my coauthor on Modernizing Minds in El Salvador and Remembering a Massacre in El Salvador. He has been with me since the start of my graduate career and has been a continual sounding board and source of support. So too has Knut Walter, historian of El Salvador, whom I first met on my initial research trip to El Salvador in 1993. I would not have made it this far without the two of them.

I would also like to thank other scholars, most of them Salvadoranists, who have helped me along the way as collaborators, commenters, sounding boards, or research companions, including Aldo Lauria-Santiago, Virginia Tilley, Michael Schroeder, Carlos Gregorio López Bernal, Paul Almeida, Jeff Gould, Ellen Moodie, Brandt Pederson, Alfredo Ramírez, María Eugenia López, Aldo García Guevara, Rafael Lara-Martínez, Carlos Henríquez Consalvi, Leigh Binford, Bob Holden, Henrik Rønsbo, Jan Suter, Patricia Alvarenga Venutolo, James Mahoney, Héctor Pérez Bri-
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A historian is utterly reliant on archives and thus equally dependent upon archive and library staffs. I’ve been invariably impressed by the staff members I have worked with across multiple continents, but especially those in El Salvador, who labor under adverse conditions but who have always been gracious and eager to assist me. The staff members at the national archive (Archivo General de la Nación, or AGN) in El Salvador, in particular, have had to endure me on multiple occasions, but especially for that long year in 1994 and 1995 when I was a fixture in the building nearly every day, from opening until closing. Our physical surroundings were less than ideal, and the archive was still in something of a shambles, but they patiently negotiated me as they went about their business of bringing order to the chaos around them. So, to Miguel Angel, Isabella, Maria Eugenia, Luis, Mauricio, Sebas, and some others whom I am undoubtedly overlooking, I extend my heartfelt thanks. I also would like to
acknowledge the adept assistance of Svetlana Rosenthal in the Comintern Archive in Moscow, Russia. She was gracious and accommodating. Also, the library staff at Furman University has been nothing but supportive in helping me with my seemingly unending requests for arcane and hard-to-find sources over the past fifteen years.

Aldo Lauria-Santiago, Patricia Alvarenga Venutolo, and I utilized the archives in El Salvador at a distinct moment, the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the archives were opened to the public for the first time and the staff members were still taking stock of the monumental task of ordering and protecting the nation’s documentary patrimony. Still, they granted us gracious and liberal access to the materials. Without that liberal access, this project would never have been possible. As I describe in more detail in the introduction, I was able to sift through every page of documentation in the Gobernación collection, along with other collections in national, regional, and municipal archives. A strength of this project is the extent to which its conclusions are based on a comprehensive survey of the extant documentary record. Access to the materials is now more strict and controlled, as it should be. But without a similar degree of access, especially in the absence of detailed indices and high levels of organization in the collections, recreating this research would be, I believe, next to impossible, especially for a solitary researcher.

I would like to thank Jack Bermingham and David Rock, my undergraduate and graduate advisors respectively. Jack triggered my desire to teach, and he has since supported me more times than I can count. David never planned to have a Salvadoranist under his tutelage, but he endured me patiently and supported me avidly. In recognition, I dedicate the book to them.

I would not be writing these words without family and friends. As to the latter, most of them would not care one way or the other if I mention them in writing, so for the sake of simplicity, I will simply say, thanks, you know who you are. As to the former, my parents Harriette and Woody, my sister Nissa, and my in-laws Matt and Carol and Rob and Jaime have been there to help out so much, I cannot even begin to do them justice in words. And last but not least, my wife Cathy and my children, Anders and Halle: they are my foundation of support, and, naturally, they had to deal with my self-sequestering more than anyone else.
Small portions of chapters 6, 7, and 8 have been published previously, and they reappear in the present work with permission of the respective publishers:


Map 1. El Salvador’s Fourteen Departments and Their Capital Cities (Contemporary)
Map 2. The Historical Evolution of El Salvador's Departmental Boundaries

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On December 2, 1931, El Salvador’s civilian president, Arturo Araujo, was deposed in a quickly executed military coup. He was replaced by his vice president, General Maximiliano Martínez.¹ At the time, the 1931 coup seemed unexceptional. El Salvador and its neighboring countries had experienced plenty of coups, and many military officers had served as president. In hindsight, the 1931 coup was a watershed in Salvadoran history. Arturo Araujo had been elected in a relatively free and fair election, the first of its kind in El Salvador. Sixty years would pass before democracy returned to El Salvador. Unbeknownst to anyone at the time, the Martínez regime would usher in five decades of dictatorial military rule, the longest run of uninterrupted military rule in Latin American history. That series of military regimes was followed by twelve years of devastating civil war between 1980 and 1992. Not until after the war did democracy return to El Salvador, and only then because the war caused the military to be restructured and the political system to be reformed.

