

Communicating external voting rights to diaspora communities. Challenges and opportunities in the cases of El Salvador and Costa Rica

Comunicando los derechos de votación en el extranjero a las diásporas. Retos y oportunidades en los casos de El Salvador y Costa Rica

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Abstract

This paper explores the challenges that home governments face when trying to convey information about newly established political rights to diaspora communities located in host countries. It does so by analyzing the cases of El Salvador and Costa Rica, two Central American countries that will offer external voting rights (absentee vote) to their citizens, for the first time, in the national elections of 2014.

Keywords: transnational, political rights, diaspora communities, El Salvador, Costa Rica, international public relations

Resumen

Esta investigación explora los retos que los gobiernos nacionales enfrentan cuando tratan de comunicar información sobre los derechos de voto en el extranjero a sus diásporas en países huéspedes. Esta investigación analiza los casos de El Salvador y Costa Rica, dos países de Centroamérica que empezarán a ofrecer el derecho al voto en el extranjero a sus ciudadanos, por primera vez, en las elecciones del 2014.

Palabras clave: transnacional, derechos políticos, diáspora, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Relaciones Públicas Internacionales

Summary

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1. Introduction
2. Literature review
3. Methodology
4. Results
5. Discussion and conclusions
6. References

Sumario

1. Introducción
2. Marco teórico
3. Metodología
4. Resultados
5. Discusión y conclusiones
6. Referencias

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of external voting processes where diaspora communities in a host country are allowed to vote in national elections in the home country is a phenomenon that has been studied mainly at the political level, for instance, theorizing about the legal, normative, and sociopolitical arguments that different nation-states have to allow –or not— this external voting to happen in different countries around the world (LaFleur, 2013). The study of this topic has happened, recently and quite scarcely, mainly in the field of transnational politics (Martínez-Saldaña, 2003; LaFleur, 2013).

This phenomenon of granting external voting rights to publics located abroad, nonetheless, has not been studied from the perspective of transnational government communications (namely, from global public relations or public diplomacy lenses) to understand the challenges and opportunities that governments face when trying to communicate external voting rights to a diaspora community.

This paper has the following three objectives:

- To analyze the cases of El Salvador and Costa Rica, two Central American countries that will offer external voting rights to its citizens who live abroad, for the first time, in the national elections of 2014.

- Based on the lessons learned through the analysis of these two cases, to develop theoretical propositions about the challenges that a home government faces when trying to communicate information about an external voting process to a community formed by migrants living in host countries.
- To offer a model of contextual factors capable of affecting the voters' decisions to participate—or not—in an external voting process.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the field of international communication, a diaspora community is a unique population or “public” because it is formed by a group of citizens of a home country who reside in one or more host countries. This situation makes this public a unique hybrid between a home, a host and a transnational public for the home government (Bravo, 2011). It is also an heterogeneous public where some of its members maintain strong transnational linkages with their countries of origin through remittances, investments in the home-country economy, political participation and social networks, while other members of the same community detach themselves from the home country (Délano, 2010; Gamlen, 2008; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Varadarajan, 2010).

Communicating with a public like this about the topic of external voting rights evidently constitutes a struggle for a home government, given the contextual factors present: geographic dispersion of this community in one or several host countries, logistic difficulties to cast the absentee vote, limited government budgets to communicate with the diaspora, and different of levels of trust of the diaspora community in the political processes happening at home (Agunias, 2009).

Governments and political parties at home are increasingly interested in keeping ties and building relationships with their diaspora communities abroad for a variety of reasons, from self-serving reasons such as attracting remittances to the home economy to altruistic reasons such as the home-government decision to defend its citizens' human rights abroad (LaFleur, 2013; Newland, 2010; Sives, 2012). A relationship-building process like this, between a home government and a non-governmental actor located abroad, has been

described as an example of international public relations (Molleda, 2009; Zaharna, 2009) and of public diplomacy (Gilboa, 2008; Yun, 2012).

