

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF GLOBAL & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Migrating Along the Pipeline: Political Instability and Migration in the Northern Triangle

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SPRING 2022

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for a baccalaureate degree
in Global & International Studies and Communication Arts & Sciences
with honors in Global & International Studies

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ABSTRACT

Over the past thirty years, immigration out of Central America has dramatically increased. The United States and Mexican borders are receiving burgeoning numbers of emigrants from the region, many of whom ask for political asylum from unstable governments and gang control. This thesis investigates the impact of political instability on trending migration out of the Northern Triangle of Central America. Through a comparative case study of El Salvador, a representative country of the Northern Triangle, and Nicaragua, a neighboring country with similar socioeconomic conditions, I analyze how political instability has impacted the flow of migration. I look at three primary indicators of instability: weak state institutions, political corruption, and gang involvement in politics. I find gang involvement in politics, specifically the gangs Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18, has the largest impact on migration. Instances of gangs interacting with the government and gaining authority coincide with large increases in migration. Generalized corruption is not found to cause distinct increases in migration. However, it contributes to the decision to migrate, as most people leave countries rampant with corruption to ones with better institutions. Presidential corruption scandals do increase migration, and examples were found of this relationship in both El Salvador and Nicaragua. Finally, weak state institutions contribute to overall political instability, but I did not find exhaustive evidence of weakening institutions leading to increases in migration.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
Chapter 2 Literature Review	3
Ungoverned Spaces: The Consequence of Weak States	4
<i>Maras</i> : The Fusion of Gangs and Political Power	6
Political Corruption	7
Gaps in the Research	9
Chapter 3 Theory and Hypotheses	10
Indicators of Political Instability	13
Weak State Institutions & Non-provision of Public Services	13
Political Corruption	13
Gang Involvement in Politics	14
Hypotheses	14
Chapter 4 Data and Methods	17
Case Studies: El Salvador and Nicaragua	17
Dependent Variable: Migration	19
Independent Variables	19
Limitations	21
Chapter 5 Case Studies	23
El Salvador	23
Nicaragua	35
Chapter 6 Discussion	44
Chapter 7 Conclusion	48
References	51

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not be possible without the help, expertise, and support of others in the Penn State community. I want to thank Andrew Vitek for agreeing to coach me through this process despite it being outside of his concentration. His encouragement and wisdom helped create this final product and bolster my confidence as a researcher. Likewise, I thank Johnathan Abel for his advice on this project as well as my greater Penn State experience. Finally, thank you to all my friends who read over drafts and listened to me talk about this topic incessantly for a year. The support of my family and friends was an indispensable blessing.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Over the past few decades, the population of migrants arriving at the southern borders of Mexico and the United States has skyrocketed. The majority of these immigrants originate from the Northern Triangle, a region in Central America made up of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. This mass migration, paired with lower levels of migration from Mexico, makes Central America the largest source of immigrants travelling North; their numbers rose from 7.2% of US border apprehensions in 1990 to 73.7% in 2019 (Massey, 2020). The overarching narrative of this mass migration is individuals and families fleeing persecution, economic exclusion, and violence due to rampant corruption and gang infiltration into politics.

The political history of the Northern Triangle is one of instability, authoritarianism, and military dominance over state institutions. These trends climaxed in the late twentieth century as each country battled with internal divisions, foreign intervention, and crumbling political legitimacy. This included widespread corruption in Honduras, far-right death squads in El Salvador, and a genocide against indigenous peoples in Guatemala (Garrard-Burnett & Barrard, 2010). Since then, all three countries experienced political turnover and are currently nominal democracies. However, the label of democracy does not translate into the state institutions and government actions under the current administrations. The governments are no longer killing citizens or openly being run by military or business interests, yet quality of life is low and migration numbers are higher than ever.

A deeper understanding of why people are emigrating out of the Northern Triangle is imperative to finding the means to help them. Once the primary causes are determined, these migrants can receive aid in the form of resources finding a safe refuge or, in the best case, solutions to the problems in their country of origin and repatriation. Prior studies have analyzed migration out of this region as economically motivated (Obinna, 2019; Massey, 2020). In a departure from existing research on migration out of the Northern Triangle, I argue that political factors cause migration. The primary factors contributing to this hypothesis are rampant political corruption, the manipulation and removal of state institutions to maintain a hegemonic elite, loss of state control over territory, and the power of gangs over political outcomes. In the following sections, I will overview existing research and present a full exploration of current theories and publications on political instability. Then, I will analyze the impact of political instability by studying emigration from El Salvador, a country from the Northern Triangle, and Nicaragua, a neighboring country. Migration and political instability in both countries will be compared to determine the impacts of each indicator. Finally, I will discuss implications of my findings and suggest paths for future research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The overall research on the topic of migration and political instability is well-developed, however, there is a gap when it comes to considering political conditions as a cause of current migration patterns. Most studies analyze current migration from the Northern Triangle as either an individual decision or trend due to economics. There are many economic migrants that travel north along Central America to seek higher wages and the opportunity for remittances, but this is a separate population from the migrants studied in this thesis. Economic migrants are primarily single adults that migrate in patterns alongside seasonal labor timelines, and they typically associate with a specific employer (Bauer & Zimmermann, 2018). The population examined in this thesis are immigrants who arrive at the southern US border with the characteristics of refugees: multiple family members, small children, no connection with a host or employer (Massey, 2020). The specific details motivating the migration varies across individuals, but the overarching story is one of political violence and state abandonment.

To conceptualize the political push factors causing migration out of the Northern Triangle, I separate current research on political instability into three components: ungoverned spaces, gang politics, and political corruption. Individually each factor poses a threat to the safety of citizens, but when compiled, they create a culture of direct and indirect political violence that forces citizens to flee. Furthermore, when all three of these factors interact, they exacerbate dangerous living conditions and the degradation of democratic institutions. In this thesis, each factor will be analyzed for its impact on migration. Afterwards, the discussion section will analyze how these factors interact in a cyclical nature.

