



UNO Presidential Candidate Violeta Chamorro

A Surprising Defeat?

Using the Importance of People to Create a Better Understanding of the
1990 Electoral Defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua

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Incumbent FSLN President Daniel Ortega

On February 25th, 1990, several Washington politicians were collectively holding their breaths as Nicaraguans voted in the presidential election. The Sandinista government of Daniel Ortega was apparently poised for reelection, and yet the White House had done all that was in its power to prevent the Sandinistas from winning a second election. When the results were finally released, the news made many of the politicians elated, but shocked, by announcing the victory of National Opposition Union (UNO)'s opposition presidential candidate, Violeta Chamorro¹: “UPSET!; White House Startled” screams the front page of the Washington Times. Frank Murray writes, “the opposition victory was so ‘unexpected’ there was no contingency plan” (*The Washington Times*, February 27, 1990).

Since the shocking win by Doña Chamorro, dozens of scholars and political scientists have endeavored to explain the electoral defeat of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in the 1990 presidential elections (LASA 1990, Anderson 1992, Bischooping and Schuman 1992, Castro and Prevost 1992, Selbin 1993, Anderson 1994, Anderson and Dodd 2005, to name a few). The Sandinistas ran the ticket of incumbent President Daniel Ortega, who was seen as a favorite in many of the political polls pre-election. In one of the last polls taken before the February election, the Washington-Post and ABC News “found the Sandinista (FSLN) presidential candidate, Daniel Ortega, with a 48% to 32% lead over the main opposition (UNO coalition) candidate, Violeta Chamorro...” (Bischooping and Schuman, 1992). Delving deeper into the polling results, the research shows that, out of the 17 polls analyzed by Bischooping and Schuman, “All seven of the polls reputed to have FSLN partisan connections predicted victory for Ortega by a large margin, while nine of the 10 polls with alleged UNO ties gave the lead

¹ For a tabular representation of election results, see Appendix 1, Table 1 on Page 25.

to Chamorro.” With the pre-election poll predictions so scrambled, many social scientists, such as Roberts and Wibbels, have turned to other theories and methods to explain this surprising result.

In more general terms, many scholars have endeavored to explain electoral volatility seen so often in Latin America (Remmer 1991, Walker 1991, Seligson and Booth 1995, Robert and Wibbels 1999, Roberts 2002). The findings and hypotheses of Kenneth Roberts and Erik Wibbels (1999) are those which will be examined most closely in this paper. The electoral volatility they study is exemplified in a case such as Nicaragua. In 1984, one of the main leaders of the FSLN, Daniel Ortega, won an overwhelming victory in the second democratic elections ever held in Nicaragua (Selbin 1993). Six years later, this same man running under the banner of the same party suffered electoral defeat at the box office. Roberts and Wibbels set out a series of hypotheses to account for this type of electoral volatility, and then carry out a quantitative analysis of 43 presidential elections (as well as 58 congressional elections, which will not be evaluated in this paper) in 16 Latin American countries during the 1980s and 1990s. They analyze economic, structural and institutional explanations in their attempt to account for the type of electoral volatility seen in cases such as 1990 Nicaragua. As convincing as their hypotheses initially appear to be, the quantitative results often differ from the initial ideas, and Roberts and Wibbels have a difficult time explaining their results, as the reliance on structural factors is an inadequate approach. This paper argues that, using the quantitative study done by Roberts and Wibbels, and assessing it for the case of the 1990 Nicaraguan presidential elections, the three sets of hypotheses and the accompanying results can best be explained by taking into account the role of people and

the importance of agency. Furthermore, it will be argued that the international context and pressures, left out in the aforementioned study, can also be explained as impacting the elections through the actions and beliefs of individuals. Too often, social scientists attempt to explain events and outcomes from an overly-structural approach without giving nearly enough credence to the roles played by individual actors. This paper is a response to the common macro-structural approach, as it emphasizes the importance of individuals and agency in determining the results of key events, such as the 1990 Nicaraguan presidential elections. By using the importance of individuals, this paper significantly contributes to the many social science debates over electoral volatility by using a theoretical framework not often employed by theorists and scholars who attempt to explain electoral volatility in Latin America.