The Martínez regime exemplifies an authoritarian tradition in El Salvador. He was a stern, esoteric man, and his adherence to theosophy garnered him the nickname *El brujo* (the witch or sorcerer). He ended the nascent experiment with democracy and used state power to violently suppress popular dissent. The most extreme example of his regime’s repressive character came in response to a peasant uprising in the western zones of

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the country in January 1932, just six weeks after he came to power. During the uprising, peasant rebels attacked roughly one dozen townships, killed approximately one hundred people, and damaged a variety of businesses and residences owned by local elites. In response, government soldiers swept through the western countryside, killing untold thousands of people, sometimes in highly orchestrated mass executions. The killings of 1932 would prove to be one of the worst episodes of state-sponsored repression in modern Latin American history. In various ways, the events surrounding General Martínez’s rise to power and the 1932 uprising exemplify El Salvador’s well-earned reputation as a nation long on authoritarianism and short on democracy.

The compelling and tragic events of the late 1920s and early 1930s in El Salvador inspired questions that led to this study. What were the origins of the Martínez regime? How did the political system operate during his reign? Did it resemble past regimes? Was there indeed a democratic interlude prior to Martínez, and if so, how did it function? What were the causes of the 1932 uprising, and how did the events of 1932 affect the consolidation of the regime under Martínez, as well as the military-led regimes that succeeded him?

I have grouped my responses to those questions in the following five arguments. First, politics in El Salvador was indeed defined by a longstanding system of nondemocratic authoritarianism that dates to the earliest days of the republic, but which took full form with the rise of the coffee economy and state centralization in the late nineteenth century. The system was characterized by a complex series of patronage-based alliances that functioned according to a set of informal rules that every political actor understood, but which were never codified. This system of nondemocratic authoritarianism was challenged between 1927 and 1931 under the leadership of President Pío Romero Bosque. He and a coterie of state bureaucrats attempted to change the informal rules by directing the system away from patronage and towards a more genuine democracy. That reform initiative resulted in the election of Arturo Araujo in 1931. The regime of General Martínez overturned those reforms and returned to the structures and practices of the pre-Romero era. Therefore, continuity is the first and foremost theme advanced by this study. The military regime that began in December 1931 was rooted in the structures and practices of the liberal dictatorships prior to 1927.
El Salvador’s nondemocratic political system exhibited some highly paradoxical traits, including a vigorous and regular electoral process with high voter turnout, and a political discourse that celebrated democracy, freedom of suffrage, and individual liberty. A second claim of this study is that a fundamental disconnect existed between what political actors said and what they did, between their rhetoric and reality, between the formal legal codes and the informal rules of how politics was actually practiced. Out of these paradoxes emerged a distinct political culture of authoritarianism that became a determinant variable in setting the parameters by which Salvadorans practiced politics. Thus, an extension of this second argument is that culture matters in explanations of how and why El Salvador’s particular political system came to exist. El Salvador’s material conditions may or may not have predisposed it towards authoritarianism, but its inhabitants’ decisions, practices, and habits mattered. The era of President Romero Bosque offers a particularly revealing window on how the informal rules functioned. He advocated for genuine democratic reforms, and his actions prompted local political actors, accustomed to the traditional practices, to bombard the central government with requests for clarification. Why were the ministry’s officials rejecting the usual practices, and why did they seem to be changing the meaning of the terms democracy and freedom of suffrage?