Ungoverned Spaces: The Consequence of Weak States

One of the largest causes of emigration out of the Northern Triangle is a lack of political stability caused by distinct regions of diminished state presence known as ‘ungoverned spaces.’ Ungoverned spaces are regions of limited or aberrant state control that exist within traditional country borders (Keister, 2014; Lynch 2016). Other definitions of the term focus on the lack of state monopoly over violence and inability of the government to exercise “effective sovereignty” (Clunan & Trinkunas, 2010, p. 17). Due to the lack of state control, these regions typically overflow with corruption, ineffective policing, and lower standards of living (Colburn, 2016). Public police forces, investment in social security, and health services suffer from being cut off from the government, leading to the citizens bearing the brunt of the damage.

Ungoverned spaces are most traditionally discussed as areas with no large-scale organization that form against the wishes of the state. Existing literature on state control analyzes ungoverned spaces under a narrow conceptualization of governance, solely focusing on legitimate states as governing bodies (Colburn, 2016). However, in many instances, ungoverned spaces are not anarchy, but instead have systems distinct from legitimate states. These authority systems can materialize as gangs, warlords, or rebels taking control of a region (Keister, 2014). In the case of this thesis, ungoverned spaces are controlled by gangs who hold both the monopoly on violence and the political sway to maintain power.

The second prong of this expansion upon traditional definitions of ungoverned spaces is the assumption that the loss of power is against the state’s wishes. The phenomenon of eroded state control and legitimacy is often labeled as state failure (Koonings & Kruijt, 2004). The term state failure aims to explain why an area falls into disarray and political instability, leading to an ungoverned space. By using failure, the term insinuates an unintended or unfavorable outcome

for the state due to loss power over that area. This term is valid in some cases, ‘state abandonment’ is a more applicable term in some Northern Triangle regions. Once the state sees an area to be a fruitless investment – caused by high poverty or crime rates – the government can withdraw state resources to focus funds and personnel elsewhere. This distinction is important because it highlights a deliberate choice by the state rather than a lack of power to sustain control (Schubeth, 2015).

The areas that end up experiencing state abandonment are poor, overcrowded urban neighborhoods or remote rural towns with little potential for growth. City populations are booming in Central America, causing rapid unplanned urban growth as city planners cannot keep up with the increase in people (Antillano, Arias & Zubillaga, 2020). This unplanned growth has resulted in highly unequal development where wealthy neighborhoods increase in standards of living while adjacent shantytown neighborhoods suffer little public investment or services. By not providing adequate policing or social service, the government abandons these areas, deliberately turning them into ungoverned spaces.

These areas that experience state abandonment and become ungoverned spaces are hot spots for emigration. In these communities, people face violence from unregulated gang activity and the collusion of corrupt police officials (Clunan & Harold, 2010). Additionally, the lack of social services, such as proper healthcare or employment opportunities, increases immigration. These push factors become political as the state is responsible for failing to provide for these communities, or in some cases, purposefully extracting their services.

Maras: The Fusion of Gangs and Political Power

A second contributing factor to political-caused emigration is gang involvement in politics. First, it is necessary to differentiate neighborhood street gangs from the supra-national gangs gaining political legitimacy and causing mass migration. Central America is home to two major gangs: Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio-18 (B-18), referred to as *maras* in the Spanish language (Cantor, 2016; Méndez, 2019; McNamara, 2017). The primary business of these gangs is extortion, but they also engage in trafficking of humans, weapons, and drugs (McNamara, 2017). They have chapters in Mexico and parts of the United States in addition to the Northern Triangle, making them a formidable economic, social, and political force.

Their initial rise to power is tied to twentieth century political unrest and mass deportations from the United States in the 1990s (Dowd, 2019). The origin of both groups is tied to Los Angeles, California; in the 1980s, civil war in El Salvador caused mass migration to the United States and many young men joined gangs for community and protection. B-18 and its rival, MS-13, were formed in the prisons and Latinx neighborhoods of LA. They then spread to El Salvador during a period of immigration crackdowns and deportations by the United States in the 1990s (Méndez, 2019). In following years, these *maras* evolved to become non-state armed groups with total control over many neighborhoods and a strong presence in all Northern Triangle countries (Cantor, 2016).

The absence of state stability and governance in the region created a power vacuum that needed to be filled. In the Northern Triangle, this power vacuum did not lead to anarchy, but to ‘oligopolies of violence’ instead of monopolies (Schuberth, 2015). B-18 and MS-13 filled this power vacuum, gaining exclusive control of territories and leveraging that power to impact politics (Cantor, 2016; Medrano, 2017, p. 3). Currently, the *maras* “have more power than any

political party" (money, arms, vertical structure, national presence, personnel) in the Northern Triangle and are increasingly legitimate political actors (McNamara, 2017, p. 15). This phenomenon has occurred in poor urban neighborhoods and is increasingly present in rural towns used as narco-trafficking bases. When these gangs take power, they gain monopoly over the use of violence and control over which groups receive protection.

This system of criminal governance causes migration for a few different reasons. The primary reason is violence, high gang power is often associated with kidnappings, sexual assault, and homicide. Gangs also control individuals' daily lives through political and economic dominance. They extract funds from the local economy through taxes and extortion (Villa & Souza, 2019). If a person tries to avoid gang involvement, they often are forced to flee due to threats to their families and the physical or financial destruction of properties and businesses. Additionally, these reasons for migration only increase when the state collaborates with or is unable to counter the gangs' power.

Political Corruption

Criminal governance and the state's cooperation with gangs ties into the final factor contributing to migration: political corruption (Cantor, 2016; Somma, 2020; McNamara, 2017). The transition from authoritarian rule to the current democracies in the Northern Triangle was rocky at best, due to poor structural changes and negative influence from political actors. Many of the authoritarian political elites remained in official power and limited democratic reforms attempted by the new governments (Cruz, 2011). This poor transition enabled lingering

patronage issues and hindered the development of justice systems and accountability to combat the incredibly high levels of corruption in the Northern Triangle.

Corruption can be divided into petty and grand levels. At the petty level, local officials are bribed by businesses and gang members to overlook crimes or establish patronage ties. Business leaders commonly engage with local officials to avoid red tape and bureaucratic requirements, in addition to promoting future favorable policies for themselves (Ruhl, 2011). The private sector corruption extends beyond interactions with local officials as many business leaders themselves make deals with gang that go unreported to state police (Cantor, 2016). This underreporting of corruption and impunity becomes cyclical as police are bribed to turn a blind eye. Many gang-related crimes go uninvestigated and unpunished due to payouts for police and justice officials (McNamara, 2017).