But, what are the particular challenges that home governments face when trying to establish communication with a diaspora community about its external voting rights? This aspect has not been explored in the international communication literature. This paper, then, is an initial effort to fill this gap in the literature by studying the ways in which two countries, El Salvador and Costa Rica, both in Central America, are articulating their communication efforts to inform their diaspora communities about the external voting rights they will have, for the first time, in year 2014.

As an exploratory study, this paper tries to answer five research questions (RQ) and tries to determine if four theoretical propositions (TP) apply or not to the process of communicating external voting rights to diaspora communities for the governments of El Salvador and Costa Rica:

- RQ1 = What were the motivations of each country to start offering external voting rights to its diaspora community?
- RQ2 = How are these governments informing their diaspora communities about this process (for example, about the fact that absentee vote will be allowed starting in 2014, about the procedures that migrants will have to follow to register, and about the procedures that they have to follow to vote)?
- RQ3 = What are the main challenges that each government is facing in this communication process?
- RQ4 = What contextual factors are helping this communication process?
- RQ5 = What contextual factors are hindering this communication process?
- TP1: Home governments with more communication channels targeted at the diaspora have better chance of success about communicating external voting rights than home governments with fewer communication channels available.
- TP2: Having a communication strategy and communication channels available to inform the diaspora community about the absentee vote do not suffice to succeed in persuading diaspora members to vote while abroad. Contextual factors in the host

country also play a role in the level of success of the communication strategies and tactics.

- TP3: Home governments that make the process of casting the absentee vote a convenient process for the migrant (in terms of time and resources invested to cast the vote) have a better chance than home governments that have more complex processes, even if the latter have better communication strategies.
- TP4: Home governments with more institutional resources in the host country (for example, more consulates and more personnel) have a better chance of success about communicating external voting rights than home governments with fewer institutional resources.

3. METHODOLOGY

As stated before, this paper is a qualitative case study of international communication processes established by home governments to inform about external voting rights to their diaspora communities, in the case of two Latin American countries: Costa Rica and El Salvador.

To qualitatively analyze the cases of Costa Rica and El Salvador in terms of their communication efforts, transnationally, with their diaspora communities, the researcher collected information from three main sources: 1) news releases posted in Costa Rica's and El Salvador's Ministry of Foreign Affairs website between January 7, 2010 and March 7, 2013 (the timeframe, then, was three years and two months); 2) the informational materials posted about external voting rights by the Supreme Electoral Court's website of each country in the same timeframe; and 3) the analysis of 11 in-depth interviews conducted with seven government officials from Costa Rica and four from El Salvador, all of them workers with the Foreign Service or the Electoral Supreme Court (ESC) at each country.

Regarding the news releases posted in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' websites in each country, even though during the timeframe described about 1,000 news releases were posted in those websites for each country (970 in the case of Costa Rica, and up of 1,000 in the case of El Salvador), the researcher only analyzed the news releases about external voting rights. This was a much smaller sample. In Costa Rica, in the period described, only

five news releases dealt with the external voting rights the diaspora will have starting in February 2014. In the same timeframe, in contrast, there were 30 news releases posted by the government of El Salvador in its Ministry of Foreign Affairs' website devoted to the topic of external voting rights, not counting the news releases that touched on external voting rights as a side topic.

Regarding the informational materials posted in the Electoral Supreme Court (ESC)'s website at each country, in the case of Costa Rica there were multiple sources of information: a) three editions of the monthly newsletter *Info-Tiquicia*; b) a website devoted to the topic of external voting rights² (with sections such as Frequently Asked Questions, How to Register, Voting Process, Contact Us, a list of the consulates where Costa Ricans can register to vote while abroad, and a copy of the law, approved in 2009, that granted external voting rights to Costa Ricans living abroad starting in February of 2014); c) a chat room; d) a Facebook page; e) a Twitter handle; and f) a YouTube channel maintained by the Costa Rica's ESC.

In the case of the El Salvador, by early March 2013 the only information available in its Electoral Supreme Court (ESC)'s website about external voting rights was a PDF document with the law that grants external voting rights starting in 2014 and an interactive map with the addresses and schedules of the Salvadoran consulates in the United States and Canada³.