In order to examine the election, first the antecedents to the Nicaraguan elections will be assessed using a focus of individuals, beginning with the revolutionary period and progressing to the electoral changes made in the years preceding the 1990 election. The two main candidates, Violeta Chamorro and Daniel Ortega will then be briefly presented. The three explanations described by Roberts and Wibbels (1999), economics, party institutions, and class cleavages, will be analyzed using the importance of individuals, and the significance of the international context will be argued. It will become apparent that the role of individuals in determining the outcome of a key event such as the 1990 Nicaraguan elections must be analyzed in order to obtain a complete understanding of said event.

Individuals in the Revolutionary Period

In order to understand the motives behind the presidential candidates and the people who voted for them in 1990, it is necessary to first briefly examine how individuals shaped the revolutionary period in Nicaragua. The Somoza family (Anastasio Somoza García and his two sons, Luis Somoza Debayle and Anastasio Somoza Debayle) ruled Nicaragua in a dynastic, dictatorial rule from 1936 until 1979. It was no coincidence that the end of the third Somoza's dictatorial rule was concurrent with the election to the United States presidency of Jimmy Carter, who was a staunch human rights advocate: although it was "highly doubtful that the Carter administration ever desired the overthrow of the Somoza system, much less the coming-to-power of the popularly-based FSLN," Carter's image as a protector of international human rights led to the liberalization of politics and the social sphere in Nicaragua because of fear expressed by Anastasio Somoza Debayle (Walker 1985, 20). The so-called "War of Liberation" launched by the FSLN to overthrow the dictatorship is widely acknowledged by scholars to have been triggered by a single key event: the murder of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, the well-known editor of *La Prensa*, an influential newspaper operating out of Managua. In the words of his widow, "On January 10, 1978, Pedro was murdered and all Managua spilled out into the streets... the people were shocked and angry" (Heyck, 1990). This catalyst led to an 18-month insurrection period, which culminated in the FSLN political victory on July 19, 1979.

Perhaps the best way to explain the path of the revolution from 1979 to 1990 is to examine the revolutionary leadership of the FSLN and the JRNG (the Governing Junta of National Reconstruction). Eric Selbin, a scholar on social revolutions, sets forth the

hypothesis that in order for social revolutions to be successful, the revolutionary leaders need to work together to at least consolidate, if not to also institutionalize, revolutionary gains after the political victory occurs (Selbin 1993). Selbin's most important case study is that of Nicaragua, which he hails as a successful revolution because of efforts made by the revolutionary leadership to both consolidate and institutionalize the revolution.

Selbin argues that consolidation, or the process in which revolutionary leaders convince the population to accept and fight for revolutionary goals, was largely the work of visionary leaders such as Tomás Borge. Borge was one of a handful of leaders that led and organized literacy, education, and agrarian reform as well as health programs throughout the impoverished country. The effects of these programs were startling: for example, in 1980, "in five short months, the illiteracy rate had been lowered from 50.35 percent to 12.96 percent. Over 100,000 volunteers (mainly young people) had taught over 400,000 (mainly adults) to read and write. The most important results could not be measured on graphs. One new literate peasant spoke for many: 'Now I can hold my head up high'" (Barndt 1985, 328). This demonstrated that the revolution was about making individual change in an indebted country with impoverished people.

At the same time, Selbin credits such organizational leaders as President Daniel Ortega for achieving institutionalization of the revolution. This institutionalization is seen in the establishing of set term limits and elections (held in 1984 in which FSLN won with the ticket of Daniel Ortega and Sergio Ramírez, winning with 67% of the vote). Also, the institutional leaders wrote a new constitution in 1987. These institutions will be further discussed in following sections of this paper.

Background to the Elections: Shaping the Electoral Process

The electoral process in 1990 was distinctly different from 1984. The changes that occurred between these two important events in Nicaraguan history can largely be attributed to three people: United States' President Ronald Reagan, Nicaragua's President Daniel Ortega, and Costa Rica's President Óscar Arias, the latter of whom won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987 for his role in the Central American peace process, a recognition of his individual contributions in working for regional solutions. Although "the regional negotiations in Central America... took place against the backdrop of military and economic coercion exercised by the United States against Nicaragua" (Roberts 1990, 68), it needs to be recognized that the actors made their own decisions within the context of international pressure. This is emblematic in the decision of the Central American presidents to rebuke the United States foreign policy towards Nicaragua.

