ORGANIZATIONAL EXPANSION, LIBERALIZATION REVERSALS AND RADICALIZED COLLECTIVE ACTION

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ABSTRACT

The paper addresses a core question in the literature on states and political challenges from excluded social classes: how is large-scale collective action possible against repressive governments in the global periphery? Using the case of El Salvador’s 1932 peasant-worker uprising, the paper contributes to theories of organizational expansion and radicalization in nondemocratic settings. The case study suggests that periods of regime liberalization deposit organizations in civil society that persist beyond the political opening in the system. Combining historical materials with logistic regression and hierarchical linear modeling (HLM), it is found that the political threats constituting liberalization reversals provide negative incentives for surviving reform-minded organizations to attempt revolutionary forms of collective action in more hostile political environments.
INTRODUCTION

The paper elaborates a sequential framework of collective action suitable to authoritarian contexts and addresses the conditions associated with El Salvador’s January 1932 rebellion. The 1932 peasant-worker insurgency and subsequent state-sponsored massacre serve as major events in Central American history as well as defined the future of modern state-civil society relations in El Salvador. The mass uprising still stands as one of the largest in scale in Latin America during the global depression of the 1930s. The rebellion involved thousands of peasant and worker participants who attempted to occupy several towns in western El Salvador and take over key army barracks and National Guard posts. The state-sponsored massacre that followed (known as “la matanza”) was also one of the greatest single acts of human rights violations witnessed in the Western Hemisphere in the past century (Monteforte Toledo, 1972, p. 124) – killing over 1 percent of the national population. Fifty years later, the insurgent rebels and death squads in El Salvador’s civil war of the 1980s named themselves after key protagonists of the events of 1932 (e.g., the insurgents’ western front “Frente Francisco Sánchez” and the para-military’s “Maximiliano Hernández Martínez anti-communist brigade”) (Ching, 1998). Moreover, the largest oppositional political party in contemporary El Salvador (Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN)) takes it title from one of the alleged plotters of the 1932 rebellion – Agustín Farabundo Martí.

This article analyzes the period in El Salvador between 1925 and 1932. The episodes of popular unrest in this era provide a chain of events found in other nondemocratic contexts, but underdeveloped in prevailing political sociology and social movement theories – an authoritarian regime attempts to liberalize the political system and then abruptly reverses these efforts. Hence, the objective of this study is to contribute to explanations of the emergence of radicalized collective action under the unlikely conditions of a regime moving onto a more authoritarian trajectory. I employ both historical and quantitative analysis to examine the relationship between regime change and forms of popular contention.

STATE-MOVEMENT DYNAMICS IN NONDEMOCRATIC POLITICAL SETTINGS

Nondemocratic governments in most times and places decrease the potential for social movement activity because of restricted access of the citizenry to
state institutions, the lack of political and associational freedoms, and the heavy penalties incurred for trying to obtain such rights (Johnston & Mueller, 2001; Schock, 2005). In fact, most authoritarian states are constructed in such a fashion as to prevent independent collective action by civil society (Osa, 2003; Johnston, 2005). Nonetheless, excluded social groups have at times overcome these obstacles and launched successful mobilization campaigns in an effort to alter the prevailing structure of power, push for new advantages, or defend existing benefits. Below, I examine the case of popular rebellion in El Salvador in the late 1920s and early 1930s to better specify the conditions that increase the likelihood of mass mobilization materializing and the form it takes in nondemocratic political settings.

**REGIME LIBERALIZATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL EXPANSION**

For states in the capitalist periphery, ruling elites may decide to liberalize the polity under conditions of sustained economic growth, especially before the current wave of global democracy promotion (Robinson, 1996). During much of the twentieth century, economic growth in Third World nations was directly tied to global market prices for the few primary commodities they exported (Paige, 1975). Favorable international economic conditions grant state managers in the capitalist periphery a slightly greater sense of autonomy by loosening political restrictions and responding more to popular grievances. In such circumstances, the state retains more resources to address pressing social and economic issues as well as use the opportunity to gain a greater level of mass legitimacy.

Political liberalization periods in authoritarian regimes are analogous to the widening of political opportunities as described in democratic regimes (Tarrow, 1998). The expansion of political opportunities in nondemocratic polities creates more favorable conditions for the founding and expansion of secondary associations and civic organizations (i.e., trade unions, professional associations, and cooperatives) via a diminution in governmental repression, formal certification, and state promotion of competitive elections. These three specific opportunities roughly match the core components of opportunity structure in the synthetic reviews of McAdam (1996) and Tarrow (1998) in terms of their discussions of declining repression, institutional access, and electoral realignments. When these liberalizing conditions appear at the same time and reinforce each other in nondemocratic
regimes, they act as “system wide” opportunities (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004) with the potential to produce a wave of collective action by several groups. First, however, students of collective action should think sequentially about the process of widening opportunities and its specific contribution to organizational expansion in civil society for mass dissent to even materialize in authoritarian settings.

A relaxation in state repression signals to organizational entrepreneurs outside of the polity that their efforts in establishing new collectivities have a better chance of survival (Markoff, 1996; Tilly, 2004). Lifting martial law, freeing political prisoners, and enacting new social welfare policies are all indicators that the state is easing its authoritarian grip on civil society. Formal state certification of emergent civic organizations provides a key incentive for civil society activists to continue organization-building efforts. With formal recognition or registration, the government acknowledges the civic organization as a legitimate entity to operate and mobilize within its territorial jurisdiction and reduces the probability that it will be repressed or liquidated. With their newly acquired legal status, civic organizations increase the likelihood of gaining new benefits and advantages in subsequent rounds of collective action (Goldstone & Tilly, 2001; Amenta & Caren, 2004). Hence, a relaxation in state coercion and institutional access “facilitate” the emergence of organization building and joint action (Kriesi, Koopmans, Duyvendak, & Giugni, 1995, pp. 38–39).

Another condition associated with regime liberalization and an expansion of political opportunity in authoritarian settings is a move toward more competitive elections (Markoff, 1996). Tilly (1978) contends that by convoking a series of multi-party elections national governments generate a shielding umbrella for a variety of civic groups to organize themselves beyond strictly electoral concerns. Even holding successive local elections sends a strong message to civil society that the regime tolerates reform efforts and it may be a propitious time to establish and expand civic organizations. Moreover, in regions with a recently consolidated nation-state, local elections may be more meaningful to the citizenry than national elections, with the struggle for municipal control, power, and authority as a greater motivator for civic action and grievance adjudication. Hence, a nondemocratic regime that begins to liberalize via competitive elections on a national scale will likely positively influence civic organization expansion within civil society.

The formation of a field of civic organizations encouraged by these regime liberalization practices greatly expands the scale of potential political mobilization. Gould’s (1995) work on nineteenth century Parisian popular
insurgencies contributed to resource mobilization perspectives by noting that one of the most important functions of formal organizations (e.g., associations, social clubs, labor unions, cooperatives, educational institutions, etc.) in relation to collective action is to greatly extend the range of collective identity formation – well beyond what would be possible for groups limited by informal organizational ties (e.g., single neighborhood, village, workplace, etc.). This scale expansion is made possible by the greater level of mutual awareness and shared recognition that organizations supply by connecting previously isolated groups to one another that are experiencing similar circumstances. The ability of civic groups to make successful mobilization appeals across regions and sectors hinges largely on the degree of organizational connectedness between the units of the identity in question. In Oberschall’s (1973, p. 119) resource mobilization model, sustained resistance by challengers, as opposed to short-term outbursts or momentary riots, requires the erection of such an organizational base along either communal or associational lines – especially for instrumental and politically oriented movements (Kriesi, 1995). Once collective actors develop organizational assets, they retain access to a fungible resource infrastructure that may be appropriated for a variety of purposes (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004).

In brief, periods of regime liberalization may include three system wide political opportunities: (1) a relaxation in repression (e.g., freeing political prisoners, lifting martial law, etc.); (2) increasing legal recognition of civic organizations; and (3) a growing competitiveness in the electoral arena. These nationally based state gestures act as mutually reinforcing conditions for groups in civil society to expand organizational capacities in specific localities and establish a field of interacting civic associations (Minkoff & McCarthy, 2005). In stable democratic political settings, there is likely more of a direct relationship between political openings and upsurges in collective action (Soule, McAdam, McCarthy, & Su, 1999). In authoritarian and transitioning regimes in the global periphery, civil society must first develop an organizational base before popular movement activity can be sustained. Liberalization periods more likely eventuate in nonviolent forms of contention led by newly founded or greatly expanded civic organizations that make claims for new advantages and/or to deepen democratic reforms (Kriesi et al., 1995, p. 39). This was the pattern of civil society opposition reported for the final years of Perestroika in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (Fish, 1995; Bunce, 1999; Mueller, 1999) as well as for democratic transitions in Brazil and Chile in the 1980s (Hipsher, 1998). As common as these sequential episodes of regime liberalization, civil society
formation, and democratic transition may be, social movement scholarship is less informed about the process of liberalization reversals whereby the state rolls back political freedoms and attempts to repress the newly created civic organizations (Tilly, 2003).