Finally, the 11 in-depth interviews happened face to face in the case of the seven Costa Rican government officials, and they happened by phone or email in the case of the four Salvadoran government officials. The face-to-face interviews and the phone interviews lasted, in average, one hour. The conversations were digitally recorded, transcribed and translated from Spanish to English.

Both the news releases and the informational materials found in websites, as well as the interviews' transcripts, were analyzed using the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), by which every paragraph in the news release, informational material and interview transcription is compared to the next, while the researcher identifies major themes and then groups them into categories to compare the two cases. Case study is one of the most well regarded and solid methodologies in qualitative research (Creswell, 2007).

² At <http://www.tse.go.cr/votext/votext.htm>

³ At <http://www.tse.gob.sv/index.php/elecciones-2014>

These two particular cases, the ones of Costa Rica and El Salvador, were deemed appropriate to focus on regarding the topic of external voting rights because the transnational communication processes are happening as we speak, because year 2014 will be the first time these two countries will offer external voting rights to their citizens who reside abroad, and because these countries constitute the most recent cases of external voting rights' granting in Latin America (Mexico started offering external voting rights in 2006; the Dominican Republic permitted external voting in 2004. For a good political analysis and overview of previous external voting rights processes, please refer to Calderón Chelius, 2003).

The Costa Rican and Salvadoran processes are, then, "fresh" case studies in which these home governments are facing, for the first time, the process of informing and persuading their citizens abroad about exercising their vote in the national elections of 2014. At the same time, while El Salvador has a diaspora community estimated to be between two and three million Salvadorans (about one-third of El Salvador's total population) (Pew Research, 2013a), the U.S. Census Bureau estimates the population of Costa Ricans living in the United States to be less than 130.000 (Pew Research, 2013b).

Besides, Latin America, as a region, has been under-researched in the field of mass communications, in general, and in the field of international communication, in particular, and Central America has been neglected even more, even though the Central American region is an important migrant-sending region for the United States. This paper, then, contributes to expand the research in transnational communication efforts between Central America and the United States, the most popular destination for Central American migrants.

4. RESULTS

The following findings are offered in the same order than the research questions and the theoretical propositions presented at the end of the *Literature Review*.

4.1. Motivation to offer external voting rights in 2014

The motivations to offer external voting rights to Costa Ricans living abroad starting in year 2014 were different from the ones playing a role in El Salvador. While in Costa Rica the

initiative stemmed from the Electoral Supreme Court (ESC), and it happened without pressure from the Costa Rican diaspora community and without opposition from the Costa Rican political parties, in El Salvador the activism of the diaspora community was key to achieve this goal, but the process faced many more obstacles than in Costa Rica.

Hugo Picado, director of IFED (Instituto de Formación y Estudios en Democracia, or Institute of Formation and Studies in Democracy) at the Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones (Electoral Supreme Court, or ESC), in Costa Rica, described the process by which absentee vote was granted to the Costa Rican diaspora as an ESC-led process to keep up with international trends, given that 10 countries in Latin America, at the time, already were offering absentee vote to the diaspora (Hugo Picado, personal communication, May 10, 2011).

Picado indicated that although the approval of the new electoral law required agreement among different sectors, for example, among congressional members of different political parties and members of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the process was not led by the political parties, members of Congress or the diaspora community itself, but by the ESC, which was interested in following electoral global tendencies. Political parties were not worried about supporting or opposing absentee vote because they thought that the number of Costa Ricans living abroad was not large enough to make a difference in the political process at home. For that reason, politicians from different sectors approved the absentee vote initiative without much consideration.

The amendment of the Costa Rican Electoral Code, which contained the provision of the consular vote, was approved in 2009 without much discussion, but it was too late to implement it in the 2010 national elections. “My personal impression is that, compared to other topics that were controversial and hot—such as the political financing of the parties, gender issues, the internal structure of the parties, and the electoral campaign—, the topic of the absentee vote did not raise neither much controversy nor much enthusiasm. In reality, the advocate and promoter of the topic always was the ESC” (Hugo Picado, IFED director at ESC, personal communication, May 10, 2011).