Reagan, who took office in early 1981, took a so-called "hard-line" stance on what he perceived to be Nicaragua's dangerous and communist FSLN leadership, and demanded several concessions from Ortega. Due to lack of cohesiveness in the strategies advocated for by his cabinet members, the policy towards Nicaragua quickly became one of "'bullying'" (Roberts 1990). Although the United States' foreign policy towards Nicaragua will be discussed in greater depth throughout the paper, the important thing to grasp is Ortega's willingness to compromise with the Reagan's government and other Central American governments on a variety of issues. This occurred even with the coercive diplomacy carried out by the Reagan's administration, as the Sandinistas hoped for more normalized relations with the United States.

Elections had long been a platform of the FSLN, and they continued to push for these after their political victory in 1979. When the FSLN held elections in 1984, it was the first time in history a revolutionary government organized fair and free elections (Selbin 1993), and these elections allowed a national plebiscite on the revolutionary leadership. The Sandinistas won the election, with an overwhelming victory of 67% of the vote going to Ortega. The elections were seen as fair and free even with some members of the opposition boycotting the elections (LASA 1984), but the Reagan administration cried foul after they covertly encouraged one of the main opposition presidential candidates, Arturo Cruz, to back out of the race so that it would appear that the elections were boycotted and therefore were neither fair nor free. Regardless, the 1984 elections had included special provisions for smaller parties, and occurred a year earlier than scheduled (LASA 1990, 8).

In the next six years, the electoral system underwent a series of changes, often with Arias at the forefront of pushing for these modifications. The Arias Treaty (also known as the Esquipulas II Treaty), developed a plan on how to end the United States-supported and funded *contra* war. This treaty was signed by the heads of the five Central American countries: Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. These accords were undermined by the United States, whose frustration over the accords was obvious: they had strong ties with the Salvadoran and Honduran government and were appalled that those countries would go against the interests of the United States and sign such an accord, which was detrimental to the United States' hegemony in the region.

The Central American presidents convinced Ortega to further liberalize the electoral process, as "the [Arias] plan required that the Sandinistas adopt democratizing

measures” (Roberts 1990, 88). One such measure included Ortega accepting “an amendment to the Central American accords that lifted media censorship, further reduced restrictions on political party activities, and led to... negotiations with the *contras*. Laws governing the creation of political parties and organization of elections were debated in the Asamblea Popular and were eventually passed... including opposition provisions easing the requirements for establishing and registering political parties” (LASA 1990). The 1990 elections were seen as an opportunity for the Nicaraguan revolutionary leadership to prove to the world, and especially the Reagan administration, that they were democratically elected and legitimate.

In order for this to occur, Ortega went to great lengths to accommodate the opposition, often entering into bilateral talks with those parties, and this led to further reforms. With the Sandinistas promising to end the military draft and give equal airtime to opposition groups in April 1989, as well as moving the elections up to February 1990, all political parties agreed to participate in the elections and to agree to support the demobilization of the *contras*. Perhaps the most influential compromise was struck between the Sandinistas and the parties opposed to them was the Sandinista’s allowance of international funds to be used in the election campaign. The CIA and the United States’ National Endowment for Democracy (NED) took full advantage of this concession as they heavily funded the opposition, especially UNO².

Introducing the Two Main Candidates

UNO became the most important opposition coalition in the months leading up to the election. The coalition was kept together despite many observers doubting that the

² See Appendix 1, Table 2 for an example of opposition funding from abroad.

ideologically different groups could be maintained under the same political party umbrella (Cook 1990). Again focusing on individuals instead of structures, it is imperative to examine the two lead candidates, Chamorro and Ortega. This is especially important in analyzing the Nicaraguan election, which was inherently individualistic: “The presidential campaign was highly personalistic, focusing on the characteristics and attributes of the candidates” (LASA 1990, 20). In choosing Chamorro, UNO had a presidential candidate with strong credibility. Anderson and Dodd (2005) claim even though Nicaraguans saw “Chamorro as inexperienced and poorly prepared for the presidency, they saw her as caring about the people and as more honest and more of a patriot than was Ortega” (16). These controversial claims are offset by two facts which gained Violeta Chamorro respect and legitimacy in the eyes of many Nicaraguans. First, Chamorro was initially part of the JGRN that ruled Nicaragua until the 1984 elections, and always “reminded people that the FSLN leaders were the ones who had first asked her to participate in politics when they invited her to join the JGRN” (Selbin 1993, 129). Secondly, Violeta Chamorro frequently invoked the image of her husband, Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, who was revered as a national hero in Nicaragua. In her own words, her campaign was an attempt to “carry on my husband’s struggle” (Heyck 1990, 50). Her selection as the UNO presidential candidate fit well in a campaign that was dominated by *personalismo*.