**LIBERALIZATION REVERSALS: THE THREATENING AUTHORITARIAN POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT**

When states reverse liberalization policies by taking away basic rights and suppressing the political opposition, they potentially risk radicalizing civic organizations and their memberships leftover from the preceding liberalization period. These new negative conditions encroaching into the political environment act as threats to organized civic groups. Threats are defined as conditions or incentives that will make groups worse off if they fail to mobilize (Tilly, 1978; Goldstone & Tilly, 2001).¹ The multi-dimensional concept of threat is the underdeveloped corollary to political opportunity (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001, pp. 42–43). Instead of the probability of gaining new advantages driving collective action via expanding political opportunities, it is the perception of current benefits being taken away that acts as the incentive for new rounds of mobilization (Goldstone & Tilly, 2001; Van Dyke & Soule, 2002; Almeida, 2003; Van Dyke, 2003; Jenkins & Form, 2005). These negative incentives may occur during downturns in the world economy – such as when international commodity prices fall for poor countries that depend on favorable prices for foreign exchange and to meet their balance of payments obligations (Fearon, 1979). Two important forms of threat that seem most important in catalyzing mass mobilization include economic threats and political threats, which can arise when regimes reverse earlier liberalization reforms.

*State-attributed economic threats:* When organized groups convincingly attribute responsibility to specific agents for a decline in their economic conditions they may initiate campaigns to resist unwanted changes (Klandermans, 1997, pp. 17–18; Van Dyke & Soule, 2002; Javeline, 2003; Snow, Soule, & Cress, 2005). The expansion of the nation-state as the chief regulator of economic life and vital resources makes it a common target for redress of deteriorating economic conditions – even globally induced ones. Specific state-attributed economic problems in the global periphery include land access (Wickham-Crowley, 1992), basic price increases (Goldstone, 1986; Goldstone, 2001; Osa, 2003), and mass unemployment (Iñigo, Carrera, &
Cotarelo, 2001). These economic grievances may increasingly become politicized under authoritarian regimes when the state itself is viewed as incapable or unwilling to ameliorate the issue (Goodwin, 2001).

In the developing world, when state-sponsored agro-export policies fail to institute substantive agrarian reform or alleviate mass unemployment problems during global economic slumps, incentives increase for organized groups to mobilize defensive campaigns. For example, in Argentina between 1997 and 2002, state-initiated structural adjustment programs combined with economic recession to unleash a nation-wide movement of unemployed workers (los piqueteros). Organized by pre-existing neighborhood groups, oppositional political parties, and church parishes, the principal actions of the piqueteros include highway roadblocks until the government agrees to provide short-term job programs (los planes trabajar) in the affected communities (Oviedo, 2001). By the late 1990s and early 2000s, more piquetero roadblocks than labor strikes were registered in the country. In a related case, Almeida (2002) documented that state-initiated fiscal austerity policies fueled a wave of mass action throughout Latin America between the late 1990s and early 2000s. In sum, state-attributed economic problems experienced directly in the immediate lives of well-networked groups may be a threat incentive to join in resistant collective action. Even though state-attributed economic problems increase the probability of heightened protest among organized actors, the form of contention will likely only become more radicalized and violent when combined with the political threats of an erosion of basic rights and escalating state repression.

Erosion of rights and state repression: After a period of extending civil rights and regime liberalization, taking away voting and the freedom to assemble obstruct the conventional avenues of political participation. Alternative nonconventional political strategies and organizations appear much more attractive under these circumstances (Amenta & Young, 1999). When competitive elections are canceled or special states of emergency decreed, the government announces the shutting down of the polity on a national scale and calls into question its institutional credibility. This conveys a strong message to civic organizations that the state as an audience and adjudicator to reform-type demands is greatly restricted (if not outright hostile). State managers maintain greater incentives to shut down political openings during economic recessions and depressions in order to cut off channels for redistributive demands from excluded social groups. Such authoritarian state behavior would also likely be reinforced and supported by agro-export elites and capitalist class factions connected to the international economy that view popular demands from below as a zero-sum game (Paige, 1975).
Over time, challengers will likely use their in-place organizational infrastructure to form revolutionary-type organizations and radicalize surviving civic organizations in order to seek political influence. Unaccountable state managers who are popularly perceived as no longer even making pretenses of acting under the rule of law encourage more militant forms of popular demands and protest, while petitioning authorities through routine conflict resolution channels appears ineffective (Jenkins & Bond, 2001). Such scenarios create a widespread crisis in normative political behavior, opening the way to mass disruption and collective political violence as alternate strategies to exercise political power for challenging groups.

Research on the impacts of state repression on mobilization finds evidence for both deterring and escalating effects (Lichbach, 1987). These contradictory findings divide into three general predictions for the effect of repression on collective action: (1) deterrence; (2) escalation to some threshold point and then declining; and (3) a positive “backlash” result. Political opportunity versions of the political process model generally view repression as a deterrent to collective action (Rule, 1988, p. 176). The deterrent view is consistent with a relaxation in state repression acting as a core opportunity motivating collective action in a liberalizing political environment. Another literature on the relationship between governmental coercion and mass dissent predicts a curvilinear effect (an inverted U-curve or parabola), with moderate levels of state repression increasing protest and high levels deterring it (Gurr, 1970; Brockett, 1993; Opp, 1994). Other studies predict a “backlash” effect (Francisco, 1995; Beissinger, 2001) with high levels of repression increasing protest behavior (Olivier, 1991; Khawaja, 1993; Rasler, 1996), including government massacres of civilians (Francisco, 2005). A number of empirical studies outside of advanced industrialized democracies have demonstrated positive effects of state repression on the level of popular contention (Goodwin, 2001; Jenkins & Schock, 2004; Almeida, 2005; Francisco, 2005; Schock, 2005). The incentives for such an effect include moral outrage (Wood, 2003) and regime delegitimation. Coercive state behavior also breaks publicly held beliefs of expected state–civil society relations in obvious and powerful ways – especially when the repressive acts are way out of proportion to the type of demands and claims protesters pursue (Goldstone, 1998).

Activists can use state repressive acts as empirical verifications of the unworthiness of state managers to rule as well as for motivational appeals within organizations to participate in future protest actions. These organizational settings provide solidary incentives, shared activist identities, and normative pressures to engage in high-risk protest (Gould, 1995; Kim &
In both curvilinear and backlash models, state repression, as erosion of rights, also pushes well-networked challengers into more radical forms of organization and dissent as repeated outrageous acts of state violence convince challengers that a fundamental reorganization of the state and society are desirable goals (Goldstone, 1998). That is, state-sponsored violence and fundamental rights violations against regime challengers changes the character of mass dissent toward more disruptive or coercive tactics and revolutionary-oriented goals. In sum, the radicalization of civic organizations conditioned by an erosion of rights and state repression will create the potential for revolutionary-type collective action.

THEORETICAL SUMMARY

The framework outlined above addresses a gap in social movements research: how mass collective action takes place in oppressive settings in the global South where political opportunities are in short supply or frozen by renewed authoritarian state practices. Liberalization efforts (including incomplete efforts) initiated by state managers and political elites leave civil society organizations intact in particular localities that may persist into the post-liberalization era. In other words, periods of regime liberalization and widening political opportunity produce a “glacier effect” by depositing organizational sediment on the political landscape and then receding. State-attributed economic threats and the political threats associated with liberalization reversals (erosion of rights and state repression) act as incentives for the communities organized during the political opening to launch new rounds of collective action in a much more hostile political environment. Organized localities will attempt to hold back the rising tide of renewed dictatorial rule. State-initiated repressive measures increasingly radicalize the goals and forms of collective action of erstwhile reformist groups, increasing the potential for mass insurgency in organized regions. In the following analysis, I show that organizations were crucial to the emergence of radicalized collective action under an increasingly repressive regime in El Salvador in the early 1930s.