In contrast, in El Salvador, the diaspora community had been advocating for external voting rights for several decades, at least since the 1990s, but the different political parties had not

agreed to approve this electoral reform in Congress until recently, perhaps afraid of the impact that the diaspora community –which is estimated to have between two and three million members outside of El Salvador, in a country of just six million people living in the Salvadoran territory—could have in the domestic political process (Salvadoran Consular Official in Tucson, personal communication, June 14, 2011). Congress in El Salvador approved this electoral amendment in January 24, 2013.

Political parties in El Salvador ignored and resisted dealing with the topic of external voting rights for decades, but since 2009, Salvadoran president Mauricio Funes, the first president ever from the former guerrilla movement and now leftist political party FMLN (*Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional*), insisted constantly, through speeches, news releases, official reports, etc., that granting absentee vote to the diaspora community was urgent and a historical debt of El Salvador with its migrants. Since he took office in 2009, Funes' stance has been strong in favor of granting external voting rights (Salvadoran Official at the Direction for the Strengthening of Salvadoran Organizations Abroad-Ministry of Foreign Affairs, personal communication, June 22, 2011; Funes, 2011; Salvadoran Consular Official in Las Vegas, personal communication, June 13, 2011; Salvadoran Consular Official in San Francisco, personal communication, June 22, 2011; Salvadoran Political Counselor at El Salvador Embassy in Washington D.C., personal communication, June 28, 2011).

President Funes' lobbying efforts became so strong that other political parties had to adopt a clear position. Fearful of losing potential voters, both FMLN and traditional conservative party ARENA (*Alianza Republicana Nacional*) gave the necessary votes to approve the electoral reform last January 24, 2013 (“Presidente Funes felicita”, 2013).

4.2. Transnational communication efforts led by Costa Rica and El Salvador to inform their diaspora communities about their new external voting rights

As explained before, Congress approved external voting rights in Costa Rica in 2009, but it was too late to implement them in the national elections of 2010. For the February 2014 national elections, the Costa Rican communication efforts –led by the ESC and by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—did not start, nonetheless, until February 2012 because, by law, communications about the electoral process in Costa Rica cannot start but two years before

the National Elections date, which is always the first Sunday of February (H. Picado, IFED director at ESC, personal communication, May 10, 2011). Since then, this transnational communications process has been a collaborative effort between the Electoral Supreme Court (ESC) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Since February of 2012, the international communication efforts to inform and persuade the Costa Rican diaspora community to vote while abroad has been managed through the ESC's website⁴, and, most recently, through web-based media such as a Facebook⁵, Twitter⁶, a chat room where you can leave a message to be answered later⁷ and YouTube⁸. Since December of 2012, there are also two more communication efforts whose goal is to inform about external voting rights: a website fully devoted to the topic of absentee vote, launched by the ESC at the end of 2012⁹ and a monthly PDF newsletter called *Info-Tiquicia*, posted on a special section of the ESC's website¹⁰. There are also two email accounts for people to ask questions or offer comments¹¹, and a dedicated phone extension at (506) 2547-4803, ext. 7307.

Web-based and social media-based informational efforts have been key for the Costa Rican Electoral Supreme Court and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to overcome, to a certain extent, the geographical barriers, given that the diaspora members live in different countries around the world and, even within the United States, they are spread out across all the U.S. territory, in many cases far away from the Costa Rican consulates. Computer-mediated processes, then, have been essential to provide information and to receive feedback from diaspora members about this process, even though these web-based and social media have been used mainly to offer information, rather than as two-way, interactive environments.