Daniel Ortega, the incumbent president, was also running a personalistic campaign. In 1984, the campaign was focused more on the FSLN party, but in 1990 Ortega chose to concentrate on his personal achievements. He also acknowledged his mistakes, running with the campaign slogan that “everything will be better.” The

Sandinistas “focused on [Ortega’s] experience, close relationship to the people, family bonds, and broad support from a wide range of people, including sports figures and other personalities. The depicted him as a man of peace” (LASA 1990, 20). Neither candidate took up specific issues during the election.

Economics: The Blame Game

With this basic understanding of how individuals impacted the revolutionary period in Nicaragua and contributed to bringing changes to the electoral process in the 1990 elections, it is now possible to analyze the hypotheses and results put forward by Roberts and Wibbels (1999). The first set of ideas hypothesized by the two researchers relates to the impact economic performance has on electoral volatility in Latin America. The two hypotheses are as follows: “Electoral volatility varies inversely with the strength of a nation’s economic performance” and “Electoral volatility increases in response to sharp changes in economic performance, whether positive or negative” (578). The first hypothesis is in response to trends seen due to the 1980s, in which the economic situation in most Latin American countries severely deteriorated as a result of the 1982 debt crisis, which caused anti-incumbent vote shifts. However, electoral volatility is not just related to anti-incumbent shifts. Instead, it is “the change in vote shares obtained by individual parties in a given political system across consecutive elections” (Roberts and Wibbels 1999, 576). Keeping that in mind, the researchers proposed the second hypothesis, which is in response to the 1990s, when the economies of many countries improved, and electoral volatility went in both directions: towards and away from incumbents. This

paper will focus on the first hypothesis, given its applicability to the situation in the 1990 election in Nicaragua, which was impacted by the economics of the 1980s.

Initially, this hypothesis appears to make a great deal of sense. The Sandinista government inherited “\$1.6 billion in foreign debt, \$760 million of which was owed to private banks” from the Somoza dynasty, and the Sandinistas were originally committed to paying off the “debts in hopes of keeping lines of credit open for new loans” (Leogrande 1996, 332). As the Ronald Reagan administration began to harness the United States’ global power to systematically block loans to Nicaragua from such organizations such as the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, Ortega realized that it was no longer a viable possibility for the Nicaraguan government to pay off its loans. Reagan took the economic oppression one step further with the declaration of a U.S. embargo on Nicaragua in 1985, after reducing Nicaragua’s 1983 sugar quota. The United States used groups such as the *contras* to prevent the Nicaraguans from reaping the benefits of their coffee exports during the mid-1980s. William Leogrande (1996) proclaims “The economic dimension of [Washington’s] policy... was arguably more effective” than “the covert military dimension” (329). Although this view does not acknowledge that the covert *contras* played a role in economics, it is still an argument which shows the importance of macro-economic effects on Nicaragua.

These macro-economic effects are what Roberts and Wibbels (1999) used to quantitatively test their hypothesis. Using the Pedersen index and the Percentage Change in Incumbent Vote³ to measure the dependent variable of electoral volatility, the researchers established two economic variables: “the GDP growth rate... and the logged

³.To read more about how these two indexes measure electoral volatility, please consult Roberts and Wibbels (1999), page 580.

rate of inflation... Both were lagged by one year and weighted by the month of the election” (580). These variables show both long-term and short-term effects, based on the regression used. The authors were surprised to discover that “neither GDP nor inflation has a statistically significant influence on volatility” in presidential elections, (Roberts and Wibbels 1999, 584). Left with these unexpected conclusions, Roberts and Wibbels generally ignore the economic findings in their explanation section, citing that the Pedersen index and the incumbent vote change index create different results when used as dependent variables, and therefore do not give much explanation regarding how their study could have come up with such interesting conclusions.

These conclusions are in contrast to the ones Karen Remmer draws in her 1991 study on “The Political Impact of Economic Crisis in Latin America in the 1980s.” Remmer, who also proposes three hypotheses about electoral volatility in Latin America, suggests “electoral shifts and volatility vary directly with the magnitude of the economic crisis in the preelection period” (Remmer 1991, 780). Remmer employs a more wide-reaching set of variables, including shifts in consumer prices (measuring inflation), GDP growth, and exchange rates, which were all assessed for the quarter preceding the election, as well as the two years preceding the elections. Remmer’s findings showed that the economic factors chosen by her, coupled with party structure (and therefore not solely reflecting economic variables), plays a large role in explaining electoral volatility, and “account for 60% of the variation in incumbent vote loss, 74% of the variance in the total incumbent vote, and 67% of the variance in overall electoral discontinuity.” However, she stresses “the contribution of GDP to these outcomes is minimal” (Remmer 1991, 784). It is important to note that both the Remmer (1991) study and the Roberts

and Wibbels (1999) study are generalizations about dozens elections in several countries during various years in Latin America, and are not specific to the chosen 1990 Nicaraguan case study.