METHODS

The study employs both qualitative and quantitative analysis of the sequencing of mass mobilization and its forms to analyze the case of popular
revolt in El Salvador during the global depression. I draw on primarily historical materials to first examine the rise of regime liberalization, the formation of a civil society organizational infrastructure and a reformist wave of contention, followed by the reversal of regime liberalization. I then use quantitative methods (logistic regression and hierarchical generalized linear models) to explain the geographical variation in radical revolt during El Salvador’s January 1932 mass uprising. Social movement scholars have repeatedly noted that theory is especially underdeveloped in explaining mobilization dynamics in lesser-developed countries (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald 1996, pp. xii–xiii; Meyer, 2002, p. 17; McAdam et al., 2001). The case study approach is a useful method to identify conceptually important issues not accounted for in prevailing theories (Prechel, 2000, p. 9). In particular, I use a sequential analysis of opportunity (i.e., regime liberalization) and threat to demonstrate how popular mobilization occurs under conditions of a regime reversing liberalization practices in the global capitalist periphery. Using this particular case should contribute to the “refining or extending movement-related theoretical arguments or conceptualizations” (Snow & Trom, 2002, p. 161).

ANTECEDENTS TO POLITICAL LIBERALIZATION (1885–1927)

For five decades (1885–1927), interlocking elite family clans with large landholdings politically dominated Salvadoran politics (including control of the legislature) (Lindo-Fuentes, 1990; Paige, 1997). However, this governing structure changed in the mid-1920s with the ascendancy of Don Pío Romero Bosque to the presidency. Romero Bosque was a political insider or institutional activist (a brother-in-law of the former President) that decided to break with the dynastic clan system of the Meléndez-Quinónez families and liberalize the polity. He was appointed president in early 1927 and took power on March 1st. Immediately, Romero Bosque implemented a number of unprecedented political reforms. The most important were: (1) removal of martial law; (2) legalization of labor organizations; (3) labor reforms and institution of labor arbitration courts; (4) university autonomy and legalization of university-based organizations; (5) reducing corruption in local elections in El Salvador’s 258 municipalities; and (6) organization and convocation of the first competitive presidential elections (Ching, 1997; Guidos Véjar, 1982). The result of these political reforms included a tremendous
growth in the organizational infrastructure of civil society, which witnessed the spread of labor union formation, organizations of urban renters and students, establishment of autonomous political parties, and the organization of peasants.

At the same time, El Salvador had undergone a rapid economic and political shift in the period between 1880 and 1930. This was the epoch when El Salvador securely inserted itself in the world economy as a coffee-exporter (Lauria-Santiago, 1999). Indigenous farming lands in the western departments were privatized by a series of central government decrees in the 1880s and 1890s (Menjivar, 1995, pp. 103–104; Pérez Brignoli, 1995). In the typical fashion of primitive accumulation practices (such as those described by Polanyi (1944) for the case of the English peasantry), many rural communities lost their means of livelihood in subsistence farming (Zamosc, 1989). Particular indigenous villages in western El Salvador launched local rebellions to slow down the pace of the land usurpations (Menjivar, 1995, p. 90). In the end, however, the central state and landed interests clearly gained the upper hand in setting aside the most fertile regions on the western pacific slope for coffee cultivation. The expropriated lands were soon transformed into coffee plantations by elite ladino families. By the 1920s, local landed elites, via vertical economic integration, controlled both cultivation and processing for export. The most successful agro-capitalists “controlled the processing, marketing, and export of coffee” (Lauria-Santiago, 1999, p. 228). The newly displaced peasantry, especially indigenous communities, filled the ranks of the rural labor force on the western coffee farms. Coffee exports rose rapidly accounting for up to 90 percent of total export revenues by the 1920s (Wilson, 1970).

Besides this colossal economic shift, the state complemented economic concentration and expansion of coffee by centralizing its administrative apparatus. This was partially accomplished by setting up national guard posts at the municipal level beginning in 1912 (Williams & Walter, 1997). In addition, the central government began to use its official political party – El Partido Nacional Democrático (PND) – by the end of the 1910s to control local municipal elections and impede regionally based rebellions, which frequently erupted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Ching, 1997). Spanish troops trained the newly created National Guard force. The combined Salvadoran security forces (army, National Guard, and national police) were reportedly the best instructed in the region (Wilson, 1970). This precedent of governmental bureaucratic expansion clearly positioned the Salvadoran state to retain a monopoly of coercive
capacity and administrative authority over all other organizations within its territory (Tilly, 1990).

**REGIME LIBERALIZATION: 1927–1930**

In 1927, Pío Romero Bosque ascended to the presidency ushering in a period of sustained political liberalization. The broad liberalization mechanisms that Romero Bosque focused on during his presidential tenure included government recognition of civic organizations and local competitive elections. The early years of his presidency also were characterized by a reduction in state repression. Government recognition could be seen in the right to form and legalize labor associations, the subsidizing of labor federations, the formation of labor courts, and university autonomy. In addition, Romero Bosque also lifted a state of siege in April 1927 that had been in place since 1920 (Menjívar, 1982). This particular action allowed much more freedom of movement and association for urban and rural groups until the second half of 1930. This unprecedented political liberalization occurred with a peak in world coffee prices, El Salvador's number one export commodity (see Fig. 1) (Williams, 1994).

In 1928, Romero Bosque established an Office of Labor that allowed urban groups to form and expand labor-based associations and unions as well as strike. Labor unions officially registered with governmental bodies permitting them greater organizational legitimacy in the eyes of state managers. The Romero Bosque government reportedly provided a monthly subsidy to the largest labor organization – the Federación Regional de Trabajadores (FRT) – of up to $1,000 and annually sent the Federation salutatory “Happy New Year’s” greeting cards until 1930 (Ching, 1997; Ching, 1998). Don Pío Romero Bosque also permitted the first competitive elections at the municipal and executive levels of government.

Romero Bosque worked most arduously in changing the structure of local and presidential elections. Competitive municipal elections took place during the month of December in 1927, 1929, and 1930 (Ching, 1997). In January 1931, Arturo Araujo, a labor reformist, won the first competitive presidential elections in the history of El Salvador. However, Araujo’s presidency lasted less than a year, when military officers overthrew his elected government in early December of 1931. In the short period from 1927 through mid-1930, the liberalization program created a marked growth in labor, civic, and educational organizations.
The dynastic governance system of Meléndez-Quiñónez (1913–1927) did allow the formation of state-connected organizations before Romero Bosque’s reforms, such as the Ligas Rojas (“Red Leagues”) (Alvarenga, 1996) and mutual aid associations of urban workers based on trade or craft between 1918 and 1927. However, these groups organized along clientilist lines and mobilized largely for staged election campaigns. The Ligas Rojas formed from existing craft associations and indigenous-based Catholic fraternal orders (las cofradías). The government feared autonomous labor organizing so much that they placed guards outside the first labor union federation conference in Armenia, Sonsonate in 1918. The labor congress, nonetheless, established the Confederación de Obreros de El Salvador (COES) (“Workers Confederation of El Salvador”).

By the early 1920s, more union organizations emerged as opposed to mutual aid associations. In 1922, the labor federation Unión Oberera Salvadoreña (UOS) (“Salvadoran Workers Union”) was established with 35 affiliated labor organizations. In 1924, COES and UOS briefly fused together.

Fig. 1. World Market Price for Coffee, 1901–1940. Source: Williams, 1994.
Most importantly, in that same year the Federación Regional de Trabajadores (FRT) (‘‘Regional Federation of Workers’’) formed on September 21st. The FRT would become the single most important organizational unit connecting various groups to push for political and economic reforms in the late 1920s. The FRT linked labor-based organizations throughout western El Salvador stretching from Lake Ilopango to Ahuachapán and Santa Ana, which border neighboring Guatemala (see Fig. 2). By the end of the 1920s, the liberalizing regime tolerated (if not actively encouraged) a wave of organizational activity by FRT militants.

Guidos Véjar (1982, p. 143) maintains that the 1927–1930 period created an unprecedented ‘‘civil society’’ in El Salvador. In 1929, for example, the FRT registered 42 organizations in 5 of El Salvador’s 14 departments. Fig. 2 displays the municipalities with FRT labor organizations reported in December of 1929. By the end of 1931, a high-estimate reports that the FRT had 75,000 members, which would have represented 10.6 percent of the economically active population at the time (Menjívar, 1985, p. 74). Salvadoran organized labor would not reach this level of union density again until the 1970s (Montes, 1984). The real organizational take off point appears to be in the 1927–1930 period, which coincided with Romero Bosque’s liberalization program. The FRT used its newly acquired legal protection to begin organizing rural workers in the western departments between 1927 and 1931 (Elam, 1968; Alvarenga, 1996; Gould & Lauria-Santiago, 2004).