In El Salvador, contrary to Costa Rica, the government has included the topic of external voting rights, frequently, in political speeches by the Salvadoran President, by the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and by the head of the Vice-Ministry for Salvadorans Abroad

⁴ At <http://www.tse.go.cr/eleccion.htm>

⁵ At <https://www.facebook.com/tsecr>

⁶ At <https://twitter.com/tsecostarica>

⁷ At <http://vmchattse.tse.go.cr:85/chattse/>

⁸ At <https://www.youtube.com/user/tsecostarica>

⁹ At <http://www.tse.go.cr/votext/votext.htm>

¹⁰ At http://www.tse.go.cr/boletin_infotiquicia.htm

¹¹ votoelextranjero@tse.go.cr and palvarado@tsego.cr

since 2009, when FMLN became the ruling party, and the topic has also been recurrent in news releases posted in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' website since 2010, but the informational efforts are just beginning, as this voting right was approved by Congress just last January 24, 2013. For that reason, at the time of writing this paper in March 2013, the only informational materials posted in El Salvador's Electoral Supreme Court (ESC)'s website about this topic were the text of the law approving external voting rights and an interactive map with the list and addresses of the Salvadoran consulates in the United States and Canada¹².

At the same time, official communications about external voting rights in El Salvador have been frequent, which is the opposite situation going on in Costa Rica. While in the last 38 months (January 7, 2010 to March 7, 2013) more than 30 news releases have been posted by El Salvador Ministry of Foreign Affairs' website about external voting rights (30 specifically about this topic, and some more mentioning the issue as a secondary topic), in Costa Rica, in the same timeframe, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs only posted five news releases about the topic of external voting rights on its website.

4.3. Main challenges for the transnational communication efforts in Costa Rica and El Salvador about external voting rights

For El Salvador, the main challenge to communicate with its diaspora community about this new political right is lack of time, as the national elections will happen in February of 2014. Still, the Salvadoran government, through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs' website, has been quite active posting news releases about the required procedures for migrants to be ready to vote abroad (for instance, the need of obtaining a valid Salvadoran national ID to be able to cast the vote) and about the places where the Salvadoran migrants can obtain those identification documents (for instance, through several offices located in places such as New York, Los Angeles, Seattle, San Francisco, Chicago, and Houston, in the United States, or Toronto, Montreal and Ottawa, in Canada, among many other cities). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also provided information about the voting process itself, for instance, about how to mail the ballot.

¹² This information can be found at <http://www.tse.gob.sv/index.php/using-joomla/extensions/components/content-component/article-categories/282-informacion-del-voto-desde-el-exterior>

Precisely, one advantage that El Salvador has, compared to Costa Rica, is the procedure elected: The absentee vote will happen through ballots sent using the postal service. This will make the process cheaper and more ubiquitous for Salvadorans, who will have an easier time mailing an envelope than traveling to a consulate to register, first, and to vote, later, which will be the case for the Costa Rican migrants, as Costa Rica elected to implement a consular vote.

For Costa Rica, the tight schedule has been less of an issue, as the absentee vote was approved since 2009, and the communication efforts have been more strategic and carefully planned between the ESC and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs than in El Salvador. The main issue for Costa Rican migrants is going to be the cumbersome logistics needed to vote while abroad: Migrants will have to register, first, in the closest Costa Rican consulate in their country of residence. The deadline to do so is September 30, 2013. Later on, the Costa Rican migrants will have to visit their consulate, during National Election Day, to cast their vote. The main issue here is the cost of doing so.

For example, most Costa Rican migrants live in the United States, where there are only seven Costa Rican consulates throughout the U.S. territory. This means that the majority of the Costa Rican diaspora members will have to travel long distances to reach their consulates. This means driving for many hours or taking one or several planes. Given the distance, it will also involve paying for lodging and, most probably, having to miss one or two working days to go through the registration and voting process. For example, if a Costa Rican lives in Raleigh, North Carolina, the consulate of his/her jurisdiction is located in Atlanta, Georgia. Driving from Raleigh to Atlanta takes at least six hours. Flying from Raleigh to Atlanta costs at least \$225. Traveling to Atlanta, from Raleigh, means losing two days of work, minimum, plus the cost of lodging and food.