The argument presented on economics relies on the findings of Roberts on Wibbels, with the supplemental findings of Remmer, which are not seen as important because of the inclusion of party structure in her findings. This paper argues, for the case of the Nicaraguan elections in 1990, economics did play a small role in determining the fate of the election. However, this role can only be explained by looking at the opinions voiced by Nicaraguans. Roberts and Wibbels are unable to offer a genuine explanation for their findings because they look at over-arching themes that do not reflect people's beliefs and attitudes about the incumbent government, especially with relation to economics. Briefly, an attempt will be made to explain the findings of Roberts and Wibbels through a person-based interpretation.

The key to understanding how people responded to the economic problems faced by the Nicaraguan government is to recall that the government was in the hands of *revolutionary leaders*, who brought important improvements to the Nicaraguan people that didn't necessarily relate to GDP or inflation, and whom many people did not blame for the economic issues plaguing the country. As mentioned before, the revolutionary leadership created and implemented many programs related to consolidation, or winning over the population. Several of these programs, such as the drive for education, were immensely successful, as previously mentioned. Another example of a successful program initiated by the Sandinista leadership was agrarian reform. From 1979 until the 1990 elections, it was calculated that "the [agrarian] reform had affected 28 percent of

land under cultivation; and 43 percent of all peasant families had received land. If one includes those who received titles to the national land on which they had been squatters in the central and frontier agricultural regions, the social weight of the reform tips in at around 60 percent of all peasant families” (Baumeister 1991, 236). These campaigns and programs had profound effects on the lives of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Nicaraguans, who were able to carry out subsistence farming and live with a secure roof over their head.

Many people in Nicaragua were reluctant to place the blame for the economic problems plaguing Nicaragua on the revolutionary leadership. In the face of economic disaster due to growing debt and the United States unilaterally blocking much-needed aid and loans, Daniel Ortega chose to implement a rigid austerity program in 1989 to deal with inflation that had reached an astounding 30,000% in 1988 (LASA 1990). Regardless, many of the Nicaraguan people refused to blame their government for economic issues. Eric Selbin (1993) interviewed 50 Nicaraguans from the city of León in late 1988 and the summer of 1989. He interviewed both supporters of and people in opposition to the FSLN. Upon analyzing his interviews, he came up with the following results: even though almost all of the respondents were not pleased with the state of the economy in Nicaragua, the majority of those interviewed believed they were either better off or in the same economic situation they were in before the 1979 overthrow of the Somozas. Perhaps most telling results of the interviews is that although “80 percent [of interviewees] mentioned economic mistakes made by the government... only 20 percent partially blamed the government for their economic situation, and only 6 percent placed the blame totally on the government. Most people expressed the view that the U.S.

embargo and the contra war were such drains on the economy that they outweighed the government's mistakes" and acknowledged that they appreciated the government's ability to admit its mistakes (Selbin 1993, 106). In sharp contrast to these figures, "94 percent blamed the United States partly or fully for their economic situation, focusing particularly on the costs of fighting the contra war..." (Selbin 1993, 107). This study illuminates the fact that individuals do not always blame the government for the economic problems in a country, especially if it is a revolutionary one or has contributed to bettering society in different ways. As a Nicaraguan maid states, "It's better now. Not economically, but in all ways" (105). Her opinion is one many Nicaraguans would have agreed with during the revolutionary period, and shows the importance of looking at issues from an individual's perspective.

Changes and Polarization in Party Institutions: A Recipe for Electoral Volatility?