Fig. 2. Municipalities with FRT Affiliated Organizations, December 1929 (Shaded).
Already, between 1924 and 1927, the FRT reportedly held seven strikes (Ching, 1997). Between 1927 and 1930, activists coordinated several orderly and nonviolent protest campaigns (see Fig. 3). These included urban strikes, petitions, street marches, and boycotts against exorbitant electricity prices, bus fares, and housing rents (Guidos Véjar, 1982). Also, another organizational unit affiliated with the FRT that appeared in these years – the *Universidad Popular* – provided educational and cultural seminars by sympathetic university students and intellectuals to workers and peasants throughout western El Salvador. An organization of urban renters (*Liga de Inquilinos*) was formed in 1929 that grew nearly to the size of FRT (*Ibid.*). The FRT created a communicative structure through its newspaper – *El Martillo* – and the use of pamphlets for popular education, especially allegorical drawings in the rural sector given the high illiteracy rates among the peasantry (Lárín, 1971, p. 139; Martínez, 1987; Ching, 1995).

![Fig. 3. Nonviolent and Violent Protest Events, 1916–1932. Source: La Prensa (1916–1932). Protests were defined as three or more people in civil society making claims on the government or economic elites. Violent protests were coded as actions that damaged property or harmed people.](image-url)
The early FRT chapters organized themselves as largely craft-based associations (e.g., bakers, shoe makers, construction workers, barbers, public transport workers, carpenters, tailors, etc.). FRT affiliates outside of the larger western towns of Ahuachapán, Santa Tecla, San Salvador, Santa Ana, and Sonsonate recruited largely rural workers and maintained regular interaction with peasant groups (Kincaid, 1987; Alvarenga, 1996; Gould & Lauria-Santiago, 2004). Using pre-existing organizational ties in the cofradías (Catholic-based brotherhoods in indigenous communities), the FRT was able to quickly wield organizational influence in some of the most densely populated indigenous towns and villages of Sonsonate Department in western El Salvador (Kincaid, 1987). The forms of protest from the period 1927–1930 appear largely to be reformist. Indeed, there is a clear upsurge in nonviolent protest during the years of political liberalization (see Fig. 3). Urban renters demanded cheaper rents and electricity prices, workers in towns demanded the implementation of the eight-hour work day and overtime for working at night. This all began to change in late 1930 with the onset of increasing economic and political threats linked directly and indirectly to the global economic depression. By 1931, the Salvadoran state played the role of “switch operator” (Wickham Crowley, 1989, p. 139) shifting the political environment onto a more threatening trajectory.

LIBERALIZATION REVERSAL: THE THREATENING POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT, 1930–1932

State-attributed economic problems: Already by 1930 in El Salvador, there was a rapid economic decline as the worldwide depression caused a plunge in international coffee prices (see Fig. 1). Coffee served as El Salvador’s number one export accounting for between 85 and 95 percent of all export earnings in the late 1920s (Wilson, 1970). By 1931, a growing number of small landholders were becoming dispossessed (up to 28 percent). The presidential election campaign covered most of the second half of 1930, and the leading candidate, Arturo Araujo, elevated land redistribution as a major campaign issue (Marroquín, 1977; Alvarenga, 1996; Gould, 2001). This increasingly made land access a state-attributed economic problem for the land-starved peasantry (Castellanos, 2001). Indeed, within days of taking office in March 1931, Araujo’s new residence, the presidential palace in San Salvador, was swarmed by workers and peasants demanding land reform (Anderson, 1971).
In addition, between 1929 and 1931, the wages on coffee plantations plummeted between 50 and 70 percent (Castellanos, 2001; Gould, 2001) and unemployment grew in rural areas throughout the region (Alvarenga, 1996; Ching, 1998) leading to several FRT-sponsored demonstrations headed by jobless workers by mid-1930. For example, on June 25, 1930, a leading daily newspaper reported that a mass mobilization of unemployed workers marched through San Salvador with mini-rallies held at the Casa Presidencial, the mayor’s office, and the Palacio Nacional – hence attributing blame for the unemployment crisis to three levels of government in a single rally. One of the demonstrator’s placards stated, “Los Padres de la Patria con medio sueldo en receso y nosotros sin pan” (roughly translated as: “The parliamentary deputies during legislative recess receive half of their salary and we don’t even have bread to eat” see El Día June 26, 1930, p. 1). By April and May of 1931, even peasants initiated rural strikes and occupations of coffee plantations demanding owed back wages and the end of payments in the form of company store vouchers (Guidos Véjar, 1982).

**Political threats – erosion of rights and state repression:** Between 1927 and 1930, rights were expanding with the legalization of civic associations and labor unions and the unprecedented convocation of competitive municipal elections. There was a rapid retreat in this opening by the end of 1930 with a series of declarations by Romero Bosque prohibiting union assemblies and a state of siege implemented by newly elected president Araujo in 1931. Orderly street protests and other types of public gatherings were now banned (see Table 1). Then, after the military coup in December 1931 that toppled Araujo’s civilian presidency, the newly installed General Hernández Martínez’s dictatorship cancelled the municipal election results in the first week of January 1932. The new dictator nullified local elections in the municipalities where the newly formed Communist Party had won or was perceived to have won (e.g., Ahuachapán, Turín, Tacuba, Santa Tecla, Sonsonate) (Cuenca, 1962; Anderson, 1971). This act was especially a powerful signal of the end of the last remaining vestiges of the political reforms initiated by Romero Bosque in that it was precisely the municipal elections that acted as the most democratic part of regime liberalization between 1927 and 1930.

The Salvadoran state demonstrated less repressive behavior between 1927 and the first half of 1930. There was comparatively more legal space for civil society groups to organize (e.g., the lifting of the state of siege that had been in place in the previous years). However, by the end of 1930, the intermittent arrest campaigns against labor-based groups and massacres of civilians (e.g., in Santa Ana in 1930) marked a clear increase in state authoritarianism.
state security forces increasingly persecuted the FRT. Several organizational meetings, street demonstrations, and coffee plantation strikes were brutally repressed by the National Guard between mid-1930 and early January 1932 (Alvarenga, 1996). Gould and Lauria-Santiago (2004, p. 229) report that in August of 1930 alone the National Guard suppressed labor demonstrations in at least 10 towns in western El Salvador resulting in hundreds of arrests. Table 1 lists major acts of state repression against the organized workers movement reported between mid-1930 and 1931.8

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<th>Date</th>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/12/30</td>
<td>Executive decree prohibiting workers’ rallies and subversive propaganda</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/30/30</td>
<td>Executive decree prohibiting all demonstrations by worker or peasant organizations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/27/30</td>
<td>Police repress demonstration in Santa Ana</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/21/30</td>
<td>Police massacre in Santa Ana</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/31</td>
<td>Police repression in Santa Tecla</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/17/31</td>
<td>Sonsonate (government massacre of Pacific street march)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/21/31</td>
<td>National (law against communist meetings and associations)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/11/31</td>
<td>Entire nation (state of siege)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/22/31</td>
<td>Asuchillo, Zaragoza, La Libertad (government massacre of rural workers)</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Schlesinger (1946); Anderson (1971).*

The growing repressive threats in the early 1930s radicalized the previously reformist FRT. In March of 1930, leaders within the labor movement and FRT founded a small communist party (El Partido Comunista Salvadoreño (PCS)) with a clandestine ceremony on the shores of Lake Ilopango. The PCS appropriated part of the existing FRT structure to wield organizational influence (Menjivar, 1985; Ching, 1998). The PCS also created other organizations to assist the politically persecuted, such as the
Socorro Rojo Internacional ("International Red Aid") (SRI) and the Liga Pro-Luchadores de Perseguidos ("League in Defense of the Persecuted") (LPLP) that mobilized in the 1930–1931 period. These new organizations clearly reacted to the increasingly threatening environment. In early 1930, the FRT convoked a special meeting strongly encouraging each individual affiliate organization to form a separate local branch of the LPLP in their respective municipalities (Schlesinger, 1946). Though there existed internal divisions within the FRT, the PCS faction appears to have become hegemonic in its rivalry with labor reformists and anarcho-syndicalists. As Fig. 2 demonstrates, the FRT organized local chapters in the western municipalities and this is precisely where the PCS and its affiliated organizations, such as the SRI would have growing political influence between 1930 and early 1932 (Schlesinger, 1946; Alvarenga, 1996).