Corruption manifests on the grand level as insufficient social and welfare institutions hindered by political elite and wealthy non-political actors. As a result of minimal investment in social services, political institutions are crippled and police protection is essentially nonexistent. The small portion of political and economic elites control where government funding is distributed and who benefits from state programs (Cruz, 2011). Additionally, the intrinsic structure of political parties in the Northern Triangle contributes to this corruption. The political parties with power lack large ideological divisions, so political actors end up fighting to get to the top of a small elite instead of reforming policy (Colburn, 2016; McNamara, 2017). In other cases, like El Salvador, the parties theoretically represent different ideologies, but the cohort of elites maintain power and wealth regardless of the current administration.

Gaps in the Research

While there exists research on the topic of political corruption and instability in Central America, there are multiple gaps that this thesis hopes to address. The largest gap in the research is on gang activity and numbers. Due to the illicit nature of gang activity, tracking membership is incredibly difficult; estimations from police departments and international organizations rarely, if ever, align and typically claim to be underrepresenting. Second, the existing literature lacks research on these gangs as quasi-legitimate political actors in Central America. This gap leaves out important information regarding the political climate of these countries, and therefore information about migration out of them. Additionally, there are few connections drawn between the political climate and migration in existing literature. Almost all political research focuses on pre-1990's migration caused by historical authoritarian regimes or civil conflict.

Chapter 3

Theory and Hypotheses

Political instability in the Northern Triangle is self-evident. Current institutions mirror those of prior dictatorships, corruption scandals pepper daily news, and homicide rates have reached record highs. However, there is little scholarship connecting this instability with migration between countries and out of the region. To determine the effect political instability has on migration, this thesis analyzes three aspects of political instability: weak state institutions, corruption, and gang involvement in politics. By breaking political instability into key indicators, each indicator can be analyzed for its effect on migration.

Historically, researchers make a clear distinction between two types of migration: forced and voluntary. Forced migration encompasses refugees and asylum seekers; these migrants are defined as fleeing persecution. Voluntary migrants, on the other hand, are defined as “seeking better material conditions” and making the decision to move without external pressures (Carling & Talleraas, 2016). While this binary division receives pushback today, international law and organizations, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, adhere strictly to these distinctions. The problem with the total division of migrants into forced or voluntary arises in situations like the Northern Triangle. While classifying migrants as refugees is quite simple when a minority group flees a civil war, citizens fleeing regions without outright warfare are more difficult to label.

No countries in or around the Northern Triangle are officially at war, so it is necessary to expand the conception of forced migration to explain why so many people are fleeing the region. The root cause of this migration is a combination of political, economic, and social factors

favoring a selected elite and excluding everyone else. As impunity and corruption rise, the motivation to invest in the public sector and provide well-rounded services to the people falls (Suttan et al., 2019). The combination of elite control over politics and democratic backsliding creates a vicious cycle where people of these countries are continuously denied rights and fair institutions.

Corruption leads to migration as it impacts people's daily lives and exacerbates inequalities within a nation (Carling et al., 2015). A 2017 study focused on migration in Africa found significant linkages between corruption and migration (Merkle et al., 2017). Specifically, this study found a relationship between the indirect consequences of corruption on migration. Public awareness and the act of being corrupt had less impact on migration than the overall deterioration of public services and equal opportunities that is caused by corruption (Merkle et al., 2017). This study shows one of the linkages between corruption and weak state institutions; as corruption increases, quality of institutions decreases, and vice versa. Once people lose faith in their government's ability to improve and address weakening state institutions and trust, they often look to opportunities in other countries (Carling, et al., 2015). In the Northern Triangle corruption, impunity, and diminishing state institutions both drive migration directly and aid the process of gang integration into politics.

Gang presence, and particularly violence, has a measured impact on migration. According to a Doctors Without Borders report in 2017, 40% of Northern Triangle asylum-seekers said direct gang attacks on them or their family were the primary motivation for leaving their home country ("Médicins Sans Frontières," 2017). Homicide rates in the Northern Triangle are consistently higher than the global average and femicides are pervasive in countries such as

El Salvador (Olson & Olson, 2021). An obvious link between gangs and migration is fleeing to protect the lives of one's family. However, I argue the homicide rates and counts of violence are not the only impact gangs have on migration.

Within the Northern Triangle, gangs have morphed from local street groups to international criminal organizations. By taking advantage of weak state institutions and high levels of corruption, these gangs gain the power to influence politics. It is this influence and control that magnifies their impact on communities from simply violent actors to complex choreographers of the state. This impacts migration because once the gangs establish power within the government, levels of impunity for extortion, violence, and general crime rise. Thus, they gain the ability to act unhindered by the law. Furthermore, gang action becomes explicitly political when they publicly back certain candidates for office and utilize any means necessary to get them elected.

This network of weak state institutions, corruption, and gang political power makes up my independent variable. I measure political instability with three indicators – weak state institutions, corruption, and gang involvement in politics – to best describe the drivers of migration in the Northern Triangle. Weak state institutions leave citizens with little to no public services or opportunity for job advancement. Corruption ensures the system remains unbalanced and power fully controlled by elites. Gang involvement in politics distinguishes the Northern Triangle from other regions by highlighting the unique relationship between organized crime and the government.

Indicators of Political Instability

Weak State Institutions & Non-provision of Public Services

The first indicator of political instability used in this thesis is a lack of state institutions and non-provision of public services. This is used as an indicator because it ties in the concept of ungoverned spaces and illustrates a lack of control by the government. Weak state institutions encompass lack of governmental control over processes, such as elections, limited power of security institutions, and an overall lack of successful political infrastructure. Non-provision of public services refers to the lack of community programs, efforts to reduce poverty, and access to general provisions such as healthcare or employment.

Political Corruption

Rampant political corruption is the second indicator of political instability and migration. The governments of Central America experience corruption ranging from top national leaders to petty bribes with local officials. I specifically look at corruption in the highest level of government, as multiple presidents have been accused and convicted of crimes such as embezzlement, money laundering, and bribery. This impacts migration because the corruption allows widespread violence and extortion to go unpunished (McNamara, 2017).