As one might expect, the unequal relationship between landed elites and their laborers served as a foundation for patronage relations and the attendant patron-client relations. But class inequality was not the sole inspiration for nondemocratic political practices. A third argument of this study is that peasant communities employed the same exclusionary practices as their elite counterparts. The number of cases available to support this claim is not extensive, but those cases that do exist show peasant communities manipulating local polling stations just as their elite rivals did. Not surprisingly, those elections tended to produce unanimous results in favor of the peasants’ candidates, even though their members constituted the overwhelming majority of the voting population and presumably would have won the elections, had they been conducted freely and fairly. These discoveries suggest that nondemocratic practices were deeply entrenched in Salvadoran society and political culture. They also show that peasants and poor people participated in the construction of their nation’s political systems. Elites may have set the terms of debate, in part...
by crafting the laws that governed political procedures, but poor people pursued their interests through the extant systems. Nonelites therefore took part in the normalization of nondemocratic authoritarianism in El Salvador.

A fourth argument of this study operates along a similar vein: long-standing conflicts existed between indigenous peasant communities and ladino (non-Indian) elites throughout the western highlands for control over local political office. Once again, these political conflicts took place between rival patronage-based networks, not necessarily between poor advocates of democratization and elite adherents of nondemocratic authoritarianism. The conflicts came to a head just prior to the 1932 uprising, in the midst of the Romero reforms, the Martínez coup, and the growing impact of the Great Depression. These revelations about local political conflicts suggest the need for a revisionist interpretation of the 1932 uprising, rooting its causes in long-standing local affairs and the organizational autonomy of peasant communities, rather than the traditional version that stresses the organizational impetus of the Salvadoran Communist Party. The rebellion demonstrated poor people’s ability to press their demands and force the existing system to acknowledge their needs. The succession of military governments after 1932 dutifully placed the needs of common Salvadorans at the center of political rhetoric, even though their actual policies paled in comparison to it. The 1932 uprising demonstrated the risks associated with violent insurgency for the long-term interests of peasants and poor people. The rebellion enflamed elites’ passions and made them more reactionary and resistant to change, hallmarks of their actions in subsequent decades.

Finally, the government’s response to the 1932 uprising created a model that all successor military regimes would follow. The Martínez regime used violence on a colossal scale to beat back the threat of an autonomous peasantry; as part of that process, it returned the political system to its pre-reformist norm, but with an even more intensified centralization of power in the central government. But it also insisted that reform, or at least the idea of reform, was an essential counterpart to repression and political authoritarianism. Regime bureaucrats sought an ordered and stable society, one in which economic production could proceed unabated. They realized that dead and rebellious peasants did not make good workers.
a result, they adopted a strategy in which they repressed when they felt it necessary and closed down the abbreviated democratic opening, but simultaneously called for social reforms as a way to prevent rebellion. In particular, they identified one source of the problem as unscrupulous elites who exploited workers and thus created fertile ground for communist agitation. Such calls for reform were accompanied by the standard rhetorical appeals to democracy and free suffrage. This reform/repress dichotomy was fully evident in the response to the 1932 uprising, which suggests that the uprising represented a key moment in the shaping of military rule in El Salvador. Even though the Martínez regime did little to implement reforms, it set a precedent on which its successors would expand. For better or worse, the combination of reform and repression became the standard strategy of military governance for fifty years.

The relevance of these five arguments can be further clarified by placing them in the broader context of Salvadoran historiography. The nature of military rule in El Salvador and the corresponding relationship between landed elites and the military have been the topics of much academic discussion. A prevailing narrative posits that landed elites and the military formed a united front. The elites surrendered control over the offices of government in exchange for security. To that end, the military became the Praetorian Guard of the landed elites (primarily coffee growers), and military officers were allowed to enjoy whatever privileges came with office-holding. In exchange, those officers guaranteed that elites were free to organize their economic affairs as they wished. The military’s brutal response to the peasant uprising of 1932 seemed to embody that arrangement, as did the many subsequent episodes of state repression of the working poor. Political scientist William Stanley summarized this relationship succinctly in the title to his 1996 study of El Salvador: *The Protection Racket State.*

The present study more or less sustains that argumentative thread, but stresses the need to look at it with a nuanced eye. Too easily we can fall into a rigid interpretive frame that implies that the relationship between landowners and military officers was seamless. In fact, it was fraught with complexities. Neither the military nor the elites operated as unified blocs. Each was characterized by internal divisions and messy political rivalries, some merely personal or opportunistic, and others that were ideological
and based on differing visions of the country’s future. When those complicated assemblages of elites and officers met in the political arena to make policy and determine the personnel of government, the prospects for complexity increased exponentially. Certainly, conservative officers found common cause with conservative elites, and together they could form a formidable political bloc. But challengers abounded, and sometimes they bonded over an alternative ideological vision, even over a shared belief in the need for social reform. Sometimes loyalty to institution trumped ideology, as when soldiers, for example, banded together and adhered to the internal rules of the armed forces, regardless of other stakeholders’ interests.

