

The cost of politics in Guatemala

Implications for political
participation and development

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Translated from Spanish by Arturo Velasco Delgado

July 2021



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London: Westminster Foundation for Democracy

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Recommended citation:

Otaola, M.A.L. & Erazo, M.A. (2021), The cost of politics in Guatemala: Implications for political participation and development. London: Westminster Foundation for Democracy



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**This publication has been made possible with the support of
Hanns Seidel Stiftung.**

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Preface

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

San Salvador, July 30, 2021

Demian David Regehr

Regional Representative for Central America and the Caribbean
Hanns Seidel Stiftung

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Introduction

The economic and personal costs of doing politics in Guatemala still represent a sizeable barrier to entry. In the financing of Guatemalan politics, clientelistic practices, improper use of public funds, unreported funding by large financiers, and illicit financing of criminal structures and drug trafficking persist. The upper levels of public administration have been invaded by criminal organisations, placing Guatemala in a fragile situation due to criminal interests, impunity, and corruption.

Additionally, the characteristics of the Guatemalan political and electoral system have made it easier in recent years for politics to be used as a mechanism for personal enrichment of candidates and/or the groups supporting them.

Consequently, although Guatemala has made progress in improving political parties' funding and its control and inspection, it is still possible to identify areas in which it is necessary to implement adjustments that would support improved functionality. However, the evidence found in this study indicates that the electoral authorities' political will to develop their functions plays a relevant role in the interpretation and implementation of the processes.

Given this situation, consensus demands deep changes in the political and electoral system; adjustments to the funding and oversight regime are no longer enough. A profound transformation is needed, and it must be developed with all political actors, civil society, and citizens.

Methodology

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

Furthermore, and given the holistic approach of the 'Cost of Politics' series, interviews with specialists in the field and leading figures were conducted, to discuss the true cost of politics in Guatemala. In-depth conversations, using structured questions, took place in order to maintain a consistent approach to the topics of interest. A total of 13 interviews were conducted remotely, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Out of these, six were conducted with political actors and seven with academic and electoral body specialists. Among the political actors, members of Congress, former candidates, candidates with campaign experience and unsuccessful aspirants were considered. We interviewed candidates with experience in contests for all types of elected positions, from municipal corporations to the presidency of the republic. Gender balance and representation from the various political parties in the country was sought. Current and former members of various political parties such as Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza (UNE), Semilla Party, Bienestar Nacional (BIEN), TODOS and WINAQ were interviewed.

I Context

Democracy in Guatemala is nothing new. After the ‘October Revolution’ in 1944, and with the subsequent holding of free and competitive elections, Guatemala experienced a true rotation of power, initiating a ‘democratic spring’.¹ With the victory of Juan José Arévalo in 1944 and Jacobo Arbenz in 1950, both the long dictatorship of Jorge Ubico and also the long period of authoritarian regimes that had controlled the country since its independence in 1821 came to an end.² This ‘spring’, however, did not last long. In 1954, the Guatemalan army, with the support of the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the United Fruit Company³ overthrew President Arbenz, installing Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas in power.

From then on, Guatemala experienced a long period of ‘elections without democracy’⁴ in which a series of military governments came to power thanks to annulled or fraudulent elections that limited the participation of broad sectors and groups in the country. Electoral fraud in 1961 and the coup d’état of 1963 showed the difficulties of achieving an accessible and peaceful rotation of power. It was in this context that the first armed uprising against the military regime took place, at the hands of the Revolutionary Movement on 13 November 1962.

Thus began a bloody war between different military governments and various guerrilla movements. Lasting for over 30 years, the war was marked by serious human rights violations, displacements, forced disappearances, assassinations, torture, and institutionalised state repression.⁵ According to the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH), the death toll from the war reached 201,500 victims,⁶ mostly indigenous people in rural areas.⁷

It was not until 30 years later, in 1985, that Guatemala would once again hold a free and credible electoral process. The 1982 elections were classified as fraudulent and led to important post-electoral public demonstrations by the opposition and a coup d’état at the hands of young army officers. It is from this point on that the regime began a gradual opening towards transition and laws were issued to create a Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE), the Registry of Citizens, and the Law of Political Organisations.

In 1984, elections for a National Constituent Assembly were organised and the new Constitution was enacted in 1985, the first year of free elections in Guatemala since 1954. Vinicio Cerezo won, becoming the country’s first civilian president since 1966, ushering in a second stage of democracy with elections. Later, in 1996, the signing of the Peace Accords between the Guatemalan government and the Guatemalan Revolutionary Unity, during the presidency of Álvaro Arzú Irigoyen, completed the transition.

Except for the 1993 failed self-coup d’état, the new constitution, the celebration of authentic and periodic elections, and the end of the armed conflict opened a stage of relative stability, where Guatemalan men and women had some certainty that access to power was possible without the costly use of force. However, democracy in Guatemala faces other fundamental challenges such as a weak democratic rule of law, a feeble institutional and political party system, high levels of corruption, and the influence of organised crime, all of which have consequences for the performance of democracy and transparency in politics.