Roberts and Wibbels suggest a variety of theories regarding institutions in the party system, and how that relates to electoral volatility in Latin America. Their first hypothesis relates to what has been briefly discussed earlier: changes in rules regarding elections. "Electoral volatility will increase with significant changes in the institutional rules governing party competition" suggest Roberts and Wibbels (1999, 578). As described in a preceding section of this paper, the rules governing elections in Nicaragua were dramatically changed from 1984 to 1990 because of the work and compromising ability of specific individuals, such as Daniel Ortega and Óscar Arias. With the opening up of the elections, people were able to analyze a wide range of electoral options and make their own opinions about candidates. The change in electoral structure is a

significant reason that Nicaragua voted for Chamorro. Chamorro was able to spread her message more broadly, and hypothetically let people know her platform. However, as UNO was largely an umbrella party, its main platform was to run the election *against* the FSLN, and with the exception of the pledge to end the *contra* war, without any concrete promises. Another change in the electoral structure, as mentioned previously, was the provision that allowed political parties to accept funds from abroad. It was no secret in Nicaragua that Violeta Chamorro and UNO were being funded by the United States, and that the United States was in support of her campaign. This obvious international support will come into play in following sections of this paper.

The second set of hypotheses about party institutions proposed by Roberts and Wibbels essentially states that more parties and polarization in an election contributes to electoral volatility, whereas institutionalized party systems decrease electoral volatility (Roberts and Wibbels 1999, 579). There were 10 parties that ran presidential candidates in the 1990 election. However, it is important to note that UNO and FSLN combined to win approximately 95.5% of the vote (using LASA 1990 numbers), with other minor opposition parties or coalitions receiving less than five percent of the vote, combined. Similar numbers can be seen in elections in countries such as the United States. In this way, it is hard to say if the increased number of parties played a role in the electoral volatility seen in Nicaragua in 1990.

Perhaps the most interesting finding Roberts and Wibbels unearthed with regards to institutional structure was, “ideological polarization tends to diminish rather than increase electoral volatility. Polarization may be a source of political conflict but does not cause electoral volatility; instead, it appears to distance parties, solidify their

collective identities, and anchor them with differentiated voting constituencies, thus constraining individual voter mobility” (Roberts and Wibbels 1999, 585). Only by incorporating individuals into their explanation can the authors appropriately describe the results obtained by their study, therefore proving the idea of individuals being significant in interpreting results on electoral volatility. As the Nicaraguan electorate was polarized to some degree, that could determine how and why the UNO coalition remained cohesive even in the face of ideological differences. It could also explain why so many Nicaraguans chose to vote for UNO. Even so, Roberts and Wibbels acknowledge that many institutional factors are not the main reason for electoral volatility in Latin America.

Class versus Educational Cleavage Structures

The third and final hypothesis Roberts and Wibbels (1999) offer is related to the importance of class cleavages in Latin America. They assert, “Electoral volatility will vary inversely with the political salience and level of organization of class cleavages” (580). Looking at the independent variables of union density and the size of the informal sector of the workforce, they quickly conclude: “the full models for presidential elections offer little support for structural explanations—neither trade union density nor the size of the informal sector comes even close to statistical significance...” (583). The authors profess they are “puzzled” when it comes to explaining this result, as they had expected this to be a major contributor to electoral volatility, as it has been in Western Europe. Again, without looking at people, the difficulty of explaining this outcome increases.

Looking at individuals in the context of the election helps to explain how class structures were only minimally important in the case of Nicaragua. Examining opinion polls taken before the Nicaraguan election is helpful in understanding how class structures played a small role in the elections. In her analysis of one preelection poll taken in 1989, Leslie Anderson (1992) argues that Nicaraguans voted along *educational*, not class lines. Although other factors, such as job security, played a role in voting patterns, in the study Anderson analyzes, it is apparent that more educated voters tended to express their intention to vote for the FSLN, while less educated voters, as a group, indicated they would more likely vote for the UNO coalition.

Individuals within an International Context

The most important aspect of electoral politics that Roberts and Wibbels didn't explicitly include in their analysis refers to the international context. Although in the case of Nicaragua the international context is related to economics, it is important to examine other aspects of the international context as well, such as specific actions undertaken by the United States government. This paper argues that the impact of the international context can best be explained by looking at individual actors.

In the aforementioned study by Anderson (1992), she uncovers an interesting characteristic of voters who, in a preelection poll, either professed their preference for the UNO coalition and Violeta Chamorro, or declined to give an answer regarding their presidential candidate choice. Both groups of respondents were seen by the interviewers to be fearful. The significance of these findings is important to understand why so many voters voted against the FSLN leadership of incumbent President Ortega, who had

implemented successful social programs and whose austerity programs had arguably “produced notable, highly visible relative improvements” (LASA 1990, 19) to the Nicaraguan economy. The most important question to explore is of *what*, or perhaps more aptly, of *who*, the Nicaraguan populace was fearful.