Gang Involvement in Politics

The third indicator used to show political instability is gang activity, or more specifically, gang involvement in politics. While gang activity as a whole is cited as cause for migration, I specifically aim to see how the integration of powerful transnational gangs into politics causes migration. The incorporation of gangs into the political institutions of a country leads to decreased accountability for the violence committed and increased resources for the gang (Medrano, 2017; Cantor, 2016). Through these political connections, they have more freedom to conduct illicit businesses, such as drug trafficking, and exercise control over communities. This involvement in politics manifests in multiple ways, such as controlling political campaigns and negotiating with current administrations.

Hypotheses

In order to investigate this relationship between political instability and migration, each factor contributing to political instability will be monitored in each country. In doing so, the overall impact of political instability on the Northern Triangle as well as the impact on each separate country will be compared.

H1.1: Emigration from a country is greater in countries with weak state institutions and non-provision of services.

When states do not have strong institutions or offer comprehensive public services, people have more motivation to migrate. Consistently poor institutions can lead to feelings of hopelessness that the situation will improve (Suttan et al., 2019). By consistently suffering from

lack of services and few efforts to improve them, people are more and more likely to leave for better locations.

H1.2: Emigration from a country is greater in countries with high levels of political corruption.

I hypothesize that corruption contributes to migration because of its impact on daily life and contribution to inequality. It is a way of keeping wealth and power in the hands of a chosen few, thereby decreasing the wealth and power of people in lower socioeconomic brackets. This motivates migration because people seek a country with free and fair politics and suffer under governments that only benefit the elite.

H1.3: Emigration from a country is greater in countries with high levels of gang involvement in politics.

My final hypothesis that gang involvement in politics contributes to migration revolves around the negative impact gangs have when they gain political power. Entrenchment into politics means that gangs have more freedom to commit their usual violence and extortion without fear of retribution. This leads to more people emigrating as they both suffer under the current situation and have little hope for positive change.

While the state itself is not enacting violence against the citizens, people are suffering and fleeing due to political factors. Each of these factors – weak state institutions, gang involvement in politics, corruption -- create a dangerous environment for citizens. People face daily threats to their lives, especially if they are political dissenters from the preferred gang policies. Additionally, the lack of state control combined with the refusal of these countries' governments to officially acknowledge the problem makes the threats to livelihood political in

nature (Cantor, 2016). Other countries have experienced gang activities and state failure, but this region serves as a unique phenomenon meriting special attention.

Chapter 4

Data and Methods

Case Studies: El Salvador and Nicaragua

In order to investigate how weak institutions, corruption, and gang involvement in politics impact migration, I use El Salvador and Nicaragua as case studies. Within each country I analyze the relationship between the primary dependent variable, migration, and three independent variables: weak state institutions, corruption, and gang involvement in politics. The structure of a qualitative comparative analysis pairs best with investigating this phenomenon because it allows me to analyze the indicators of instability separately as distinct variables, and together as contributors to the overall context of each country. The ability to analyze the indicators as part of an integrated system of political instability is important because there are many instances where all three interact to push migration. For example, weak state institutions open the door for corruption and collusion with gang members. The narrative nature of qualitative analysis also best captures the ‘lived reality’ of these countries, thus creating a more comprehensive analysis of how political instability impacts migration (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001).

The unit of analysis is nation-state. This unit was selected because I am looking at indicators from both local and national levels, and it aligns with the data available. Migration statistics typically document numbers at the national level, and most peer reviewed studies and open-source news outlets look at the nation as a whole as well. The time frame is roughly 1990 through 2020. This range was selected because the 1990’s mark the start of the current democratic governments in El Salvador and Nicaragua. Both countries experienced civil wars

and dictatorships through the 1980's. Thus, including data from before this range would skew my results as much of the migration occurred to escape the violence of civil war. Similarly, I cut off the time range at 2020 to eliminate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migration. Many countries closed their borders, making migration near impossible during this time, so including the decrease in migration would also skew my results.

El Salvador was selected as the first case because it shows a representative picture of political instability in the Northern Triangle. The *maras*, MS-13 and B-18 were originally formed by Salvadoran migrants in the United States and gained a foothold in Central America through repatriation in the 1990's. This history makes El Salvador the most developed case of gang entrenchment in politics. Furthermore, El Salvador is unique because there are multiple instances of legitimate negotiations between *maras* and the government. Finally, migration from El Salvador dramatically increased over the past twenty years in alignment with increased corruption and gang control, making it a strong candidate for analysis.

Nicaragua was selected as a comparison case because it is a Central American country neighboring the Northern Triangle, yet migration rates are much lower. Nicaragua also suffers from extreme corruption and a history of political instability, but I hope to show the overarching political climate is different in Nicaragua than in the Northern Triangle. According to my hypotheses, since Nicaragua does not see gangs as integrated into politics, there should be lower levels of migration. By comparing two cases that have some similar qualities, yet different outcomes, a stronger analysis is possible.

Dependent Variable: Migration

Migration was measured using the United Nations International Migrant Stock Database (MSD). The MSD records the estimated international migrant stock as of June 1 for the following years: 1990, 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2020. The data is primarily sourced from population censuses, population registers, and nationally representative surveys (United Nations, 2020). A lack of data is the largest factor lowering the reliability. Reporting on migration numbers is incredibly difficult due to the difference in national census infrastructures and amount of undocumented migration. The validity of the MSD is lowered by its definition of international migrant including foreign-born citizens, but it is important to include as an overall indicator of migration levels. Despite the shortcomings, this dataset was a strong selection because it is more reliable than other international measures of migration (Parsons et al., 2007).

Independent Variables

Variable 1: Weak state Institutions

This variable is measured by tracking non-provision of public services and weak state institutions. These factors were selected because they have been used in previous studies and are distinguishable from the other independent variables (Olson & Olson, 2021). An early barrier to measuring political instability was the use of migration as an indicator; this would obviously delegitimize my results because it measures instability using the very dependent variable I am trying to explain. Thus, I limit the scope of this indicator to non-provision public services and state legitimacy. State legitimacy includes the support of the current administration(s) by the

public, ability to control territory with police and military, and inequality perpetuated by the state. An example of state-backed inequality as a measure of state fragility is lack of state investment in impoverished communities and low social mobility. I measure weak state institutions through reports from reputable international institutions, news articles, and academic publications detailing the lack of state legitimacy and public programs for citizens.