According to the Corruption Perceptions Index,⁸ Guatemala ranks 146 out of 180 countries, with a score of 26/100. Furthermore, 90 per cent of the population consider corruption a major problem, while 66 per cent consider that the government has done a poor job of reducing it.⁹ These statistics are supported by reality. 27 per cent of congressional members in the 2015-2019 legislature were linked to corruption cases, most of them pointed

out by the Public Prosecutor's Office (MP) and the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG).¹⁰ During the 2019 presidential elections three candidates were involved in accusations and judicial processes for illicit financing and drug trafficking. At the same time, the country's former attorney general, who had led high-profile anti-corruption cases, received death threats from organised crime, and multiple attempts to block her presidential candidacy were implemented without precedent. As a result, her presidential candidacy was ultimately rejected and she now lives in exile in the United States.¹¹

Corrupt actors and organised crime networks aligned their efforts to stop the fight against corruption by managing the closure of the CICIG, an independent international body that investigated high-profile corruption cases, including the illicit financing of political parties. Meanwhile, the three state agencies closed ranks to not renew the mandate of the CICIG and since then, a regressive anti-corruption agenda has been implemented to benefit persons under investigation and prosecuted politicians, including former members of Congress, former mayors, and even former presidential Otto Perez Molina who was imprisoned in 2015.

Politics and money

Politics in Guatemala is a fundamental part of this corrupt system. According to Transparency International, almost 60 per cent of the country's population think that most members of Congress and public officials are corrupt.¹² Given this, it is not surprising that only 6.6 per cent of the population has some or a great deal of confidence in political parties.¹³ This is additionally fuelled by a fragmented and unstable party system where the creation of speculative new parties without resources or infrastructure is frequent. As an example, in the 2019 elections, 19 different parties participated, 16 of which obtained less than 10 seats each in the Congress of the Republic.

Historically, Guatemala has had a weak legal framework for political financing, as well as weak controls for the accountability of candidates and political parties. With the transition to democracy, the military and *de facto* powers influenced the enactment of a loose legal framework, especially in the area of financing.¹⁴ With few changes, such as those contained in the 1989 reform on oversight, and the 2004 reform to increase public financing and oversee private financing, the spirit of this framework was maintained for much of the country's democratic life.

This limited framework was complemented in 2016 when the Congress of the Republic approved the reforms to the Electoral and Political Parties Act (LEPP).¹⁵ These reforms were the result of a political crisis in 2015 where citizens demanded changes after political and judicial events that highlighted the direct link between money, corruption, and politics. Investigations by the Public Prosecutor's Office and the CICIG showed that criminal networks used illicit financing of political parties to reach power. Once there, the system was co-opted in such a way that it put the state to work for its benefit, generating profits that were then used for - among other things - financing later campaigns, forming a vicious cycle of money, elections, and power.

The new reform established control and oversight mechanisms for political organisations, including the creation of a Specialized Unit for the Control and Oversight of Political Party Finances within the Supreme Electoral Tribunal; criteria for the use and distribution of political financing; and prohibitions on anonymous contributions and contributions from certain actors, setting limits on electoral campaign expenses, and imposing a more robust system of sanctions.

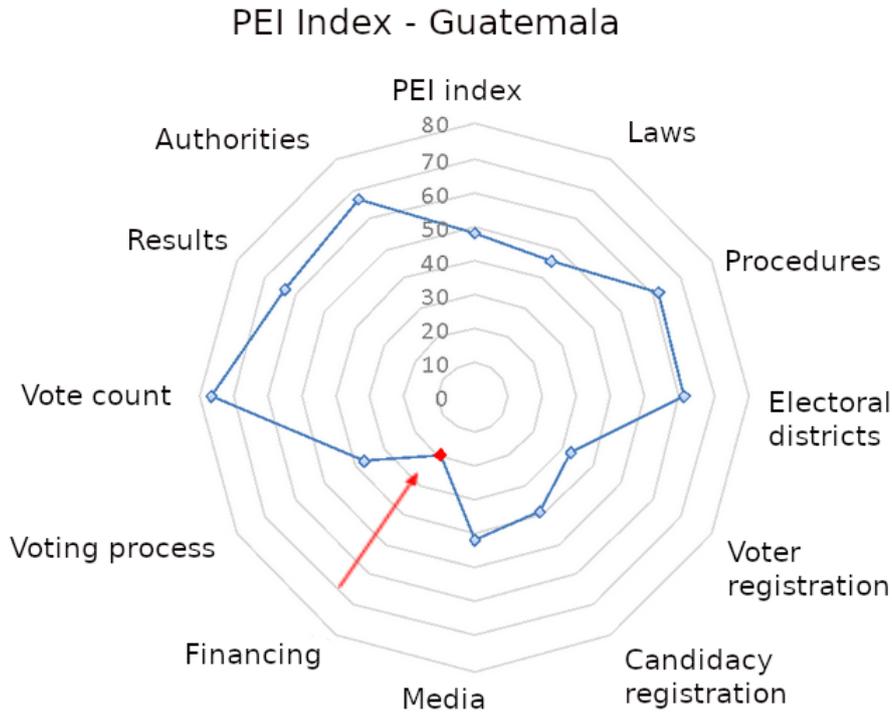
Despite these advances, the political funding system is still incomplete. Firstly, public funding is limited. The amount of funding (2 US dollars per valid vote cast per political party), its destination (designated for both ordinary and campaign financing in election years), and the way it is paid (in four annual instalments, except in election years), do not allow for the adequate maintenance of the parties and it is insufficient to cover the needs of all political campaigns. Secondly, the auditing of campaign and party resources requires strong political will on the part of the electoral authorities, as well as training and greater administrative, human, and financial resources in order to be a more effective tool for control and transparency.