Ironically, the esoteric authoritarian General Martínez highlights this need for nuance. He may have repressed without quarter and defined economic development as export-agricultural production led by landed elites, but he also raised the call for reform and demonstrated an evolving relationship with elites. Not the least example of this complexity was his government’s attempt to end the system of plantation-owned stores and stop the elites’ customary practice of paying workers in coupons rather than legal currency. Even if he failed in that particular attempt, and even if the overall byproducts of his reform program were modest, Martínez created the unprecedented expectation that government, with its capacity for autonomous action, was obligated to look out for common people. And even if elites did not find themselves overly threatened by Martínez’s policies, they feared that future regimes (military or civilian) might be worse. Indeed, Martínez’s successors followed his lead, even if they disavowed his name, and pursued reforms more aggressively, eventually implementing a land reform, an act that elites would never forget and never forgive. However much elites might have benefitted from military rule, many of them became highly suspicious of military leaders’ commitment to their priorities of economic libertarianism and the sanctity of private property. If nothing else, this study seeks to demonstrate that the foundational years of military rule in El Salvador demonstrate the need for a nuanced approach.

A second, parallel historiographical debate is the role of El Salvador’s poor or “subaltern” peoples in the making of their nation’s history. It is safe to say that until the latter half of the twentieth century, they were
largely absent from historical narratives. Due in no small part to the surge in popular mobilization in the 1960s and 1970s, progressive intellectuals looked to rectify this absence. One of the initial contributions came from the famed poet and activist Roque Dalton. In two brief historical surveys published in the early 1960s, *El Salvador* and *El Salvador: monografía*, both of which remain in print today, Dalton challenged the prevailing narratives that withheld critiques from elites and denied agency to subaltern actors. Subsequent studies built on Dalton’s foundation and consolidated a subaltern counternarrative of national history. The present study shows the value of that counternarrative. Admittedly, the system of patronage and clientelism that prevailed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries worked to the long-term benefit of elites and the detriment of the working poor. After the attempt to create a more genuinely democratic system failed in 1931, Martínez returned to past political patterns and rested his system of governance on patronage-based, hierarchical class relations. In the Martínez system, local elites served as municipal political leaders and workers and peasants constituted the rank and file. But peasants and the working poor were not absent from the process. They bargained constantly with elites and in the process shaped the manner and way in which Salvadoran history unfolded. Not the least act of “bargaining” was the 1932 uprising. Thereafter, few, if any, leaders in El Salvador dared rule without at least paying lip service to the need for social reform. And whatever motivated the eventual enactment of reforms, particularly the land, banking, and export reforms after 1979, be it conviction or expediency, the mobilized demands of poor people were largely responsible for making them happen.3

Nevertheless, one of the distinguishing features of El Salvador, at least compared to some other countries in Latin America, is the absence of a clearly defined moment in the nineteenth century when plebian masses, either urban or rural, articulated their definition of civic republicanism and sought to insert that definition into the national body politic. Scholars who have conducted research in Mexico, Colombia, Peru, Chile, and Argentina, for example, have found evidence of these moments.4 Whether the failure to do so in El Salvador reflects an actual difference from these other countries, the peculiarities of the documentary record or the distinctiveness of the scholars who have done research in it can be debated.
Regardless, for the time being, El Salvador seems to represent a distinct case.