Variable 2: Political Corruption

The second independent variable is political corruption. I use open-source media, academic studies, and international reports on corruption to measure this variable. The international reports are used to analyze the pervasiveness of corruption and detail how widespread it is. Publications and news articles are used to study individual instances of corruption that have a national level impact, for example, corruption charges against the president. El Salvador has an International Commission against Impunity that releases reports and stories on corruption within the nation. Nicaragua does not have a similar institution, so I rely on the reporting of international institutions. Finally, I reference Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index and Global Corruption Barometer to display how the high level of corruption in both countries shows through the public's opinion.

Variable 3: Gang Activity

Gang activity and influence over politics is my third independent variable. I measure the impact of gang involvement in politics by analyzing cases of gangs bribing public officials, as well as legitimate interactions between state institutions and gang members. I conceptualize 'legitimate interactions' as moments when political discourse, such as open negotiation, occurred

between the government and gangs. Measuring gang activity posed an interesting challenge because there is a significant gap in research; I found that most information on gang activity in politics stems from open-source media as opposed to academic publications or reputable international reports. I account for the lack of data on gang membership by acknowledging its impact on my findings, cross-checking news reports of gang activity across multiple platforms, and referencing In Sight Crime's Homicide Round-Up annual reports on homicide rates (In Sight Crime, 2022; Olson & Olson, 2021).

Limitations

While the case study format allows for in depth analysis of overlapping variables and provides a contextualized view of migration, there are several key limitations that must be addressed. A limitation arising from the case study format is a lack of generalizability. While case studies allow in depth analysis of the selected countries, it is more difficult to apply to other situations.

The largest limitation is the lack of reliable data for the independent variables. While there are some well-known sources publishing reports, such as the United Nations, this field of research suffers from a lack of reliable and recent data. First, data on corruption in these countries is often fraught with reporting bias; any institutions that operate at a close enough level to the governments fall victim to the very corruption being reported, so it is likely underreported. This bias requires my thesis to rely heavily on estimated cases by international organizations.

Second, while many news sources report on gang violence and involvement in politics, there lacks academically sound reporting and figures. By far, the largest source of data on gangs

in Central America is the news, which lacks the reliability and objectiveness of peer-reviewed papers or reports. Additionally, Northern Triangle governments struggle to provide accurate counts of gang membership numbers and occasionally arrive at “completely arbitrary” estimates (Bruneau et al., 2011, p. 5). For example, they have relied on the number of imprisoned gang members to guess how many people are involved overall. Thus, both statistics and reports coming out of the Northern Triangle must be analyzed accounting for bias. On the other hand, while reports coming out of the region are inconclusive, data coming out of the United States can fall victim to sensationalist attitudes and overreport gang numbers (Bruneau et al., 2011).

Chapter 5

Case Studies

El Salvador

Migration out of El Salvador is a hot topic in news sources across the Americas. Hundreds of thousands of people are fleeing the country in search of stability in the United States, Mexico, and other neighboring countries. The push to migrate has grown so large that as of 2018, one-fifth of the country's population resided in the United States (Menjívar & Cervantes, 2018). When accounting for population growth, the proportion of emigrants from El Salvador matches the most violent years of their civil war. Over the past thirty years, Salvadorans have continued to migrate due to high homicide rates, social exclusion, insufficient public services, and no hope for the situation to improve. Many Salvadoran migrants point to extortion and lack of jobs as economic reasons for their decision to leave the country.

This case study intends to show how the variety of push factors spurring migration are not individual instances but symptoms of overarching political instability. The government of El Salvador serves as a prime example of a weak state due to its fragmentation, inequality, and lack of territorial control. El Salvador has a complex history of military dictatorships, persistent inequality between elites and average citizens, and deep distrust in political institutions. Since the initial Spanish colonization, it has been ruled by an oligarchy of landed elites; they were originally known as the 'Fourteen Families' but have since morphed into more clandestine organizations of power. El Salvador is classified as a democratic republic, but the actions of its government are more akin to cobbled together patronage systems under the weight of criminal organizations and corruption.

State Institutions

To analyze the impact political instability has on migration out of El Salvador, it is necessary to understand how the current political system was implemented. The political structure arose from a twelve-year civil war spanning 1980 through 1992. Decades of elite control, widespread poverty, and marginalization eventually erupted into war when a few leftist organizations, united under the umbrella of Farabundo Martí Nation Liberation Front (FMLN), revolted against the ruling faction. Members of FMLN protested the social and economic exclusion of much of the country as well as the monopolization of rural land (DeLugan, 2005). The regime they sought to topple was the precursor for the modern right-wing party, Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA). Twelve years of war resulted in over one million Salvadorans fleeing the country and more than 100,000 killed (DeLugan, 2005).

The civil war ended in 1992 with the signing of the San Andres Peace Accords in Chapultepec, Mexico. The peace accords laid the groundwork for a democracy with fair elections, a modified police force, and updated judicial systems. However, thirty years later El Salvador has few democratic institutions untouched by corruption and a cyclical culture of violence perpetuated by gangs and the police. Many of the problems can be traced back to poor implementation of the democratic institutions spelled out in the Peace Accords. The war ended with the same government still in power, so any and all changes required the action of ARENA. The main members of ARENA were the elites historically in power, so they strove to maintain as many systems from before the war as possible. Some politically inclusive systems were implemented, but they were regularly crippled to keep ARENA in power (Wolf, 2009).

The most comprehensive reform carried out by the postwar administration solved none of the economic or social divisions, but instead focused on promoting a unified national culture.

Intending to address political and public fragmentation with ideology, the government worked with international organizations to arrange the United Nations Culture of Peace Program for El Salvador (DeLugan, 2005). A primary means of spreading these cultural ideas of unity and peace was through educational programming. While it held good intentions, this program received little public support as it failed to address any of the systemic problems within the country. Levels of inequality, poverty, and marginalization showed no significant decrease after the war.