This generates a series of problems, including opacity of sources that finance candidates and campaigns, advantages for those aspirants who have more resources (or access to them), and opportunities for greater influence on the part of the powers that be. At a system level, this affects the fairness and transparency of contests and contributes to the weakness of the party system. In 2000, a study of political financing in Guatemala warned that the system generated a dynamic where political criteria are substituted by economic capacities.¹⁶ Although there have been advances with the 2016 reform and the creation of the Auditing Unit, reality still points to the fact that sometimes the capacity of the highest bidder prevails over the law. This influences the possibilities of an average citizen for participating in politics.

The Perceptions of Electoral Integrity Index (PEI) of the Universities of Sydney and Harvard confirms the above and points to one of the main challenges of the cost of politics that will be detailed in the following section. This index evaluates the integrity of an election throughout the entire electoral cycle; that is, it does not focus only on what happens on election day, but also on what happens before, during and after it, which is consistent with the comprehensive approach of the 'Cost of Politics' series. Thus, it evaluates 11 central aspects that include, among others, the legal framework for elections, voter registration, the campaign media, the performance of electoral authorities and, of course, the important component of money in politics.

Figure 1 shows that political financing performs the worst out of the eleven components evaluated in the PEI index for Guatemala. With a score of 19.7/100, political financing registers a low level of integrity, which implies inequity in the access to and use of financial resources for candidates and parties and a lack of transparency and accountability in their use.

Figure 1: PEI index and political financing - Guatemala



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

In turn, this component is made up of five indicators: equal access to public funding, equal access to private donations, transparency in accounts publication, wealthy individuals’ influence, and inappropriate use of public resources in campaigns. Figure 2 shows the results for these five indicators, on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is the lowest level and 5 represents the highest level of integrity. As we can see, in Guatemala, access to private resources for political parties and candidacies is not very equitable, and public resources are used improperly and with little transparency. Besides, there is a strong perception of the influence exercised in politics by people with abundant financial resources.

Figure 2: Political financing by indicators, Guatemala

	Equitable access to public subsidies	Equitable access to political donations	Transparent accounts	Rich people buy elections	Use of public resources
Guatemala	2.6	1.3	1.4	1.9	1.6

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

This of course has an impact on the cost of politics, especially for underrepresented groups and for citizens without enough political or economic resources. Usually, in order to campaign - and even before that, to join a political party and obtain a candidacy - substantial resources are required, normally beyond the reach of the average person. The following section details the elements that have an impact on the cost of politics in Guatemala and, therefore, determine the barriers the common citizen faces with regard to political participation.

II The current drivers of the cost of politics

As mentioned above, in 2016 the most recent reforms to the Electoral and Political Parties Act in Guatemala were approved. For the 2019 elections, citizens' expectations were quite high and substantial changes were expected both in the manner and cost of financing politics and in its oversight (for example, sanctions for non-compliance with the norm). The implementation of new rules of the game undoubtedly generated positive and negative effects, but it also caused the mutation of illegal and informal political funding practices that allowed the oiling of the political machine to reach power.

According to the analysts interviewed, one of the positive effects to come out of this was the fear of certain political actors regarding compliance with financing regulations. Most political parties complied with the delivery of financial reports and used the 'Transparent Accounts' platform, a computer system designed by the electoral body for accountability. This situation was caused by two factors. First, there was no certainty about the new financing regime. Second, there was a lot of expectation about the auditing and the presence of the CICIG in the country; never before had the campaigns been characterised by concern about compliance with the rules of the game. This was a small window of opportunity for small and new parties that felt they benefited from competing on a relatively equal playing field.¹⁷

Specifically, the new media regime contributed significantly to levelling the playing field for candidates, especially when it comes to presidential elections. Paying for media space, particularly television and radio, constituted one of the most relevant expenses for political parties and candidates. The limitations were not only due to the high cost of this type of campaign, but also because of the negotiations that were generated around it. The prices of time and space were not the same for all. Thus, at least formally, the cost of the 2015 campaign, compared to the 2019 campaign, was substantially lower. For 2015 the TSE reported that campaign expenditure was approximately 247 million quetzales (31.6 million US dollars) while for 2019 it reported campaign expenditure of approximately 92 million quetzales (11.8 million US dollars). This represents a reduction of 63 per cent of formally reported campaign expenditures. However, expense reports made by social organisations in previous years had shown that the declared versus actual spending varied by 300 per cent, a difference essentially caused by the high cost of campaigning in national media such as television, radio, and billboards.¹⁸ Another positive impact of the 2016 electoral reform was reflected in infomercials.¹⁹ According to the monitoring of Mirador Electoral, for the 2015 campaign, more than 1,000 infomercials were identified, while for 2019 the monitoring identified only 102.²⁰