As should be evident, this study’s point of departure is politics and elections. The political arena was the space in which Salvadorans negotiated with one another over their society and its future. Elections were revelatory moments in the process. No political leader in El Salvador, whether dictator or democrat, served in office without the sanction of an election, however fettered the voting might have been. Even though El Salvador has been typified by authoritarian and dictatorial politics throughout its modern history, it was also the site of vigorous electoral activity. Elections happened with great regularity, and many people turned out to vote. At some level, these electoral proceedings were political theater, or “civic ceremonies,” as Peter Guardino describes them in Mexico. But they were essential to proving a leader’s ability to rule. Getting lots of people to the polls and then controlling the electoral outcome proved that a candidate deserved to hold office. And similarly, when politics turned violent, a leader’s ability to enact violence was meant to be understood, in the words of historian Robert Holden, “by its witnesses, victims, and perpetrators alike as a demonstration of fitness to rule.” By examining political activities and elections, the present study seeks to show how the political system functioned and thereby contribute to an understanding of the nation’s enduring authoritarianism.

This study begins in earnest in the late nineteenth century, when the liberal oligarchic state consolidated in conjunction with the rise in coffee exports. Thus, the background is one of state centralization and its highly paradoxical nature. A strong state made possible the modern military authoritarian regime that began with Martínez in 1931, but as the historian and theorist Charles Tilly observes, almost no democratic system in the world has come into existence in a society characterized by a weak state. Indeed, it was only after the Salvadoran state became stronger and more centralized in the late 1920s that a democratic process emerged. And it was only with the power of the newly centralized state that Martínez destroyed the fledgling democracy. An understanding of how the Salvadoran state centralized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and what that process meant to the day-to-day practice of politics is therefore essential to answering questions about the persistence of authoritarianism.
in El Salvador. The study looks at the early and middle nineteenth century as well, but selectively, seeking out general patterns. The primary objective is to arrive at the pivotal moment in the late 1920s and early 1930s with a contextualized and explanatory eye.

The study is defined by its distinct sources. Most of the evidence consists of documents from Salvadoran archives, especially the national archive, the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN). I first went to the AGN in 1993, shortly after the civil war ended and just a few years after its doors were opened to the public for the first time. I have since returned numerous times. Its collections are of mixed usefulness for a study of politics. Some potentially key collections, such as military records and presidential papers, are not housed there. They have either been destroyed or stored secretly elsewhere. Also, the AGN holds almost no records after the 1940s, when ministerial offices moved out of the National Palace to disparate new locations throughout the capital. Furthermore, records for the period prior to 1889 are scant, because the original archive burned down that year.

Nevertheless, the AGN holds many useful documents for the study of politics between 1890 and the 1940s, especially the papers of the Ministry of Government (Ministerio de Gobernación, or MG), the main body of sources for this study. That collection contains correspondence between the local, departmental, and national levels of government and includes substantive material on elections and political affairs. The collection consists of roughly five hundred archival boxes and one hundred and fifty bundles (roughly equivalent to another three hundred and fifty boxes) for the years 1889 to 1944. The materials are organized only by year, and documents relating to politics are intermixed with all other correspondence. The only way to find relevant information is to sift through the entire collection one page at a time. Indeed, my goal was to get through every box and bundle of documentation, which was a challenge, but thanks to generous access granted by the staff of the AGN, along with the use of a portable photocopier, I accomplished my goal and sifted through every dusty and mold-ridden page. In doing so, I gained a comprehensive overview of the extant documentary record.

I wanted to move further back into the nineteenth century to see if the patterns I was finding after 1890 had precedents. At first this seemed an impossible task, owing to the lack of documentation. Fortunately, the
AGN contains the papers of Gobernación San Vicente (the office of San Vicente’s departmental governor). These materials had been stored in San Vicente and thus were not lost to the fire of 1889, and they also survived the 1936 earthquake that destroyed much of San Vicente City. The records date back to the 1840s and contain correspondence between the ministry of government, the departmental governor, and municipal political officials. In addition to those materials, the AGN holds sixteen file drawers of documents that were pulled from the embers of the 1889 fire; they offer further evidence of politics in the early decades of the nineteenth century.

I also traveled to the municipal archive of Sonsonate City, which at that time contained records from as early as the 1790s, including invaluable electoral data dating back to the 1820s, when the very first elections were held in El Salvador. This discovery prompted me to seek out materials in other municipal archives throughout the western region, and while their collections were nowhere near as extensive as that of Sonsonate, they did provide valuable evidence.