Democratic institutions never being fully implemented set the stage for widespread migration. There are not distinct cases of weakening in state institutions directly leading to an uptick of migration because the democratic reforms were never carried out in the first place. Instead, a rich get richer political ideology left behind much of the population and diminished any public services or provisions that support the majority of the country. For example, a 2017 report by the General Directorate of Statistics and Census found only 24% of Salvadorans have medical insurance (General Administration, 2017; United States Trade, 2019). Despite this low number, the government has taken little action to invest in improving healthcare access to poor communities. It is this lack of inclusivity that makes regions of El Salvador prime examples of state abandonment. The lack of investment in quality institutions for citizens paired with the legitimate lack of territorial control contribute to the continual stream of emigration.

Finally, the lack of territorial control in some neighborhoods deepens the problems with El Salvador's institutions and further encourages migration. The gangs are typically localized in specific neighborhoods in the poorest and least developed urban areas. Within these neighborhoods, the gangs have almost full control over the territory, resulting in even less institutional protection for citizens (Cantor, 2016). This phenomenon of gangs controlling territory also falls under the concept of state abandonment that was defined in a prior chapter.

Despite the high levels of violence and gang control over territory, governments have done little to solve the problem and have historically refused to address it as a serious and pervasive threat. The dismissal of the migration problem in El Salvador originates at the domestic level; the Salvadoran state does not officially acknowledge that the high number of internally displaced peoples is caused by violence (Medrano, 2017). By refusing to recognize the cause of internal displacement, the government spurs migration. The Assistant High Commissioner for Protection at UNHCR, Volker Türk, described the phenomenon succinctly, victims of violence “first move, but then try to flee their country because they feel totally unprotected” (Medrano, 2017).

Corruption

The non-provision of public services and concentration of power in the hands of elites ties directly into levels of corruption in El Salvador. Corruption and impunity are pervasive; regular exposés are published on candidates involved in patronage, negotiations with gang members, and electoral manipulation. In the later 1990’s and early 2000’s, ARENA steered legislation towards their own benefit by both manipulating votes to gain power and engaging in illegal transactions while in office. To maintain control of the government, they bought loyalties in return for votes, ensured senior police personnel supported them, and financed their party through illegal means (Wolf, 2009; Rodríguez, 2020).

Corruption is not limited to ARENA. FMLN and other minor parties engage in the same manipulation of institutions to make under the table arrangements and appoint preferred candidates to power (Sanz-Levia & Jiménez-Sánchez, 2021). Political financing for both major parties in El Salvador is another major area of concern. There is very little monitoring of where

parties, campaigns, and administrations gain their funds; while the government mandated party financing be public knowledge, inquiries are quickly shot down and denied information without consequence (Rodríguez, 2020). Given the reports of bribery and embezzlement, it can be implied that much of the political financing relates to illicit business and criminal organizations.

The lack of substantial change and continual impunity only added to the baseline distrust of government held by the Salvadoran people. After decades of state repression, corruption, and no public services before the war, people were unsurprised to see no positive change under the refurbished democracy (DeLugan, 2005). This distrust has only been reinforced by the numerous corruption scandals and instances of bribery. According to the 2019 Global Corruption Barometer, 91% of Salvadorans have little to no trust in the government and 92% believe at least some government officials are involved in corruption (Transparency International, 2021b). These perceptions are not without cause as government officials regularly use power to benefit allies and friends through work contracts, jobs, or money handouts (Puerta et al., 2017). Furthermore, it was not until the most recent election of Nuevas Ideas candidate Nayib Bukele in 2019 that a candidate from a third party won the presidency. This binary divide of parties perpetuated political corruption and impunity as there were no alternative options for voters to turn to when corruption scandals were leaked. Corruption in El Salvador is also measured through the Corruption Perceptions Index. Over the past decade, the country's score has decreased from 38 to 34, showing rising levels of corruption (Transparency International, 2021a).

The most significant relationship between migration and corruption occurred during the presidency of Elías Antonio Saca González. Antonio Saca was president from 2004 to 2009, coinciding with the highest increase in migration out of the country. There are widespread allegations of corruption against former President Antonio Saca, including using public funds for

personal enrichment, pushing laws to favor family business interests, and bribing judicial officials. Right after entering office in 2004, he created a new law that allowed him and his associates to easily transfer public funds into private bank accounts with little records of the transaction. He also regularly gave money to private companies with no government contracts and moved public funds into family business accounts (Bonello, 2016). Furthermore, he is accused of pressuring mayors into voting for his preferred candidate for office with threats of removing them from ARENA's municipal candidate list.

This corruption came to light in the years following his term, resulting in a 10-year Supreme Court sentence for embezzlement and money laundering of more than \$300 million in public funds (Associated Press, 2021; Al Jazeera, 2019; Sleinan, 2021). He laundered money with the help of a few other high-ranking officials through a network of fake companies and front men (British Broadcasting Company, 2018). In 2019, his sentence was extended for two more years due to an attempted bribe of \$10,000 to a court official in exchange for information about who brought the charges against him (Al Jazeera, 2019). While his illicit activities were not revealed until after he left office, the increase in migration during his term shows a link between corruption and migration. The largest increase in migrants leaving El Salvador was from 2005-2010, aligning almost perfectly with Antonio Saca's presidency.

Linkages between migration and presidential corruption are further strengthened by the following administration also being accused of corruption and resulting in the second highest increase in migration. Carlos Mauricio Funes Cartagena was president from 2009 to 2014 and has been found guilty of illegal enrichment. The Supreme Court of El Salvador found that he used public funds for private expenses, including but not limited to, home renovations, hospital bills, and foreign travel (BBC 2018; Al Jazeera, 2019). Currently, Mauricio Funes is still free

and lives under the protection of asylum in Nicaragua (Guardian News, 2016; Sleinan, 2021).

While the amount of money embezzled is much lower than that of his predecessor, Mauricio Funes still depleted the amount of funds available to invest in public services and further weakened trust in the government.