Guidos Véjar (1982, p. 169) reports how these gathering state-attributed threats in the late 1930–1931 period converted reformist contention into more threat-induced episodes of collective action. Demonstrations for new advantages and specific policy changes were increasingly replaced by protests demanding the end of political persecution and the state of siege. For example, on July 4, 1931, posters appeared in the FRT-organized municipalities of Santiago Texacuangos, Ahuachapán, and Sonsonate demanding that the government rescind its recently enacted law prohibiting meetings and public gatherings.9

The newly formed communist party of El Salvador was calling for more radical changes and was denied municipal electoral victories in early January 1932. Security forces repressed a number of labor strikes on coffee plantations during this time. These repressive threats against organized workers and peasants culminated in the legendary peasant-worker uprising and massacre of January 1932. During the revolt, workers and peasants attempted to occupy several towns in western El Salvador (see Fig. 4). In general, protest did not become overwhelmingly violent until after the military overthrew the elected government in December 1931 and the nullification of municipal elections in January 1932 (see Fig. 3). Insurgent activities began in early January as rolling strikes on coffee plantations (Gould, 2001) and sporadic protests against the cancellation of the municipal elections (McClintock, 1985). The uprising included an estimated 16,000–30,000 peasants and workers with rudimentary weapons (mostly agricultural instruments and a few small arms) attempting to occupy local municipal governments and attack army and national guard posts (López Vallecillos, 1964). Rebel activity was reported as early as January 10 (when the PCS gave its support for the rebellion (Ching, 1998)) peaking around...
January 22, and continued until around January 28 when overwhelming state repression set in. The popular revolt was brutally crushed by early February.

Following the uprising of January 1932, a wave of government-backed violence struck rural and urban El Salvador. The security forces killed between 8,000 and 30,000 people in the weeks following the rebellion. This makes it one of the largest acts of state-sponsored repression (and human rights violations) in the twentieth century in the Western Hemisphere against non-European peoples. The overwhelming majority of massacre victims were indigenous peasants in the western departments (descendants of the Nahuatl-speaking Pipil Indians) (making the mass slaughter a veritable ethnocide). In four municipalities at the center of the rebellion (Tacuba, Juayúa, Nahuizalco, and Izalco), Montes (1979) estimates that state security forces and government-armed vigilantes exterminated 28.5 percent of the total population in the repression that followed the uprising. It was reportedly the first time that the national guard, police, army, and airforce used rapid-fire machine gun weaponry and aerial bombardment. Vigilante squads and government forces dumped hundreds of bodies in hastily dug
collective graves throughout the western towns and villages. During this reign of state-sponsored terror, security forces completely dismantled the organizational infrastructure of the FRT.

**QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE 1932 REBELLION**

As stated above, the 1932 uprising and massacre served both as one of the largest single acts of popular insurgency and of state repression witnessed in Latin America during the worldwide Great Depression of the 1930s. What is even more perplexing is how the insurgents mobilized and coordinated such a widespread rebellion with relatively few resources and under close surveillance by estate owners and security forces. For example, in the years prior to the uprising, the Salvadoran government organized the National Guard nationwide along bureaucratic lines to prevent the outbreak of rebellions. The following section presents a discussion of the data, methods, and results of a quantitative analysis of the organizational role of the reformist FRT labor groups and acts of state repression in contributing to the 1932 uprising. While the interpretive historical analysis in the previous section demonstrated the sequence of events of regime liberalization, organizational expansion, liberalization reversal, and movement radicalization, it did not explain the precise geographical variation of the 1932 revolt. The analysis of municipal data shows that the organized regions benefiting from regime liberalization and most affected by its subsequent reversal (i.e., via state repression) were the ones most likely to rise up in revolutionary-type revolt in January 1932.

Historical materials are limited for political events in Central America in the 1920s and 1930s. Relevant data were gathered from Salvadoran historiography, the geo-spatial mapping of El Salvador’s municipalities, and 1930 census records to model the relationship between pre-existing FRT organizations, state repression, and the January 1932 uprising. The units of analysis are the 258 municipalities, which are equivalent to US counties, embedded in El Salvador’s 14 departments at the time of the revolt. A multi-level model predicting the incidence of a municipality-based rebellion in 1932 is also estimated using independent variables at both the municipality and departmental levels.

**Rebellion variable:** The dependent variable is the occurrence of a rebellion in 1932, which is denoted below as R_1932. This is measured as a dummy variable scored 1 if the municipality reported a rebellious event or contributed participants to a rebellion in another municipality between January 10
and 28, 1932, and coded 0 if not. Rebellious events ranged from theft and small-armed attacks to the sustained occupation of towns for several days by hundreds of insurgents. Data on rebellious events were collected and coded from Anderson’s (1971) seminal monograph on the revolt and from López Vallecillos (1964).

The independent variables are the following: FRT labor organization (FRTPRES) is a level-1 municipality dummy variable scored 1 if the municipality reported the presence of an FRT labor organization in December 1929, and 0 if otherwise. December 1929 was the high point of regime liberalization and the FRT was the major civil society group to expand its organizational reach during this political opening. A second level-1 organizational variable is whether the FRT was in an adjacent municipality (DUFRTBOR); this dummy variable is scored 1 if the municipality was geographically contiguous to a municipality reporting an FRT organization in December 1929, and 0 if not. These data were obtained from Schlesinger’s (1946) list of FRT organizations, a source used repeatedly by prominent Salvadoran social scientists and historians (see Larín, 1971; Guidos Véjar, 1982; Menjivar, 1982, 1985; Lungo, 1987). In addition, Schlesinger’s list appears to be similar to an independent directory of FRT organizations uncovered by Ching (1998) in an archive on the Salvadoran Communist Party uncovered in a Moscow library in the early 1990s.

Another level-1 independent variable is state repression defined as arrests, injuries, or deaths caused by government security forces on civil society groups between January 1, 1930 and January 4, 1932, as reported by Anderson (1971). These are all observable coercive events initiated by the state (Earl, 2003). Repression was measured as a dummy variable (REPRESS) scored 1 if the municipality experienced at least one act of state repression, and 0 if otherwise. A second state repression dummy variable was constructed for municipalities bordering others that experienced an act of state repression (BOREPRE). Often, state acts of coercion took place during demonstrations or meetings where participants came from neighboring municipalities.

Several other variables were included as controls (population size, concentration of indigenous peoples, and coffee cultivation). Population size (LOGPOP) was measured at the level of the municipality using data from the 1930 census. Owing to outliers, the natural log of population size was used. The percentage of land cultivated in coffee in the 1929–1930 harvesting season (PER_CAFE) was measured at the departmental level and taken from Iraheta Rosales, López Alas, and Escobar Cornejo (1971). Coffee production is an important variable because a large number of
participants in the 1932 rebellion are reported to have been laborers on coffee estates. Therefore, regions of relatively higher coffee cultivation should have a greater likelihood of rebellion.

Information on the size of the indigenous population (INDIG) was based on data from the 1930 census. This variable was measured at the departmental level as a percentage of the department’s total population. The historiography of the 1932 revolt clearly demonstrates that indigenous groups were key actors in the rebellion, and the epicenter of the revolt, in Sonsonate department, comprised the highest density of indigenous peoples in the country at the time (Montes, 1979; Pérez Brignoli, 1995; Ching, 1998). Since information on coffee production and the indigenous population are only available at the departmental level, their effects on the likelihood of a municipal rebellion are estimated using hierarchical generalized linear modeling (HGLM) techniques (presented in Table 3). Recent reviews of collective action research suggest that scholars apply hierarchical modeling where “societal processes refer to different levels of aggregation” in order to “capture embedded processes” (Jenkins & Form, 2005, p. 348). In this case, municipal-level data on rebellion, labor organizations and state repression are embedded within departmental-level data on indigenous population size and coffee production. The descriptive statistics for all variables used in the quantitative analyses are listed in Table A1 in the appendix.