The new media regime was not particularly well received by media owners. They tried to repeal, through appeals of unconstitutionality, the articles which, in their opinion, were directly detrimental to them.²¹ The new regime established the obligation of the media to deliver airtime against a symbolic payment of 20 per cent of the commercial rate. It was for this reason that a lot of media, in addition to supporting the legal strategy mentioned above, decided not to sell airtime or space to the TSE so that it could be distributed equally among them. This meant that the political programme did not have the mechanisms to reach the population.

Despite the advances in recent years, the recently generated dynamics have not been progressive. There is even an effort by some political parties and sectors to promote a regressive agenda in terms of electoral financing oversight.²² According to those interviewed, these efforts are fed, for example, by fallacies such as the belief that financing regulations discourage private financing in general. There are probably disincentives for the small financier who contributes 50 quetzales (approximately 6 US dollars) and above, and to whom the management of a ledger was a cost they were not willing to assume. However, financing from large contributors has never been

reported by political parties before or after the reform.²³ Large financiers have used simulation mechanisms to hide the financing of electoral campaigns; the cases of co-optation of the state²⁴ and the case of illicit electoral financing of FCN²⁵ are evidence of such mechanisms.²⁶

Thus, despite the reform and its positive effects, money continues to have a strong impact on politics. There is a tendency to focus politics on the promotion of ideas and proposals. This has been successful in urban contexts, among the youth and people with access to more education. In contrast, in rural areas with low levels of schooling, other forms of politics are successful and therefore, the so-called grassroots campaign is costly and still necessary to obtain beneficial results, particularly in the national list²⁷ and the presidential campaign.

Citizens who wish to participate in politics face a series of obstacles related to their age and gender, and particularly because of their lack of access to financing. As we will see further on, there are certain variables related to the cost of politics that either condition or encourage citizen participation in politics.

A high cost that has conditioned the participation of ordinary citizens in politics is access to the media and the promotion of their image. Added to this is the fact that, at the local level, personal networks and access to financing are key to being able to compete against politicians who have used state resources or who have received funding from criminal networks to finance their campaigns.

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

Access to the media and the approval of the 'great elector'

From a monetary point of view, a functional democracy depends on having access to a significant amount of money, while facing interests and conditions that allow access, with some degree of difficulty, to the resources and networking necessary to participate competitively.²⁸

The functioning and performance of a political organisation requires financing at different moments, from its creation to the definition of its organisation and structure, to its affiliation and electoral campaigns. In all these moments, candidates and leaders need to invest time and economic resources to keep the party structure alive, but above all, to make themselves known. In this field, they compete in unequal conditions given that public officials have historically used their position and even public funds to promote their image. Mayors, for example, have at their disposal between 1 and 2 million Quetzals (between 129,000-259,000 US dollars) from the constitutional funds²⁹ to carry out public works in their communities, which are used to buy goodwill and promote their political figure. Officials in charge of social policies or the construction of public works have also taken advantage of the use of public resources to promote themselves. The inauguration and delivery of works triples on the eve of a popular election.³⁰

Campaign expenses on communication strategies, image, and process evaluation are quite high. In order to make themselves known, candidates need considerable amounts that can be invested in communication strategies.

Some candidates have opted to buy or found media outlets that allow them to promote their image before and during the electoral campaign.³¹ The candidates interviewed particularly mention a significant expenditure which they call 'the Great Elector', constituted by groups and individuals from the media, trade unions, or private organisations that lead people into certain opinions. These groups organise fora and debates, discuss proposals and make the candidate known. Some candidates are repeatedly called to these spaces, while others are simply vetoed.³² There are two ways to win the favour of these groups: either you are a product and part of the sector, or you buy the right to be part of it. Candidates allocate an important amount of financing to buy the favour of, for example, journalists and news editors.³³ In 2019, the electoral authority prohibited the use of social networks for electoral campaign purposes, making it more necessary that the campaigns are at least mentioned in news and discussion fora.

Thus, implementing communication strategies or engaging the electorate requires the investment of large amounts of money that not all candidates have access to. Furthermore, emerging candidates are constantly blocked from these spaces and must resort to other types of strategies to make themselves known.

National versus local campaigns: the rise of self-financing and personal networks

Dynamics between national and local campaigns are different, and the rules of the game have contributed to this difference. National campaigns include the presidential election, election of members of Congress by national list and the Central American Parliament. Local campaigns include district congressional and local (sub-national) government elections.