The Reagan administration’s determination to sabotage the Sandinista’s rule was not limited to economic measures: violence was also a common method employed by the United States government to weaken the FSLN rule and to punish the Nicaraguan people for voting for Ortega in 1984. Perhaps the best known of these violent tactics is the *contra* war, in which the United States funded a violent force to fight in opposition to the Sandinista government. Often seen as a force of economic aggression (LASA 1990), this view overlooks the horrifying personal effects the *contra* war had on the people of Nicaragua. The *contras*, as they were known in both Spanish and English due to their counterrevolutionary stance, waged an intensive low-intensity warfare that began with a \$19.8 million allotment that was signed by Ronald Reagan in 1980 (Walker 1987), and was covertly funded through the CIA for the next eleven years (LASA 1990). Funding of this armed force led to the Iran-Contra scandal as many in the United States believed their government should not be covertly funding this force. The Sandinistas fought the *contras* using the Sandinista Army and the Sandinista Militia, whose combined numbers were approximately 100,000 members in the mid-1980s. In a country with a population of 3 million, this was a substantial section of the populace.

The prolonged *contra* war devastated the country, both economically and psychologically. Economically, “by 1986, 55% of the government’s budget was devoted to fighting the war, a figure that held constant until 1988” (Leogrande 1996, 342).

Psychologically, however, the war wrecked even more havoc. Conservative estimates place the number of *contra* war deaths at 30,000, while others estimate that over 60,000 Nicaraguans died during the war. To put the devastation for such a small country in context, using the conservative numbers, the Nicaraguans lost twice as many people per capita during their armed conflict than the Americans did in the two World Wars, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War combined (Selbin 1993, 101). Furthermore, the *contras* terrorized the people of Nicaragua. Nelson-Pallmeyer (1990) calls this *contra* war a “war against the poor,” and notes that the war “is fundamentally a war to destroy the capacity to hope, envision, and work for an alternative future” (21). In a two-week march Nelson-Pallmeyer participated in during 1986 while he was in Nicaragua, he “heard hundreds of personal stories... from people who had experienced in the flesh their own families and communities the terror, torture, rape, and murder that accompanied attacks by U.S.-backed *contras*” (24). The country was literally being ripped apart by the *contras*.

Fear stemmed from other U.S. actions as well. The threat of invasion of the United States was omnipresent in Nicaragua through much of the 1980s. “On July 19, 1983 on the fourth anniversary of the Nicaraguan revolution, the Pentagon sent nineteen warships with 16,000 U.S. marines to Nicaragua’s coasts. On another occasion the United States surrounded the tiny country of Nicaragua with (a) twenty-five warships off both coasts, carrying nearly 25,000 soldiers and 150 fighter bombs, and (b) an additional 20,000 U.S., Honduran, and *contra* troops that were moved to Nicaragua’s northern border” (Nelson-Pallmeyer 1990, 46), making it so that Nicaraguans were unable to feel safe. Nelson-Pallmeyer further emphasizes, “Anyone who visited Nicaragua has

witnessed the emotional toll that U.S. psychological-warfare operations, including ongoing training exercises and threats of invasion, have had on the Nicaragua people” (46). The United States also terrorized Nicaraguan fishermen by setting up bombs in harbors in attempts to dissuade foreign aid from arriving in the country’s ports. After the United States’ 1989 invasion of Panama, authorized by the newly-elected President George H.W. Bush, the United States sent a strong message to the Nicaraguan people that their country could be next and that the American foreign policy towards Nicaragua would not change with the election of a new president. With the constant threat of violence, many Nicaraguans chose to vote for a candidate they believed could stop the horrors and therefore better Nicaragua: Violeta Chamorro.

Conclusion: Making the Nicaraguan People “Cry ‘Uncle’”?

On November 5, 2006, many Washington politicians were too busy finishing up their campaigns to worry about the Nicaraguan presidential election. Like in 1990, Daniel Ortega was running for president and polling ahead. This time, however, Ortega was not running as an incumbent. The Constitutionalist Liberal Party (PLC) was the incumbent party, with a new presidential candidate; incumbent vice-president José Rizo Castellón. “Nicaragua votes with one eye on US reaction,” writes Sophie Arie (*The Daily Telegraph*, November 7, 2006), emphasizing the importance of the international context. Within days, Ortega was named president-elect, finally returning to the presidency after having run two unsuccessful campaigns since his electoral defeat in 1990. The return of the Sandinista ex-president to power in the 2006 elections can likely

be explained in the same way as his loss in the 1990 elections: through the roles, motives and beliefs of individuals.