RESULTS

In December of 1929, the FRT registered 42 organizations with at least one labor organization in 19 of El Salvador’s 258 municipalities (7.4 percent). Between January 10 and 28, 1932, an anti-government disturbance occurred (or contributed rebels) in 24 of the 258 municipalities (9.3 percent). In 14 out of the 24 (58 percent) rebelling municipalities in 1932, an FRT organization was present at the end of 1929. Moreover, 20 of the 24 municipalities participating in the insurgency (83 percent) were geographically adjacent to a municipality with an FRT labor organization. To estimate with statistical precision the contribution of FRT organizations and state repression in predicting the occurrence of rebellion in 1932, two types of multiple regression models are estimated. The first is a logistic regression of a municipal rebellion using only municipality-level independent variables (Table 2). The second is a multi-level (HGLM) logistic regression of a municipal rebellion using both municipal-level and departmental-level independent variables (Table 3).
Table 2. Logistic Regression Model Predicting the Likelihood of a Municipality Rebelling in 1932.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Logit Coefficient</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Regime liberalization organizations</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRT labor organization established in municipality (1929)</td>
<td>2.68** (0.926)</td>
<td>14.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRT labor organization adjacent to municipality (1929)</td>
<td>0.327 (1.34)</td>
<td>1.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political threats</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State repression in municipality (January 1, 1930 to January 4, 1932)</td>
<td>4.33** (1.44)</td>
<td>76.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipality adjacent to state repressive event (January 1, 1930 to January 4, 1932)</td>
<td>2.75* (1.27)</td>
<td>15.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Size</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipality population size</td>
<td>0.793 (0.487)</td>
<td>2.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LR $\chi^2$</strong></td>
<td>102.60***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log likelihood</td>
<td>−28.54</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo $R^2$</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$N$</td>
<td>258</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses.

*p ≤ 0.05

**p ≤ 0.01

***p ≤ 0.001 (two-tailed tests).

Table 2 reports the results of a logistic regression predicting the likelihood of a municipality experiencing a rebellious event in January 1932 using organizational, state repression, and population size explanatory variables, all measured at the level of the municipality (level 1). To facilitate the interpretation of these effects, the logit coefficients shown in the first column were exponentiated and their odds ratios are reported in the second column. The odds of a municipality experiencing a rebellious event in January of 1932 are almost 15 times greater for those where an FRT labor organization was established at the end of 1929. If an act of state repression occurred in the municipality between 1930 and the first week of January 1932, the odds that an insurgent event connected to the January 1932 uprising occurred in the municipality were 76 times greater than in a municipality without such state repression. In addition, municipalities contiguous to those witnessing state repression had odds of experiencing an insurgent event in 1932 that
were 15 times greater than those not contiguous. Thus, Table 2 provides evidence that enduring labor organizations and repressive state behavior contributed significantly to the outbreak of local mass rebellions. These effects were estimated controlling for the population size of the municipalities.

Because there was substantial variation in the level of intensity of rebellions across municipalities, an additional test was conducted predicting the potency of the local uprisings. In this model only the 81 municipalities within the 5 western departments that experienced a rebellious event (Ahuachapán, La Libertad, Santa Ana, Sonsonate, and San Salvador) were included as the units of analysis. Ordered logistic regression was

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3.</th>
<th>HGLM Logistic Regression Predicting Rebellion Occurrence in January, 1932.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent Variables</td>
<td>HGLM Logit Coefficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>$-3.186^{****}$ (0.610)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level-1 predictors</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Regime liberalization organizations</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRT labor organization established in municipality (1929)</td>
<td>$2.651^{***}$ (0.973)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRT labor organization adjacent to municipality (1929)</td>
<td>$-0.763$ (0.963)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Political threats</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State repression in municipality (January 1, 1930 to January 4, 1932)</td>
<td>$2.887^{***}$ (0.989)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipality adjacent to state repressive event (January 1, 1930 to January 4, 1932)</td>
<td>$1.342$ (1.096)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipality population size</td>
<td>$0.558^*$ (0.305)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level-2 predictors</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent indigenous in department (1930)</td>
<td>$0.094^*$ (0.045)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coffee cultivated in hectares in department (1929–1930)</td>
<td>$0.218^*$ (0.109)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Standard errors are in parentheses.

$p \leq 0.10$

$**p \leq 0.01$

$****p \leq 0.001$ (two-tailed tests).
used to predict the level of rebellion intensity using the municipality-level independent variables shown in Table 2. Intensity of the 1932 rebellion was measured with an ordinal coding scheme ranging from 0 to 2. Municipalities reporting no rebellious activity were scored 0. Those reporting small-armed attacks, sabotage, arson, and robbery were scored 1. Those reporting larger armed attacks on National Guard and army posts and/or sustained occupations of towns by rebels were coded 2. The results were very similar to those shown in Table 3 with FRT labor organization and state repression positively associated with the intensity of municipal rebellions at less than the .05 level of significance.15

In order to examine the role of organizational perseverance and state repression in explaining the 1932 uprising in more contextual detail, two important control variables were added in Table 3, namely, indigenous concentration and coffee production, both measured at the departmental level. In order to incorporate the departmental-level covariates into a single multi-variate estimation with municipality-level variables an HGLM model is employed (see Raundenbush & Bryk, 2002). Such an estimation technique improves on earlier statistical options for incorporating multi-level data. One of the earlier strategies was to collapse the departmental-level variables down to the municipality level, however, all municipalities in the same department would automatically have the same values on the collapsed variables, thus violating the assumption of independence of observations (Poston & Duan, 2000). Another traditional strategy would have been to group the municipality-level data up to the contextual (departmental) level. One could sum or average the municipality-level data at the departmental level. The weakness with this option is that it would be discarding of all of the municipality-level variation. Indeed, in the case of El Salvador, there is substantial variation at the level of the municipality. Aggregating to the departmental level would completely miss this more fine-grained variation in rebellion.

Hence, in this study a multi-level HGLM model is also utilized to determine the likelihood of a municipality taking part in El Salvador’s 1932 mass rebellion. To estimate this type of multi-level model, several structural equations are shown below. The level-1 independent variables are measured at the municipality level and centered at the group mean. The level-2 independent variables, percentage of departmental population that is indigenous (INDIG), and percentage of total land in the department dedicated to coffee cultivation (PER_CAFE), are measured at the departmental level and are centered at the grand mean. The level-1 and level-2 structural equations

---

15 For a detailed explanation of the coding scheme and results, see Table 2 in the original source. For a comprehensive discussion of the HGLM model and its application, refer to Raundenbush & Bryk (2002).
are as follow:

**Level 1 Equation**

\[
\log\left(\frac{\phi}{1 - \phi}\right) = \eta \\
\eta = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{FRTPRES}) + \beta_2(\text{DUFRTBOR}) \\
+ \beta_3(\text{REPRESS}) + \beta_4(\text{BOREPRE}) + \beta_5(\text{LOGPOP})
\]

**Level 2 Equations**

\[
\begin{align*}
\beta_0 &= \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}(\text{INDIG}) + \gamma_{02}(\text{PER_CAFE}) + \mu_0 \\
\beta_1 &= \gamma_{10} \\
\beta_2 &= \gamma_{20} \\
\beta_3 &= \gamma_{30} \\
\beta_4 &= \gamma_{40} \\
\beta_5 &= \gamma_{50}
\end{align*}
\]

The level 2 equations are integrated into the level 1 equation, resulting in the following multi-level logistic regression equation:

\[
\eta = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01} \times \text{INDIG} + \gamma_{02} \times \text{PER_CAFE} + \gamma_{10} \times \text{FRTPRES} \\
+ \gamma_{20} \times \text{DUFRTBOR} + \gamma_{30} \times \text{REPRESS} \\
+ \gamma_{40} \times \text{BOREPRE} + \gamma_{50} \times \text{LOGPOP} + \mu_0
\]

In the level one model \(\eta\) is the predicted log odds of a municipality experiencing a rebellious event between January 10 and 28, 1932. In Table 3 (as in Table 2) the logit is converted into an odds ratio by exponentiating its coefficient (see column 2 of Table 3). The odds of an outbreak of rebellion in a municipality is predicted by the presence of an FRT labor organization in the locality (FRTPRES), FRT labor organization in adjacent municipality (DUFRTBOR), acts of state repression in the municipality preceding the rebellion (REPRESS), municipalities bordering acts of state repression (BOREPRE), municipality population size (LOGPOP), the percentage of the departmental population that is indigenous (INDIG), and the percentage of the department’s total land under coffee cultivation (PER_CAFE).

Table 3 presents the results of the HGLM multi-level model predicting an insurgent rebellion in each of El Salvador’s 258 municipalities embedded in 14 departments.