In brief, all this process involves a cost (money and time) than most migrants are not willing to pick. In fact, even though by January of 2013 about 6,400 Costa Ricans had registered to cast their vote while abroad (“Cancillería abrirá”, 2013), this is just a small fraction of the total number of potential Costa Rican voters living abroad (Consular Official in New York, personal communication, June 7, 2011; Consular Official in Los Angeles, personal communication, June 23, 2011; “Cancillería abrirá”, 2013).

Even if the communication efforts are strategic and well executed, reality will impose its circumstances. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Costa Ricans living in the United States, for example, will not vote unless the Costa Rican consulate is located close by, or, if they have the legal status and the financial means to do so, Costa Ricans will prefer to travel to the home country to cast their vote, combining a civic duty with vacations (High-Level Costa Rican Government Officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs #1 and #2, personal communication, May 11, 2011; Consular Official in New York, personal communication, June 7, 2011; Consular Official in Los Angeles, personal communication, June 23, 2011). Even though the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is trying to facilitate the process by opening more consulates before the absentee vote takes place (“Cancillería abrirá,” 2013), it is still not a convenient process for most Costa Ricans living abroad.

4.4. Contextual factors that help or hinder the transnational communication efforts

Some contextual factors are hindering –and, in a few cases, helping—the communication efforts of El Salvador and Costa Rica to inform their diaspora communities about their newly acquired external voting rights.

In El Salvador, for example, the communication process is being helped by the fact that El Salvador has been aggressive in opening new offices, all around the world, but mainly in the United States, where Salvadorans can obtain or renew the national Salvadoran ID they need to have in order to vote while abroad. This document, in Spanish, is called *Documento Único de Identidad* (Unique Document of Identity, DUI, by its Spanish acronym). Another contextual factor helping the process is the fact that the absentee vote, for Salvadorans, will be sent by mail, which makes the process cheap and accessible to anyone.

A contextual factor that could hinder the transnational communication process about the external voting rights in El Salvador is the level of trust that Salvadoran citizens abroad have in their home government. Millions of Salvadorans started leaving the home country in mass in the 1970s because of the bloody civil war between the right-wing conservative government and the leftist guerrillas, and, ever since, they have left the home country because of political instability and poverty. For that reason, the levels of trust in the home government, no matter what political party is ruling the country at a given time, are not

high. This could deter some Salvadorans from voting, as they might think that they have no real chance to impact the home government's policies. On the positive side, the Salvadoran diaspora has exhibited a high level of activism in the past, trying to achieve this external voting right for many years, which seems to indicate that the diaspora community is probably going to be an active public in the electoral process.

In Costa Rica, on the contrary, the levels of activism of the diaspora community are low, but the levels of trust in the home government are not especially compromised. With a democratic tradition and political stability since 1948, Costa Rica has not "expelled" citizens for political reasons or due to armed conflicts. Costa Ricans who leave the country decide to live abroad to try to look for a better future. Costa Ricans are economic migrants, not political ones. For that reason, it can be argued that the levels of trust in the electoral process are not compromised, although this has not been researched empirically, neither quantitatively (through a survey, for instance) nor qualitatively (through focus groups, for example). Regretfully, contextual factors might still play a strong role in hindering the transnational communication process about the external voting rights, given that the process to vote while abroad is simply too complex: It requires the Costa Rican citizen living abroad to go to his/her consulate to register, and then to visit the consulate again to vote. In the United States, for example, there are only seven Costa Rican consulates, which means that the easiness to travel to those consulates is burdensome for most Costa Ricans.

If we consider that, to start with, the Costa Rican diaspora has not exhibited high levels of activism, and given that this political right was granted to the diaspora even without asking for it, one of the challenges that the Costa Rican government will face will be dealing with the probable apathy that the Costa Rican diaspora members might exhibit, due to lack of interest in the political process in some cases, or due to lack of resources (time, money, transportation channels, etc.) to register to vote previous to the National Elections Day and to vote during the National Elections Day. For a summary of findings, please refer to Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of results