The first difference lies in the fact that, traditionally, funding from large financiers is generally given to presidential candidates.³⁴ This has resulted in district and municipal candidates without enough funds for the electoral campaign, putting them at a disadvantage or forcing them to obtain additional funds from other sources.

Second, doing politics in a context of poverty is expensive. Guatemala is a country where 59 per cent of the population lives in general poverty.³⁵ Therefore, the campaign strategy at the local level where poverty is more widespread is different, and generates higher costs.³⁶ The local politician, who must campaign closer to the people, faces practices that are part of the culture of a population with many unmet basic needs. Candidates are required to seek votes through gifts that include, but are not limited to, food, promotional products, parties and cash. In the interviews for this study, it was mentioned that culturally, in some communities, the fact that a candidate brings money and gifts demonstrates their ability to manage and achieve benefits for the community.

These differences, among others, have had effects on the way politics is conducted at a local level. The first effect is the power gained by local bosses and leaders. The second is the growing need for self-financing, which limits the participation of citizens who cannot access this type of resource.

The high costs for political parties of having an organisation present in force in all departments and municipalities make them seek alliances with candidates who have their own personal network and local structures - that include not only a considerable number of voters, but also self-financing networks - every time an electoral campaign approaches. For the political parties, it is easier to focus on a local or district chief than on the financial and organisational demands of establishing a party organisation in a department or municipality. This explains how several legislators have been able to be re-elected but on the ticket of different political parties each time. A

congressman who has been re-elected three times, representing different political parties, explained that he had his own local structure that includes mayors and community leaders who trust him, and vote for him regardless of the political party he is running for.³⁷

These district chiefs have an advantage over the new candidates; they have demonstrated that they fulfil certain promises and this explains why the political party chooses to link itself with this type of character.³⁸ However, the construction and maintenance of such local structures has a cost. Generally, local leaders ask candidates for favours in exchange for having supported them in the campaign; basically, what they ask for are positions or contracts.³⁹ Several of the traditional chiefdoms were linked to corruption cases,⁴⁰ preventing their chosen candidate from running for the 2019 elections. However, their structures are still in place, and they adapted to a new context and continued to operate through family members or other characters who inherited their support networks.⁴¹

On the other hand, this study illustrates how local campaigns must be self-financed by the candidates. All the candidates interviewed mentioned that in order to finance their campaigns they had to resort to loans, savings and contributions from family members. These costs are still being paid today, whether they won or not.

In this way, candidates who fail to win see their personal and family wealth compromised. Besides, they have to face paying their own expenses without an income during the campaign period. A candidate for mayor explained that in his case, when he announced his candidacy, he was asked to resign from his job so that it was not involved in political issues.⁴² And the situation does not end there, because if they do not win the elected office when the campaign is over, there is a period in which it is difficult to find a job.

The funding that must be raised is significant not only because of the costs mentioned above but also because, in some cases, costs also include the nomination processes. This practice allows the political party to secure funds for the national campaign.

In the nomination process, the higher candidates are located on the list, the higher the price to be paid. The price per nomination can range between 1 and 2 million quetzales (129,000-258,000 US dollars). From this account, the candidates, whether or not they win, already have a debt to recover, which, added to the high cost of the campaign, becomes a significant sum of money. According to those interviewed, at least in the 2015 campaign, a congressional candidate for the central district could have spent around 2 million quetzales (258,000 US dollars). And, as an example, a district member of Congress needs approximately 4 million quetzales (520,000 US dollars) to cover initial expenditure.

In contrast, an average member of Congress earns 29,500 quetzales a month, which means that in their four years they will earn an accumulated approximately 1.4 million quetzales (183,000 US dollars), which would mean spending around three times more than they would earn in their term of office, just to cover this entry cost.

This type of borrowing leads candidates, upon assuming public office, to be tempted to extract resources from the treasury or receive money in exchange for votes in Congress. Several cases presented by CICIG evidenced practices such as ghost jobs, designation of public administration personnel for personal matters, public works contracts for companies linked to relatives or friends, and bribes in cash to favour the approval of legislation.⁴³

At the local level, candidates have to demonstrate their financial credentials before they link themselves to political parties as a vehicle to be able to participate, even if that means not having ideological affinity with the party or sharing its principles and values. This condition presents an important financial obstacle for many citizens who wish to get involved in politics and launch their candidacy. If you do not have your own financing or access to loans or financing from groups, you do not have a chance to be a candidate.

Once elected, the cost of doing politics presents specific challenges at the local level. For a district member of Congress, funding for outreach, grassroots visits, and maintaining the functioning of the party organisation is necessary at all times, and is very scarce. District members of Congress must travel to their district every week. Districts such as Petén are more than 400 kilometres from the capital city, a trip of more than nine hours. On these trips they must pay for accommodation and meals outside their district. In the same way, and because they are more closely linked to the community, the community expects them to financially support social causes. An example of this could be seen with the arrival of COVID-19 and tropical storms ETA and IOTA when some members of Congress had to designate part of their salary to support the community. Also, they must have an office in addition to the one offered by Congress to receive people from their district, who would not travel to the capital city to request an audience with them. This implies payment for an office and personnel.⁴⁴

The financing of criminal structures

Political financing has also been used for the self-management of immunity and the approval of the authorities to carry out illicit businesses, mainly organised crime and drug trafficking.