This relationship between presidential level corruption scandals and migration shows that the consequences of corruption – public money used for private interests, high bribery, and unequal distribution of power – cause migration. In the years following the civil war, El Salvador had a decrease in its migrant stock due to people voluntarily returning and deportations from the United States (United Nations, 2021). For the first few presidencies there were minimal corruption scandals and lower levels of emigration. However, between the year 2000 and 2005, the number of migrants increased by more than 160,000; this marks a huge increase in people leaving when compared with the increase between 1995 and 2000 of a little over 15,000 (United Nations, 2021). The large jump in scale of migration is linked to the start of regular corruption scandals in El Salvador. The president during the first spike in migration from 2000 to 2005, Francisco Guillermo Flores Pérez, was charged with stealing \$15 million in donations from Taiwan. Following an earthquake in 2001, Taiwan donated the money to aid rebuilding and relief efforts, but it was diverted into the pockets of the president (BBC, 2019).

As the scale of presidential corruption has increased, the number of migrants has also increased. This relationship is caused by the high-profile nature of presidential corruption. While petty bribes and corruption in local officials undeniably runs rampant through El Salvador, the amount of money diverted from public funds to private interests does not compare. Presidential corruption impacts migration because it directly removes funding for the improvement of citizens' lives and weakens the institutions set up to protect them. Corruption is common practice

in the judicial branch and many citizens fear reporting crimes by organized gangs or public officials due to the backlash of their paid-off police and judges.

This type of corruption ties into the following section on gangs. Many crimes and homicides that are committed go without charge and without trial. This results in migration as people are not only worried about being the victim of a crime but becoming a perpetual victim. For example, in 2015, fewer than 10% of homicide cases resulted in formal charges in El Salvador (McNamara, 2017). This lack of punishment for crime is a product of pervasive corruption and bribery in the judicial system, thus creating another tie between corruption and dangerous conditions causing people to migrate. Overall, high levels of corruption positively correlate with high levels of migration.

Gangs

The corruption and weak state institutions of El Salvador serve as the perfect breeding ground for gang activity. As discussed in the literature review, the *maras* MS-13 and B-18 both originated in Salvadoran migrant populations that brought their organizations to Central America when deported from the United States. While there were some street gangs existing in El Salvador at the time, MS-13 and B-18 quickly took over. From 1993 to 1996 the demographics of Salvadoran gangs shifted from 236 distinct *clicas*, or local cliques, to 54 *clicas* of which all had a relationship to MS-13 or B-18 (Bruneau et al., 2011). These *maras* have become increasingly politicized since the turn of the twentieth century, gaining territorial control over many neighborhoods, influencing elections, and even striking deals with the government. In fact, MS-13 recently became the first street gang on the United States transnational crime organization list (Martínez et al., 2016).

This history is instrumental to the modern relationship between gangs and politics because the *maras* gained power in El Salvador due to the initial instability of a post-civil war country and the continual culture of corruption and violence. When shutting down the gang system did not work, politicians turned to working with them. Government officials and candidates of all parties have taken to using the gangs as a tool for gaining political power. The gangs of El Salvador are arguably more powerful than the government in terms of territorial control and sway over the public (McNamara, 2017). At all levels of government, from local officials to the president, having the gangs' support leads to significant power. This symbiotic relationship has proved valuable to both the gangs and the government at the expense of Salvadoran citizens and civil society. Migration in the twenty-first century has reached historical highs as gangs feed off the political instability and corruption rampant in the government.

The *maras* involve themselves in politics through three main avenues: intimidation of voters, territorial control over campaigns, and outright negotiations with the administration. The 2014 presidential election serves as a good example of gangs using their physical power and reputation to control politics. They set up booths near polling stations and advertised themselves as members of a non-governmental organization helping citizens vote. Once a person entered their booth, they would request their ID and intimidate the voter to vote for their preferred candidate (Puerta et al., 2017). This practice is common throughout the country, but it is most prevalent in the municipalities in and around San Salvador. Control over territory is another means by which gangs influence politics. They wield immense power over the existing democratic institutions as they can control who enters and exits their territory. Gangs will allow certain politicians to campaign in their territory in return for favorable policies, employment opportunities, or simply bribe money (Puerta et al., 2017).

Political ties with the *maras* happen at all levels of the government, from local officials to national leaders. Elías Hernández is an example of how gang connections are leveraged to gain and maintain power. Elías Hernández was elected as mayor of Apopa, a municipality in the San Salvador department, in 2012 by leveraging gangs and bribe money to gain his position. Prior to election, he had a history of petty drug trafficking, human smuggling, and a short imprisonment for theft. His biggest scandal occurred in office, when it was revealed that he struck a deal with B-18 to gain votes and money (Puerta et al., 2017). In the same year he entered office, the municipality raised daily taxes \$0.25, giving the profit to the gangs. He hired gang members as municipal police officers, allowing them to use state resources for any necessary errands. Hernández was caught after he allegedly ordered the assassination of several people to settle personal disputes (Avelar, 2021).

The relationship between the politicization of the *maras* and migration becomes evident when analyzing migration numbers over time. Following the end of their civil war and a period of mass deportation in the 1990s, the population of migrants significantly decreased. However, migration numbers did not remain low for long. The largest periods of migration are between 2005-2010 and 2010-2015. These two periods of higher emigration align with two significant moments involving gangs and politics: the implementation of *mano dura* in 2003, its successor *mano súper dura* in 2004, and the gang truce in 2012.

In 2003, the Administration enacted the *mano dura* policy that cracked down on crime. This permitted the arrest and prosecution of individuals solely on the basis of profiling, as well as a loosening on restrictions for police officers in regards to torture and extrajudicial action (Wolf, 2009; Cruz, 2009). *Mano dura* sparked outrage within gangs because it tried to limit their power and allowed actors outside of state institutions to act against them. This led to businesses,

individuals, and police working together to seek retribution and “cleanse” the country of gangs (Cruz, Fernandez de Castro, & Santamaría 2007). However, *mano dura* and its successor *mano súper dura* were unsuccessful in curbing gang activity. They only resulted in overcrowded prisons, human rights abuses, and skyrocketing homicide numbers (Cruz, 2009). The five-year period following this policy resulted in the highest emigration rates since the civil war.