Country	Advantages	Disadvantages	Possible Outcome
Costa Rica	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More time available to communicate with migrants about the external voting process - More media channels to communicate with the migrants - Better overall communication strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Highly complex process: Consular vote requires Costa Ricans to travel, twice, to far-away consulates - Fewer official communications (for example, news releases and speeches) 	Better informed citizens, but less favorable results (possibly, fewer voters among the Costa Rican diaspora than among the Salvadoran diaspora)
El Salvador	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Simpler, cheaper process: external voting process will be conducted by mail - More institutional resources: Not only El Salvador has more consulates in the United States than Costa Rica, but it also has offices where Salvadoran national IDs are emitted for the migrants - Larger migrant community, so migrants can get easily informed through social networks rather than official communication channels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Less time available to communicate with migrants about the external voting process - Minimal media channels developed to communicate with migrants - Less clarity in the communication strategy - Smaller migrant community, with fewer social networks available to gather information 	Less informed citizens, but higher possibility of success of the external voting process (the process is simpler and cheaper)

Graph: the author

5. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Informing and trying to motivate Costa Ricans and Salvadorans to vote in the national elections of their home countries while living abroad (external voting rights or absentee vote) is a transnational communication process that these home countries are experiencing for the first time, as these external voting rights will be offered, for the first time, in the national elections of 2014. In the case of El Salvador, this country has had to face the need to communicate with and persuade its diaspora community about its external voting rights while in a tight schedule. In the case of Costa Rica, the main challenge has been

communicating with the diaspora community about an opportunity that is so difficult for many diaspora members to enjoy that the communication efforts might not be enough to persuade the audience to act in a specific way, such as registering first and later casting its vote in the Costa Rican consulates.

El Salvador has been more constant and persistent in terms of informing about this topic through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs' website than Costa Rica. The latter, though, has been much more efficient communicating the process of absentee vote through a well defined communication strategy that involves a dedicated website, social media (such as Facebook, Twitter, a chat room and a YouTube channel), online newsletters, a few news releases, and more, in a joint effort between the Costa Rican Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Costa Rican Supreme Electoral Court. Efficiency, nonetheless, might not translate into good results.

While Salvadorans will be able to cast their ballot by mail, Costa Ricans will have to travel to the closest consulate to cast their vote. For many Costa Ricans around the world, including in the United States, traveling to their consulates might involve driving for many hours or taking planes, taking at least a couple of days off from work, and spending money in transportation, food, lodging, and more. Salvadorans will not have that burden, although many Salvadorans have had to visit different government-sponsored centers in the United States and elsewhere to obtain their Identification Document (DUI), which also constitutes a burden for the migrants.

In the field of persuasion, social cognitive theory explains and predicts that a person will be more likely to act in a certain way if that person perceives that he or she has self-efficacy (in other words, if the person feels that he or she can make a difference in a given process, for instance, a political process) (Bandura, 1994, 2010; Caprara, Vecchione, Cappana & Mebane, 2009). For this external voting process in two Central American countries, especially in the case of Costa Rica, self-efficacy will be felt among the potential voters when the process itself gets simpler. Otherwise, transnational communication efforts, although necessary and essential for the success of the process itself, will not be enough to mobilize the Costa Rican diaspora to the voting centers in the few consulates available to cast the vote.

In other words, contextual factors that affect self-efficacy matter and weigh strongly when trying to achieve success in transnational communication efforts. The limited resources to communicate about this topic, the geographical barriers and the few consulates available to cast the vote, in the case of Costa Rica, and even the level of activism of each diaspora community, will have an impact in the success of the transnational communication efforts that governments in a home country implement with their diaspora communities.

What this seems to indicate is that transnational communication efforts cannot be planned without taking the context in consideration. The success of the communication efforts will depend not only on the quality of the communication strategies and tactics, but they also will depend on whether the intended public perceives it has self-efficacy (Bandura 1994, 2010; Caprara et al, 2009) to deal with the situation. In the case of El Salvador, lack of time is a real concern. In the case of Costa Rica, the voting process itself is so complicated that is likely that communication efforts will not be able to help reach the objective: to persuade a substantive percentage of Costa Ricans living abroad to take advantage of external voting rights.