Criminal structures, and particularly drug traffickers, have found two mechanisms to seek profit: financing politics and, in recent years, participating in it. The costs to be assumed are high, but equally high are the amounts of money offered to remain at the service of these structures. The favours they require in exchange have to do with the search for impunity, public works contracts, tax benefits, hiring of personnel and ease of drug trafficking. This causes the public administration to function inefficiently and to the benefit of certain groups or sectors.

In this way, candidates and political organisations financed by criminal structures have a blank cheque that allows them to spend more on different campaign strategies. This means doing politics in these territories is becoming more expensive, and their opponents must compete under unequal conditions.

The accusations of politicians linked to drug trafficking have been going on for more than 20 years. However, it was in 2009 when the US Embassy itself referred to the UCN party as a party with a narco-ideology.⁴⁵ There is great, and ongoing, concern about the growing influence of drug trafficking and organised crime in politics. In 2017, the United States requested the extradition of former Vice President Roxana Baldetti and, in the context of the 2019 electoral process alone, four extradition requests were processed for charges against candidates related to drug trafficking.⁴⁶

Drug trafficking capacity has increased in terms of geography and power in state spheres. Currently, the UCN party, whose Secretary General is serving a sentence in the United States for drug-related crimes and who US authorities warned had a plan to assassinate several political adversaries in the last elections,⁴⁷ is the third largest force in Congress.

Those interviewed also mentioned with great concern the influence of financing from drug trafficking and organised crime at the local level, where they do not need political parties and use the civic electoral committees to gain access to mayoral offices. The temporary nature of the committees, together with the limited capacity of the electoral authorities to supervise them, allows them a greater margin for receiving and managing illicit financing.

Political parties are aware that it is not possible to compete against the presence of these types of groups and influences. In their words ‘(...) there are areas where you cannot even enter. Competition is nullified in the face of these power groups.’⁴⁸ Candidates interviewed mentioned feeling at a disadvantage not only in the face of disproportionality in terms of financing but also expressed fear of reprisals that could even mean death.⁴⁹ Therefore, competing in these conditions implies increasing costs in terms of personal security for the candidates themselves and their families.

Those interviewed for this study agree that the financing of drug trafficking has no limits and is very complicated to trace. In the face of this type of funding, the capacities and functions of the Specialist Unit for Oversight of Political Party Finances (Unidad Especializada de Control y Fiscalización de las Finanzas de los Partidos Políticos, UECFFPP) are very limited. It is therefore necessary to coordinate national and foreign inter-institutional efforts to identify and sanction the financing of organised crime.

The personal cost: the politician's craft

It is important to mention that, in Guatemala, during the decades of conflict, citizens' participation in politics could mean the restriction of their rights and even death. At that time, it was impossible to exercise civic, political, and freedom of expression rights. From the perspective of the limitation of rights, even though Guatemalan democracy is under construction, the cost for the new generations is lower.

For research purposes, it was very interesting to inquire about the personal costs associated with doing politics. In this sense, the candidates differ substantially. On the one hand, we found politicians, mostly men, who know their craft and know that they will win enemies, and that they may end up in jail. They know how to move, they know when to move, they know with whom to move and especially they know how to differentiate political quarrels from personal ones. They are aware that their position on specific issues has generated significant costs; particularly, they say they are victims of the judicialisation of politics, misinformation campaigns, and systematised attacks from social organisations for going against international agendas.

The politician by trade finds a golden opportunity to live and work in and for politics, ‘(...) when one has had the privilege of studying politics, one knows clearly that the exercise of this opens and closes doors. One is aware of both the benefits and the sacrifices. The politician is not a martyr who suffers and carries the burden of politics.’⁵⁰

On the other hand, other candidates, particularly women, report that the decision to enter politics has been met with high personal costs. Beyond the financial cost, women candidates are afraid of compromising their name, of rejection, and stigmatisation. For them, the cost of criticism, the public scrutiny, and the family cost discourage their desire to participate.⁵¹

When competing in a context dominated by organised crime or drug trafficking, candidates might even lose their lives.⁵² In other contexts, their reputation may be compromised and, as a result of disinformation campaigns, they may lose their job and their political future as well.

The cost for indigenous women candidates is even greater given that power relations are not the same among the different actors.⁵³ Women who dare to participate in political spaces are frowned upon and are constantly victims of boycotts among their peers or even within their party organisations.

Personal enrichment: the perverse incentive to participate in politics

One of the strong incentives to participate in politics has been personal enrichment. Most of the people interviewed for this study agreed that politicians have found in politics a way to survive by keeping part of the funding that is given to them during campaigns or when they hold elected office.