In addition to archives in El Salvador, I consulted archives in the United States (State Department records), England (the papers of the Foreign Office), and Moscow (the archive of the Comintern). The latter shed particularly valuable insight on the events surrounding the 1932 uprising, in the form of correspondence between El Salvador’s fledging Communist Party, the Comintern, and the Comintern’s regional office, the Caribbean Bureau in New York City.

The Gobernación records constitute the main body of evidence for this study, and like any source, they are particular. They reside in a hybrid place between the public and private spheres. They were not intended to be circulated publicly, unlike newspapers or broadsides, which are printed with the intent of informing a public community, swaying opinion, and contributing to Habermas’s “rational-critical public debate.” But neither were they the closed correspondence of a small group of individuals operating in an institutionalized structure, as were the letters and reports exchanged between the Salvadoran communists and the Comintern. Admittedly, some of the Gobernación records are like the Comintern materials, but most of them are the consequence of very public events, such as elections, the results of which were often published in publicly circulated newspapers. Furthermore, the individuals participating in the Gober-
nación correspondence were not necessarily close affiliates in a closed bureaucracy. They were often separated by vast distances—geographical, professional, and social—and the participants in the correspondence did not necessarily know one another, nor did they depend upon one another for their professional future. In fact, sometimes the authors were rivals. Thus, their correspondence is as much a reflection of a public political process as a closed, intrastate “community of discourse.”

Consequently, the Gobernación records allow the pursuit of a variety of research tracks. They can reveal something of the hidden transcripts of the subaltern voice, through the petitions contained therein, although they are not as effective at doing so as, for example, the sources Ricardo Salvatore employed to look at the paysanos of Buenos Aires, or as the artisanal newspapers that James Wood used to study Santiago’s semi-urban plebeians. The Gobernación materials can illuminate the ways people communicated with one another about politics, both as confidants and as strangers. But normally their discourse was not intended for the public sphere, and so when I sought to better understand the ways they dialogued publicly about democracy and politics, I turned to more public, albeit less abundant, sources, such as periodicals and newspapers.

Introducing El Salvador

El Salvador followed the general chronological pattern of the rest of Latin America. It achieved independence from Spain in the 1820s and then entered into an extended period of political instability and economic malaise. A global economic downturn that lasted until the latter nineteenth century adversely affected all of Latin America, with few countries able to find buyers for their products. Peru was an exception, with its supplies of bird guano, which were used to make fertilizer. El Salvador also produced a crop that retained market validity: indigo, a blue dye derived from a plant that had been grown there since precolonial times. Regardless, the mid-nineteenth century was a challenging time for all of Latin America, El Salvador included.

An economic revival began in the 1870s and 1880s in the form of an export boom that lasted until the Great Depression in the 1930s. During
that boom, almost every country in Latin America experienced a rapid surge in North American and European markets for its primary commodities. El Salvador’s crop was coffee, indigo having been displaced by other sources (British India) and the development of synthetic dyes. Coffee took over as the nation’s main export crop by the 1870s and went on to dominate the Salvadoran economy. By the 1920s it accounted for as much as 90 percent of the nation’s export revenues. Throughout Latin America, the export boom grew economies and stabilized politics, but it also resulted in economic inequity and political dictatorship. El Salvador was no exception, and a small group of elite families came to control the lion’s share of wealth and power.

The inequities accompanying the export boom eventually prompted calls for reform throughout Latin America. Beginning in the early twentieth century, most Latin American countries witnessed a rising tide of labor activism and reform-oriented political movements. The Mexican Revolution of 1910 to 1940 and the reform movement in Uruguay under President José Batlle are just two of the more well known, albeit diverse, examples. In El Salvador the reform movement was delayed and short-lived, taking the form of a brief democratic opening between 1927 and 1931 and a peasant uprising in 1932. But following the pattern of many other countries in which the onset of the Great Depression had triggered reactionary responses, El Salvador witnessed the coup that brought General Martínez to power, resulting in a thirteen-year dictatorship.

Depression-era dictators like Martínez found it difficult to weather the wave of democratization that swept across Latin America with the Allied victory in WWII. In many countries, new leaders came to power through democratic elections or mass-based populist movements, pushing the conservatives and reactionaries back. The demise of General Martínez in 1944 provides a typical example. He was undone by a rising tide of a popular discontent that culminated in a general strike. It appeared that El Salvador might reinvigorate its moribund democracy of 1931 and join other countries undergoing democratization, like neighboring Guatemala. But a reactionary countercoup put a quick end to that prospect and ushered in another four years of dictatorial military governance.