The presence of a local FRT labor organization remains a strong predictor of a 1932 rebellious event occurring within a municipality even after
controlling for the effects of the level of coffee production and indigenous population at the departmental level. Additionally, the odds of a municipality rebelling are 18 times greater where acts of state repression took place preceding the rebellion. Repressive threats occurring in the municipality in the years and months immediately before the rebellion made the municipality much more likely to experience radicalized revolt in 1932 even when controlling for important departmental characteristics of indigenous population size and percent of land used to cultivate coffee.\(^\text{16}\)

Size of the indigenous population, municipality population size, and area of coffee production were found to be statistically related to the outbreak of rebellious events. A one percent increase in the departmental indigenous population increases the odds of a municipality rebelling by almost 10 percent (i.e., the odds ratio – \(1 \times 100\)). A one percent increase in land cultivated in coffee (in \(\text{km}^2\)) at the departmental level increases the odds of a municipality rebelling by 24 percent. These findings give cautious support to historiographical research pointing to the key role of the indigenous population (Pérez Brignoli, 1995) and agricultural wage laborers proximate to coffee estates in the rebellion (Paige, 1997).

Nonetheless, large portions of the national territory where coffee is cultivated (e.g., in the Department of Usulután) and where indigenous communities reside (e.g., in the Departments of La Paz and Morazán) remained calm during the revolt. Even in the western departments where the insurgency took place, there existed indigenous majority municipalities that the FRT failed to penetrate (Gould & Lauria Santiago, 2004) and subsequently neglected to participate in the uprising. At the same time, some of the rebelling municipalities, such as Tacuba, were primarily mestizo, not indigenous. The FRT and PCS benefited enormously, though, by capturing the support of the largest communally organized indigenous cofradías in Sonsonate Department – especially through winning the support of the cacique (traditional leader of the cofradía) that acted as a broker that could bring in hundreds if not thousands of followers into the movement via bloc recruitment.\(^\text{17}\) Indeed, some of the largest and most intense local rebellions occurred in municipalities with large indigenous populations in which the FRT and PCS maintained influence (i.e., Juayúa, Izalco, Sonzocate, and Nahuizalco).

**SUMMARY OF QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS**

The above quantitative analyses suggest that in January of 1932 regime challengers partially appropriated the pre-existing labor organizations
created in the liberalization period (i.e., “liberalization holdovers”) to
launch a much more radical uprising against a repressive regime. This find-
ing fits Menjívar’s (1985) interpretation that the more radical Communist
Party of El Salvador (PCS) “captured” many of the FRT local chapters by
1930. Municipalities that were already organized by reformist labor asso-
ciations in the late 1920s were more likely to experience more radical
insurgent activity in January 1932. Solidarities, information flows, relation-
ships of trust, and organizational know-how were already well established in
the western municipalities by 1930 (Gould & Lauria-Santiago, 2004) fol-
lowing nearly 3 years of political liberalization. Those municipalities that
were rich in labor organizing activity were much more likely to resist the
encroaching authoritarian regime than those regions that suffered from
labor organizing deficits during regime liberalization. This finding supports
the core notion in resource mobilization perspectives that collective action
much more likely occurs in areas with relatively more organizational assets
(Edwards & McCarthy, 2004). In addition, municipalities that recently ex-
perienced state-sponsored repressive actions were also more likely to witness
revolutionary-type rebellion. Such repressive threats made radicalized col-
lective action (i.e., participation in the 1932 rebellion) much more likely in
the municipalities in which they took place.

FRT propaganda, well-seasoned foreign and domestic organizers, and
educational seminars by the FRT-sponsored Universidad Popular all found
their way into the western municipalities between 1927 and 1931. These
organizational elements taught workers and peasants (many already struc-
tured in the indigenous cofradías) important organizing skills as well as the
basic rights of working people. This impressive organizing drive was carried
out under the protection of the Romero Bosque political reforms. When the
regime closed back down by late 1930 and 1931, labor organizations per-
sisted and radicalized. Acts of governmental repression signaled to the re-
cently organized challengers that the state was no longer receptive to
popular demands (if not completely antagonistic). Acts of state violence
were much more likely to be carried out in the municipalities organized or
influenced by the FRT, in effect radicalizing or speeding up the pace of
radicalization of the geographical regions that were previously organized.18

In a special workers’ congress in 1930, the FRT appealed to its affiliates to
strengthen rural organizing in the western departments. Already by 1931,
workers in rural regions were holding demonstrations against the increasing
state repression. For example, in mid-May 1931 an anti-state repression
demonstration (i.e., threat-induced) was held in the western municipality of
Sonsonate. Participants reportedly came from the nearby municipalities of
Izalco, Caluco, Nahuizalco, and Juayúa. Three out of these five municipalities (including Sonsonate) maintained a local FRT chapter at the end of 1929. At least 800 people marched down the streets of the town. One of the demonstrator’s signs read, “Abajo los decretos fascistas del 12 de Agosto y 30 de Octubre” (Down with the fascist decrees of August 12 and October 30!) in reference to the two states of emergency declared by the national government in the second half of 1930. Local security forces fired on the street march to disperse it – resulting in three deaths and several more injuries. The demonstration may have portended that even more dramatic actions were to come. Four out of the five municipalities that attracted protest participants to this particular protest event in mid-1931 also experienced high-intensity rebellion in January 1932, and one of the municipalities, Juayúa, was reportedly the strategic headquarters for the entire revolt (Méndez, 1932).

The above quantitative findings suggest that periods of regime liberalization deposit organizations that coordinate the mobilization of excluded social classes, such as agrarian and urban wage laborers, and make possible much more radical forms of contention when the political climate becomes more repressive and threatening. It is the state itself that shapes and “incubates” these changing forms of contention (Goodwin, 2001) by literally revolutionizing the groups it initially invited to participate in political society as reform-minded citizens’ associations and labor-based organizations.

**DISMEMBERMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS: 1932–1962**

The rise of the General Hernández Martínez presidency, a patrimonial dictator (Wickham Crowley, 1992) marked a new era in Salvadoran history. The period from 1932 to 1962 was one in which the ascendant military rulers effectively checked the growing expansion of the organizational infrastructure of Salvadoran civil society. In 1932, the Martínez regime reportedly used the voting lists from the municipal elections to hunt down sympathizers of the Salvadoran Communist Party (Marroquín, 1977; Montes, 1979; McClintock, 1985). After the January 1932 massacre, unions were declared illegal, and labor-based organizations did not re-emerge until the late 1930s and early 1940s as “societies” and mutual aid associations. For example, in 1940 a national survey of all civic organizations conducted by a governmental commission found that almost none existed with the exception of local chapters of the Martínez dictatorship’s *Pro-Patria* Party (Ching, 2004).
In sum, the massive repression following the 1932 uprising totally destroyed the organizational infrastructure set up in the late 1920s and early 1930s around the FRT and other civic groups. Moreover, El Salvador was under nearly an uninterrupted 13-year state of siege from 1932 to 1944 following the January bloodbath. The growing organization of civil society had been impeded by the state and would experience a 30-year hiatus (even though important short-term protest campaigns emerged) until it would expand and surpass the levels achieved in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The 1932 massacre also marked the beginning of Latin America’s longest enduring military government (Williams & Walter, 1997).

**FINDINGS**

For social movements emerging in nondemocratic contexts, the current case may offer a few salient processes that operate in other authoritarian political settings. More specifically, this study finds that periods of regime liberalization create the kinds of conditions favorable to the establishment and growth of civic organizations capable of launching a wave of reformist and nonviolent protest as political opportunity perspectives would suggest (Kriesi et al., 1995; Tarrow, 1998). When state actors rollback these liberalization efforts and close down political opportunities, they might radicalize the newly created civil society organizations, which vary in their geographical distribution. If regimes continue to steer themselves on a more authoritarian trajectory, they may induce episodes of militant collective action in the pre-organized communities, such as witnessed in the January 1932 rebellion. Extremely high levels of state coercion, such as the ethnocide massacre squashing the revolt, will wipe out opposition all together as curvilinear models of state repression on collective action have long predicted (see Boswell & Dixon, 1990; Muller & Weede, 1994).