Given the specificities of Guatemala's political and electoral system mentioned above, politics in recent years has been used as a mechanism for personal enrichment of candidates and/or the groups that support them. Personal and clientelistic interests prevail and are fed by local structures that legitimise these practices. Operational party politics at a local level is represented by local associations or community development councils (COCODE)⁵⁴ and one of the practices used by these local structures is to approach candidates and offer a certain number of voters in the villages where they exercise control, in exchange for favours ranging from works, contracts, and cash. These structures are not loyal to a political organisation, offering clientelistic support to all contenders and going to the highest bidder.⁵⁵

III Outlook

The poverty in which more than half of Guatemalan inhabitants live, added to deep corruption and interests of certain groups and sectors that seek to use the state for their sole benefit, has caused electoral campaigns to be expensive, without content, and clientelistic. When political activity becomes more expensive, political parties and candidates seek financing at all cost, and that is where corruption and organised crime come in.

The political analysts interviewed agreed that the weaknesses that could be evidenced during the 2019 electoral process had to do with flaws contained in the law, but also with the deficient implementation of the control and media regime.

Therefore, a clear legal framework is needed to provide certainty for the electoral authority, political actors, and citizens regarding the rules governing the electoral system and its oversight. Additionally, in practice, the institutional design and political will of the electoral body is fundamental for the interpretation and implementation of the norm to be consistent with democratic principles and transparency.

A future reform process should work on the basis of an unbiased evaluation that includes some adjustments to the financing and control regime, as well as to the media regime. The aim should be to eliminate those obstacles that have prevented the efficient functioning of UECFFPP, and to reduce the high dependence on large-scale private financing. Mechanisms could be explored to increase public financing and allow strategies such as micro-financing or seed capital for new political parties, with the aim of democratising financing and allowing political options to compete on equal terms.

In the same way, UECFFPP should be given more autonomy and independently specify requirements that force financiers to keep accounting books, establishing with technical criteria that such requirements should be mandatory from a certain amount. The aim is to promote political party funding that is transparent, traceable, and equitably distributed, both at a national and local level.

Regarding the media regime, it is recommended that the percentage of the electoral fee is reviewed, and mechanisms are implemented that allow the registration of most of the media, so that the political parties and candidates can reach citizens without having to invest excessive amounts in a media campaign. In the same way, the absolute prohibition of using social networks for propaganda purposes should be eliminated and on the contrary, the registration of this in the TSE should only be only obliged for monitoring and control purposes. The capacities of the electoral body and the conditions of social media do not allow the public administration to establish hiring and control mechanisms.

For its part, in 2016 the administrative sanctioning regime was strengthened when the number of fines was increased, and a specific procedure for the cancellation of political parties that do not comply with the financing regime was allowed. However, it is necessary to revise the offense catalogue that allows for a coherent sanctioning system, punishing in its due proportion of responsibility the party organisation, its authorities, candidates, and financiers. The evidence found through this study reveals the need to include in the sanctioning framework individual responsibilities (candidates or fundraisers) to reduce the lack of control of funding at a local level. One sanction could be the loss of the seat or position won, if it is demonstrated that the financing rules were not complied with.

However, after the departure of CICIG, the political actors in the Congress of the Republic have not shown any real interest in making the necessary adjustments to improve the electoral system or the oversight mechanisms. On the contrary, movements are surging to approve a backward agenda that would bring down the advances in electoral transparency, particularly those related to financing and oversight. Therefore, in the short term, and with the composition of the current Congress, the reform to the LEPP is not essential⁵⁶ since, according to analysts and experts, there are currently no political incentives to make real changes.

At the institutional level, during the years following the reform in 2016, international and national cooperation reflected great efforts to accompany the TSE in the implementation process. The only instance that managed to show positive results despite its late implementation was the UECFFPP. Other specialised units such as the media regime or the diaspora voting unit did not have the same impact. There was a lack of interest on the part of the authorities to develop and approve mechanisms to facilitate accountability and transparency.

In this regard, it is recommended that an unbiased and conscious evaluation process be implemented to identify areas for improvement and, based on this, an institutional re-engineering plan be set into motion to improve coordination and internal communication. This should also include the decentralising of services and functions. The objective would be to strengthen the presence of the TSE at a local level for registration, civic education, promotion of citizen participation, and electoral procedures, to ensure it can better exercise control and supervision of political party financing at the municipal and departmental levels.

Additionally, coordination mechanisms must be strengthened between the electoral authorities, the Public Prosecutor's Office, and other agencies responsible for assisting in investigations to identify the financing of organised crime and drug trafficking. Efficient mechanisms and protocols must be created, and roles and responsibilities must be delimited.

While it is true that legal and institutional reforms are necessary to remove obstacles for political participation, much can be done by political parties and citizens themselves. Political parties are called to implement democratic and representative mechanisms at all stages of party life, including the formation of political organisations and decision-making bodies, and particularly the nomination of candidates. The financing provided by a candidate or a sector should not condition participation or access to an elected appointment. The affiliates can play a relevant role by asserting their voice and vote in the assemblies, so that the candidates represent their interests and not those of the financier.