As this paper has clearly stated, major events in world history such as the results of the 1990 Nicaraguan elections can best be explained using an individual-centered approach. The hypotheses and results presented by Roberts and Wibbels (1999) do a decent job of explaining the electoral volatility seen in Nicaragua in 1990, but their reliance on macro-structural factors means they cannot offer detailed and persuasive rationale to explain their findings. This is due to the fact they do not place enough emphasis on the roles and motivations of individuals. Only by examining those motives in the context of the three variables proposed by Roberts and Wibbels (1999); economic, institutional and class structures, as well as looking at these motives in an international context, can the 1990 Nicaraguan elections be rightfully explained and analyzed.

With the benefit of hindsight, were the results of the 1990 elections that surprising? Several scholars, such as Anderson (1992) argue that the results should have been expected. Taking into consideration a variety of factors, but especially the international context, it appears as though many individuals in Nicaragua made the rational choice of voting for Violeta Chamorro. The vast discrepancies in preelection polls and election results could be explained by realizing that Nicaraguans did not want to admit they were prepared to vote against the Sandinistas because of the beneficial revolutionary programs the leaders had initiated, but eventually they chose to do so as they analyzed the context around them. A vote for Chamorro was seen as a vote for a definite end to the *contra* war and other elements of psychological warfare employed by the United States, as it was apparent that Chamorro was allied with the United States.

Instead of viewing the election results as people bowing under international pressure and “crying uncle” in the words of Ronald Reagan (Roberts 1990, 67), a more apt way of looking at these results is to examine how individuals made rational choices within complex international circumstances for what they believed to be for the good of themselves and their country. The phrase, “making someone cry ‘uncle’” carries the connotation of bullying, as described by Roberts (1990). However, this phrase takes away agency from the Nicaraguan people and the revolutionary leaders. As the leaders were unable to prevent the United States from terrorizing the country, even with the concessions they gave up, the people of Nicaragua knew that they couldn’t vote for the Daniel Ortega.

In order for the revolution to ever continue in the future, the Nicaraguan people realized they needed to have a peaceful country that was not bombarded by the attacks of a foreign nation. In order to get that peace, they voted for Violeta Chamorro as president. Although the people of Nicaragua were up against a larger enemy than themselves, a more apt phrase to describe the results of the Nicaraguan election than ‘bullying’ is perhaps as a ‘temporary ceasefire.’ The two sides gave each other what the other wanted: the Nicaraguans received the cessation of the *contra* war in exchange for voting out the revolutionary leadership, which was the goal of the United States. However, the submission of the Nicaraguan people was only *temporary*.

With the reelection of Daniel Ortega to the presidency in November, it could be argued that the Nicaraguans saw their chance in 2006 to return to a more revolutionary government. Although several of the ideas of Daniel Ortega have been moderated over time, or so he claims, many Nicaraguans may have still revered him as the revolutionary

leader he once was. The Nicaraguans were again able to analyze the international context, and may have believed the United States was not in a position to create another *contra*-like force that could tear apart the country. Having appraised the international context, the Nicaraguan people voted to once again reelect former President Daniel Ortega. By agreeing to an unspoken 'temporary ceasefire' in 1990, the Nicaraguan people chose to end the *contra* war but retained their sovereignty and an opportunity to once again choose a revolutionary leader to the presidency, when they deemed the international context to be appropriate.

Appendix 1

Table 1: 1990 Presidential Results (LASA 1990, 36)

	Number of Votes	Percentage of Votes
UNO	777,552	54.7
PSOC	5,843	0.4
PLIUN	3,151	0.2
PRT	8,590	0.6
FSLN	579,886	40.8
MAP-ML	8,110	0.6
PSC	11,136	0.8
PUCA	5,065	0.4
PCDN	4,500	0.3
MUR	16,751	1.2
TOTAL	1,420,584	100.0

Table 2: Opposition Funding from U.S. Congress (LASA 1990, 25)

Unión Nacional Opositora (UNO)	\$1,841,000
Reserve Funds (Supplementary)	2,801,312
Instituto de Promoción y Capacitación Electoral (IPCE)	1,524,000
Confederación de Unificación Sindical (CUS)	493,013
Vía Cívica	220,000
NED grant management costs	97,400
NDI/NRI grant management costs	757,720
GRAND TOTAL	\$7,735,000

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