By employing a historical sequencing framework scholars may be able to better predict when state repression will deter, escalate, and/or radicalize collective action. El Salvador was under a state of siege from 1920 to 1927. Under these restrictive conditions the level of civil society mobilization was relatively low (as reported in Fig. 3). Thus, repressive state policies acted as an effective deterrent to collective action when rulers applied coercion before a civil society infrastructure had been created. When the state relaxed its repressive apparatus during the first three years of the Romero Bosque presidency (1927–1930) civil society associations proliferated and provided collective vehicles to organize reform-minded protests.
The reversal in regime liberalization from mid-1930 to 1932 both radicalized and escalated collective action because civil society activists effectively formed and/or expanded several civic and labor organizations during the short-lived political opening, and they increasingly perceived their interests threatened with a loss of employment, rights, and safety. The main regions of the radical 1932 uprising involved municipalities where labor organizations established themselves during regime liberalization and the localities most victimized by mounting state-sponsored violence with the resumption of dictatorial governance. Periods of attempted polity liberalization, even incomplete and partial attempts, appear to plant organizations that persist in the political environment and carry on collective action under the unlikely conditions of a government reasserting its authoritarian rule over civil society. The present case informs scholars interested in the escalating effects of state repression on mobilization, either curvilinear or backlash proponents, that they should give closer analytical attention to the level of organizational buildup and associational life in civil society immediately before the state launches a repressive campaign. The 1932 uprising instructs us that state coercion on the heels of a rapid expansion of civic organizations may radicalize and accelerate mass defiance until the government employs overwhelming violence to quell the movement. In short, the density of civil society’s organizational field conditions the various impacts state repression may have on popular mobilization.

While the Salvadoran regime and the landed agrarian classes restored relative political order for several decades via the genocidal massacre and bloodbath, there remained long-term backlash effects, at least in the sphere of political culture. New generations of activists in the 1970s drew on the events of 1932 as a political identity and a conceptual map to arrange contemporary class conflicts (Paige, 1997). One of the largest street marches in Salvadoran history – of an estimated 200,000 people – took place on January 22, 1980 to commemorate the 48th anniversary of the 1932 uprising and massacre. Ten months later, the opposition united against the military government under the name of the “Farabundo Marti Front for National Liberation” (FMLN) (a title in memory of a key organizer of the 1932 rebellion who was sentenced to death and executed by a firing squad) and launched a protracted guerrilla war for nearly 12 years until signing a peace agreement with the government in early 1992. This former revolutionary organization continues today as the largest electoral opposition political party in the country and maintains the Farabundo Marti label.
CONCLUSION

A case study largely contributes to social science by expanding and refining existing theoretical concepts. The current case informs political process models by highlighting that the particular political opportunities of competitive elections and institutional access may be the most important features of political liberalization in relation to initiating collective action in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes. These two opportunities not only encourage the launching of reformist social movement campaigns, but the establishment of enduring organizations. The founding of organizations provides a fungible resource infrastructure that can be appropriated for a variety of purposes – including the launching of more radical episodes of defensive collective action if a regime moves to a more threatening and repressive posture. In addition, this case found that the political threats of rights violations and state repression against organized challengers as most responsible for the radicalization in collective action.

Future studies of nondemocratic and transitioning regimes in other times and places may want to examine the kinds of sequences explored here to better understand the likelihood of the emergence of collective action and the forms it takes (i.e., reformist or revolutionary). El Salvador also experienced a similar sequencing of political changes in the late 1960s and 1970s. In the mid-1960s, during a period of rapid economic growth, the ruling military regime permitted competitive elections for the first time since the late 1920s and early 1930s as well as recognized the legality of a variety of civic organizations. The liberalization of the late 1960s gave birth to a vast field of civil society organizations (e.g., rural cooperatives, education-based organizations, and labor unions) that initiated a series of nonviolent protest campaigns. By the mid-1970s, military state managers closed down the electoral system and regime liberalization policies. Several of the organizational leaders of the reformist labor, cooperative, teacher, and student movements would become leaders of the emerging revolutionary organizations that launched the FMLN guerrilla insurgency in the early 1980s against a more repressive regime (Almeida, 2003).

This study suggests that the practices of regime liberalization, organizational formation under liberalization, and the particular threats associated with liberalization reversals (especially the erosion of rights and state repression) may be recurrent processes driving collective action and its radicalization in a variety of political environments in the global South. More investigations are needed in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian political
settings to determine the generalizability of these observed patterns. Particularly insightful would be comparative research whereby the sequences and trajectories vary, such as regimes that maintain their liberalization pathways (e.g., Portugal and Spain in the 1970s; Latin America and Eastern Europe in the 1980s and 1990s) in contrast to regimes that reverse or shutdown democratic transitions (e.g., Guatemala in the 1950s and 1960s; Brazil in the 1960s; Chile in the 1970s; Algeria in the 1990s; and Nepal in the 2000s). In such comparative studies, the pace and duration of both the liberalization and the reversal periods should inform scholarship on the likelihood of the emergence of large-scale collective action and the shapes it manifests.

NOTES

1. The concept of threat shares some similarities with Smelser’s (1962) concept of “structural strains.” I use the multi-dimensional concept of threat in this study in the more narrow meaning of Tilly (1978) whereby a specific negative economic and/or political threat impacts on the interests of challengers – that are perceived to make the group worse off in the event of inaction – motivates new rounds of collective action. Smelser’s much more general definition and discussion of structural strain was conceived to explain all types of collective behavior from fads, natural disasters, workplace conflicts, to revolution. In this study, I use threat to explain the likelihood of collective action for only state-oriented social movements in nondemocratic regimes.

2. There are a number of potential state-attributed economic problems that may activate challengers into defensive collective action in both liberalizing and repressive contexts (e.g., roll-back of work-related social-welfare benefits, wage arrears, new taxes, mass unemployment, etc.). The core of the concept centers on convincingly attributing to the state threats to material well-being that will make ordinary people worse off if they are not attended to and alleviated by the appropriate jurisdictional authorities.

3. Useem (1985) observed an analogous process in a New Mexico prison riot, which exploded after a period of extending rights was taken away from inmates.

4. Erosion of rights in democratic societies also induces episodes of defensive collective action. The current analysis focuses on the loss of fundamental rights that change the entire nature of political competition in a society, such as the loss of citizenship rights and the freedom to publicly assemble.

5. However, it should be noted that several indigenous communities did receive land titles in western El Salvador (Ching, 1997).

6. Some accounts suggest that the FRT also organized urban renters in addition to craft workers and peasants (see Larin, 1971, p. 7).


8. This growing repression of the Salvadoran state is often underemphasized in historical accounts of the era. This is likely due to the genocidal repression that took
place in early 1932. The 1932 bloodbath was so massive and overwhelming that the preceding episodes of repression appear miniscule.

9. See *La Prensa* July 7, 1931, p. 1, “Por Medio de Carteles en que Piden se les Permita Efectuar sus Reuniones Subversivas.”

10. Anderson (1971) reports a popular disturbance in the city of Santa Ana as late as January 28.

11. Anderson’s monograph on the revolt is viewed as both the most objective and exhaustive by Central American historians (see Montes, 1979).

12. This is a quantitative measure for state repression used by Beissinger (2001) in his study of ethnic nationalism in the former Soviet Union.

13. Municipality-level data for coffee production was not generated until 1938 and 1939, when the first national coffee census was administered.

14. Figures for Chalatenango Department’s coffee production were estimated from 1930 and 1931 records provided in the same article.

15. The results of this ordered logistic regression analysis of rebellion intensity are available from the author upon request.

16. Though, the odds ratio lessens (from 76 to 18) compared to Table 2 when we control for indigenous population size and amount of coffee cultivation.

17. For processes of community leaders acting as brokers for social movement mobilization see Broadbent (2003). For bloc recruitment dynamics in other kinds of movements see Oberschall (1973) and McAdam (1982).

18. The Pearson correlation between FRT presence and state repression is $r = 0.48$ at the $p < 0.001$ significance level.

19. See *Diario Latino* May 19, 1931, pp. 1 and 4, “Entre los Manifestantes “Rojos” Fue Vista, Dicen, una Persona de Aspecto Distinguido a Caballo.”

20. Ching (1997, p. 443) reports only three labor strikes/work stoppages taking place between 1932 and 1939.

21. For example, the radical Islamic guerrilla armies in Algeria’s civil war of the 1990s (e.g., the GIA) also emerged from the electoral mobilization of the newly legalized political parties that were banned following their success in municipal and parliamentary elections in the early 1990s.

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REFERENCES


**APPENDIX**

*Table A1.* Descriptive Statistics: 258 Municipalities of El Salvador in 14 Departments.

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