Finally, any process of legal and institutional transformation must be accompanied by in-depth work with citizens. As long as gifts and favours continue to dominate voting preference, clientelism and its costs will continue to influence politics and the quality of civil servants. For this, social auditing, an independent press, and citizen training are key to achieving positive and sustainable outcomes.

Case study: Politics is for men: the impact of financing on women's political participation

Women's political representation is a pending topic in Guatemala. Data shows that, both in terms of the national census and the electoral roll, there are more women and more registered women; they also participate more when it comes to voting. However, there is a very marked disparity in terms of political participation.⁵⁷ By 2020, the representation of women in Congress was 20 per cent, and it was 3.2 per cent in mayoral offices.⁵⁸ If you are not a man or if you don't have funding or sponsorship, you don't make it into the system. Money is an entrance fee and therefore, women are denied participation in the different sectors.

Members of political parties, and especially women candidates, state that there is a myriad of challenges they face to participate on equal terms with men. According to information obtained in interviews, political parties whose internal regulations promote parity have difficulties in complying with their values.⁵⁹ The reasons are multiple: lack of support from husbands, lack of time given their family responsibilities, *machismo*, but particularly, the difficulty of accessing financing. For a woman who does not have a fixed income, it is more difficult to become a candidate because she cannot finance it, so it is easier for a political party to look for a man who does have such income.⁶⁰ Generally, a certain profile of candidate is sought: a man, with access to financing, and with an established personal network, that is to say, with financial and social capital. For this reason, when a woman holds a leading position within a political organisation, she often encounters difficulties linked to machismo. Women leaders in political organisations have denounced the fact that men hold parallel meetings days before the official meetings chaired by them take place, with the intention of reaching prior agreements without taking their opinions into account.⁶¹

This situation is exacerbated in the case of indigenous women candidates, who find it even more difficult to participate because they face structurally inherent machismo practices, such as the role of elders⁶² and the traditional leadership of men in the communities. The belief within political parties is that women have no capabilities and lack economic resources. Therefore, they have to resort to other strategies such as their ability to talk to people, convey messages, and engage in dialogue. One congresswoman interviewed indicated that '(...) *it is complicated to compete in the face of gifts and cash*'.⁶³

The testimonies of the congresswomen interviewed show the multiple challenges they have to face on a daily basis. The party grassroots structures or other candidates tried several times to remove them as candidates, preferred to talk to their male relatives, or invented stories about lovers or pregnancies to harm them.

IV Summary

Despite the advances in terms of financing, control, and supervision, following the implementation of the LEPP reforms in 2016, the cost of doing politics remains high, particularly for citizens who do not have access to large sums of money.

Those interviewed for this study agreed on the profound disparity that exists between the national campaign and the local campaign. In the local campaign, self-funding prevails, which competes with the public funds used by mayors seeking re-election. Local politics has by nature more contact with citizens and, in a context of poverty and exclusion, clientelistic practices prevail. This situation encourages the rise of chiefs who accumulate political and financial capital evident in personal networks made up of groups of mayors and community authorities that allow them to negotiate with any political party for the control of their municipality or district. The costs for the local politician, after the electoral campaign, are also higher. In order to continue contact with their district, they must pay for mobilisation expenses, lodging, food, headquarters and financing of internal causes related to local dynamics.

Another disparity identified in the study is the difference between the personal costs borne by men candidates and those borne by woman candidates. The reasons are multiple: lack of support from husbands, lack of time given family responsibilities, *machismo*, but particularly, the difficulty of accessing financing. It is more difficult for a woman who does not have a fixed income to run for office because she cannot finance her candidacy, so it is easier for a political party to look for a man who does have such an income.

An important finding is the way in which criminal structures, particularly corruption and drug trafficking networks, have taken advantage of the electoral system, the political party system, and the weakness of control and oversight by electoral authorities and the Public Prosecutor's Office. The entry costs and self-financed electoral campaigns of many congressional candidates, mayors and presidential candidates are not consistent with the salaries they formally earn in their four years of office. The strongest motivation to participate in politics is enrichment, impunity, and the facilitation of businesses such as drug trafficking and money laundering.

Finally, another differentiation is the perception of the personal costs associated with political practice. The politician by trade knows the risks and rules of the game, and is willing to assume the consequences. The ordinary citizen, particularly women and young people, are generally victims of discrimination, criticism, threats, discrediting, and harassment. The high cost of grassroots campaigning, nomination costs, culturally rooted clientelism, and the interests of groups and sectors that are willing to contribute large amounts of unreported or illicit financing have generated a significant barrier to the political participation of citizens who, instead of seeking enrichment or impunity, seek to represent the interests of the population.

Given this panorama, it is important to implement legal reforms, but also institutional reforms accompanied by the promotion of education for democracy. The strategy must be comprehensive, working with all political actors and citizens to obtain positive and sustainable outcomes.

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²⁸ Interview with mayoral candidate, January 2021.

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⁵⁰ Interview with municipal candidate, January 2021.

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

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