What is true is that this process, in which two governments have undertaken efforts in the home country to communicate external voting rights to a population located in host countries (in this case, a diaspora community), constitutes a transnational communication process where a governmental actor engages with a non-governmental actor located abroad. In this regard, this is a transnational process that fits the definition of international or global public relations (Molleda, 2009; Wakefield, 2007), and that fits the field of action of public diplomacy (Gilboa, 2008; Zaharna, 2009; Yun, 2012).

Based on the analysis provided before, the four theoretical propositions offered in this paper following the research questions seem to hold true in these two particular cases: the Costa Rican government, with more communication channels and a more solid communication strategy, has been able to inform its citizens about external voting rights in a more efficient way than El Salvador. Yet, communication efforts are not enough, and the contextual factors that will hinder the process for Costa Rican diaspora members (such as transportation costs and time investments) will favor Salvadoran diaspora members (who will be able to cast their vote by mail, instead of traveling to far-away consulates). Based on the two cases

analyzed in this study, a model of contextual factors capable of affecting the decision of external voters to cast their vote while abroad is provided next.

Model: Contextual factors capable of affecting the decision of external voters to cast their ballot while abroad

In the home country

- Effectiveness of the communication efforts developed by the home government to inform the diaspora community about voting rights (for instance, through dedicated websites and social media, or through ads/announcements in migrant-targeted newspapers and radio stations)

In the host country

- Complexity of the process to cast the external vote:
 - Time needed to cast the vote
 - Effort level needed to cast the vote (for example, mailing your vote versus casting the vote in person, traveling to a far-away consulate)
 - Investment needed to cast the vote (for example, transportation and lodging costs to register and to vote in a consulate, versus just paying the postage and visiting the local post office, in the case of a postal vote)
 - Size of the diaspora community (a larger community provides stronger social networks to obtain information through informal channels rather than just through institutional communication efforts)

In the diaspora member

- Level of trust in the home government
- Strength of the transnational connections kept by the migrant with the home country (existence or not of social networks and political participation at home, for instance)

- Perceived level of self-efficacy (whether the migrant believes that his or her vote can impact political decisions at home or not)

5.1. Further research and limitations

As these two external voting rights' processes are going to happen for the first time in 2014, an evident future research opportunity lies in analyzing the results of these two electoral processes, to improve both the transnational communication efforts and the voting process itself in the future. There are also opportunities to do comparative research in other geographical locations to find lessons learned, particularities, and commonalities among countries. In that regard, analyzing other cases of external voting rights could help establish if the four theoretical propositions developed in this study hold true in other circumstances, geographical locations and timeframes, or if they are particular and unique for the cases of El Salvador and Costa Rica.

Another stream of research can emerge from analyzing whether the levels of trust of the diaspora members in the home government played a role or not in how active these diaspora members were in terms of taking advantage of the absentee vote.

Regarding the limitations of this study, it is appropriate to acknowledge that no research project is perfect and this, as well, has several limitations. Two of those limitations deal with the scope of the methodology and the reach of the findings. Even though a systematic effort was undertaken to analyze communication efforts developed by these two governments through a long-enough period of 36 months, looking at different communication tactics (news releases, websites, social media, newsletters, speeches, etc.), and even though this analysis was enriched with information collected through in-depth interviews with key informants, this is a one-sided analysis, as this study is not analyzing the response of the target audience (the diaspora community) to these informational products and efforts. What this means is that this paper is analyzing the home government's transnational communication outputs, not the transnational communication outcomes.

Besides, as it is the case with any qualitative study, the results of this study are not intended to be generalizable to other situations. Generalizability, as defined in quantitative research, is not an aim of qualitative research. Understanding a phenomenon is the aim. And yet, a

study like this offers, on one hand, a contribution to understand these two cases in particular, but, on the other hand, it also contributes to an understanding beyond these two cases, given that the lessons learned for the cases of Costa Rica and El Salvador and the theoretical propositions advanced for these two particular cases can shed light on the types of considerations, challenges and opportunities that other home governments can face when communicating with a public located beyond the home government's territory.

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