Nevertheless, El Salvador experienced its own version of populist reformism. Even though military officers continued to control government,
each successive regime touted the cause of social reform more than its predecessors had. The conservative regime of 1944 to 1948 fell in a coup to a group of young, reformist officers who portrayed themselves as defenders of the common person and enemies of unscrupulous elites. Ultimately, the “revolutionaries” were more talk than action, and they refused to democratize, but they followed the continental pattern after WWII of appealing to the masses and legitimizing the calls for justice and reform. They fell from power in October 1960 to a combined civil-military movement that promised to advance the cause of reform even further.19

The consolidation of the Cold War and the victory of the revolutionaries in Cuba in 1959 polarized Latin America and reinvigorated the conservative right, which associated reformism with communism and advocated an increased use of violence to defend itself from enemies at home and abroad. This growing polarization resulted in seizures of power by militaries or conservative movements, which threw reformists and populists out of office. With few exceptions, almost every country in Latin America came to be controlled by an anticomunist military dictatorship. Some examples include the ouster of President Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954, the coup by General Augusto Pinochet against President Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973, and the Argentine military’s seizure of power in 1954 and then again in 1976.

In El Salvador, the post–Cuban Revolution backlash came in the form of a military coup in January 1961 that ousted the civil-military reformers of October 1960 and accused them of being communists. The new leaders followed the pattern of attributing popular demands for change to communism.20 They used violence and intimidation to quell the so-called communist threat, and they stayed in power through massive voting fraud in the presidential elections of 1972 and 1977. They also perpetrated increasingly brutal acts of violence in the countryside in hopes of quelling mass organization. But they also tried to maintain popular support by appealing to the reformist spirit of their predecessors. And they pursued modernizing reforms more aggressively, hoping to stave off looming financial ruin by diversifying the economy and creating jobs for the swelling mass of landless laborers. They opened up the political system to proportional representation in the 1960s, enacted a massive education reform in 1968 designed to boost school enrollment and train students for
an emergent industrializing economy, embarked on widespread infra-
structural improvements, and eventually tried to enact a land reform in
1976. Their strategy failed, and the increasing polarization culminated in
the civil war of 1980 to 1992. Not every country in Latin America expe-
rienced a full-scale civil war like that in El Salvador, but most every nation
experienced a conservative backlash against reformism in the 1960s and
1970s, defined by state-sponsored terror and a corresponding radicaliza-
tion of opposition.

El Salvador followed many Latin America–wide patterns, and thus
questions about its history of authoritarianism can be answered in part
by comparing it to other Latin American case studies. But Latin America
exhibited tremendous diversity, and any generalizations need to be placed
within the context of distinctiveness. As a case in point, El Salvador wit-
nessed, as mentioned previously, both the longest run of interrupted mili-
tary rule (1931–1979) and one of the single most violent acts of state-
sponsored repression (the massacre of 1932). El Salvador thus had much
less experience with populist reformism than the rest of Latin America.
Whereas almost every country in Latin America had experienced at least
one extended left-leaning or progressive government, El Salvador had sus-
tained next to none. Basically, the political right has ruled El Salvador
throughout its modern history.

In addition, El Salvador is the smallest country in Latin America, a
situation that has had multiple consequences. One of these is a high popu-
lation concentration. Even in the early twentieth century, few vacant areas
existed in El Salvador. The countryside was heavily cultivated and densely
populated, and so too was it highly deforested. In the western hemisphere,
only Haiti is more deforested than El Salvador. Another consequence of El
Salvador’s small size was a distinct experience with state centralization.
The debates between centralists and federalists that were so important to
other nations in Latin America mattered less in El Salvador. And once the
state did centralize, the potential for regional factionalism was not great.

The economy of El Salvador was one of the most monocrop in Latin
America. With as much as 90 percent of its export revenues derived from
coffee by the late 1920s, El Salvador relied on a single crop for economic
survival more than most any other country. Even with economic diversifi-
cation in the 1940s and 1950s, in the form of cotton production and some