The most blatant control over politics exerted by the *maras* emerged in the past ten years in the form of direct negotiation. The *maras* have the power to negotiate with the government because of homicide rates. The homicide rate of El Salvador is historically astronomical; in 2015, it was the most dangerous country in the world with a homicide rate of 103 per 100,000 residents (In Sight, 2021). An estimated two-thirds of homicides in El Salvador are attributed to gangs, so the homicide rate quickly became used as political leverage to control the office. This control manifests in the second key shift in migration across 2010-2015. The increase in migration aligns with the 2012 gang truce and subsequent backlash at its dissolution in 2013. After years of incredibly high homicide rates, Minister of Security, General David Munguía-Payés decided to take action in 2012. Attempts to crack down on gang violence with force only led to higher homicide rates in the past, so Munguía-Payés decided to collaborate with the *maras* to make El Salvador a safer place. In 2012 a truce was enacted between MS-13 and B-18 where they would limit homicides. In return, the government would address the horrific prison conditions, seek to eliminate extrajudicial killings and torture by police, and not make any moves to regain territory controlled by the gangs. Consequently, the gangs gained political sway over the current president and security institutions. In the week following the agreement, homicides went from 14 per day to 6 per day (Miguel Cruz, 2019).

However, the following year Munguía-Payés was barred from appointment to the civilian position of Public Security Minister due to his military status. He had planned to continue the truce, but his replacement favored a tough on crime approach. The truce disintegrated, and by 2014 homicide rates were as high as ever. By 2015, El Salvador was one of the most dangerous countries on earth with a homicide rate of 103 people per 100,000 residents (Miguel Cruz, 2019; In Sight, 2021). The period of 2010 to 2015 had the second highest rate of migration out of El Salvador. While the gang truce successfully decreased the number of homicides, it did not have an impact lowering migration.

Nicaragua

In contrast to El Salvador, Nicaragua arose from a similar background of political turmoil, but has vastly lower levels of emigration. Nicaragua shares a western border with the Northern Triangle on the narrow land bridge connecting North and South America. It also underwent a civil war in the 1980's that resulted in tremendous political polarization, corruption, and power concentrated in the hands of elites. Nicaragua is one of the most corrupt countries in the world, ranking at 164th out of 180 countries on the 2021 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2021a). The current president, Daniel Ortega, has been in power for over 15 years through authoritarian elections and dictatorial suppression of opposition groups. However, the population of Nicaraguans residing outside of the country is less than half that of El Salvador. In fact, of the 310,884 Central Americans deported from the United States during the turn of the century, only 3% were Nicaraguan (Rocha, 2011).

Despite the historical similarities between the Northern Triangle and Nicaragua, the dramatically lower migration numbers show a significant difference in the political context. The difference is not related to economics because Nicaragua has the second lowest GDP per capita in Latin America and the Caribbean. If migration out of Central America was solely economic, Nicaragua would have a much larger migrant population than the Northern Triangle. El Salvador has roughly double the GDP of Nicaragua, with 2020 GDP per capita of US\$3,798.6 and US\$1,905.3 respectively (World Bank, 2020). Ruling out economic motivations, the disparity in migration is caused by the difference in political institutions and lower gang involvement in politics.

State Institutions

The presidential system of Nicaragua was established after the Contra War between the revolutionary Sandinistas and counterrevolutionary Contras in the 1980's. After decades of corruption and authoritarian control, the Sandinistas forcefully took power in July 1979, ousting the hereditary dictatorship of the Somoza family and replacing it with a socialist regime. This takeover was widely unpopular among the middle- and upper-class citizens of Nicaragua, prompting many to migrate to Costa Rica and the United States. The Contra War ensued after the United States, under President Ronald Reagan, funded and trained the Contras to keep supposed communist interests out of America's backyard. Both sides committed egregious human rights violations, scarring a generation of young Nicaraguans, and leading to the popularity of joining local street gangs for protection and familiarity (Rocha, 2006).

The war concluded with the 1989 Tela Accords. A democratic government was established, and the international community invested heavily in the development of fair and transparent institutions. Daniel Ortega was the last Sandinista leader in the seat of presidency until the first elections in 1990 when the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) was defeated by Violeta Barrios. This marked the first election after the Contra War and was praised for its transparency with international observers, as well as free and fair competition among parties (i Puig & Serra, 2020). It did not, however, take long for corruption and elite control over politics to seep into the electoral process. In 2006, Daniel Ortega was elected and has been in power ever since. Through manipulating constitutional requirements and stacking legislative bodies with supporters, Ortega successfully converted the budding Nicaraguan democracy into a hegemonic electoral dictatorship.

The provision of public services in Nicaragua have been limited by embezzlement and corruption. Democratic institutions, specifically the electoral system, are in deep danger from complete erasure. After two general presidential elections, the integrity of Nicaragua's democratic institutions received their first major blow. In 2000, President Arnaldo Alemán of the Constitutionalist Liberal Party (PLC) struck a deal with former President Daniel Ortega to alter the election system, seeking a method for impunity and guaranteed future political power (Thaler, 2017). This *Pacto* lowered the percentage of votes needed for election to 40%, or a mere 35% if there is a 5% margin. It also ensured future electoral victory by essentially narrowing the party system into a duopoly of the PLC and FSLN. *Pacto* even extended the two parties' control to include influence over courts and the electoral commission itself (i Puig & Serra, 2020).

Arnaldo Alemán used this agreement to handpick the next president: Enrique Bolañas Geyer. Then, in 2006 Daniel Ortega was elected and has since manipulated the institutions and siphoned funding from public services to remain in power to this day. Daniel Ortega and his wife, Rosario Murillo, now serve as the president and vice president. Their power reaches throughout the upper levels of politics, aided by the appointment of their children to key roles in the public and private sector (Camacho, 2021). Their family controls almost every aspect of politics and economics in Nicaragua, a fact made clear by the changing of the official presidential residence, the Nicaraguan equivalent of the White House, to Ortega's personal home. Since ascending office in 2007, Ortega has shaped and ignored the democratic institutions to ensure his reelection with no term limits (Thaler, 2017; i Puig & Serra, 2020).

Overall, Nicaragua does not display weak institutions, but undemocratic ones as the government has strong control over public and private institutions. However, the fact that people are still leaving highlights a relationship between undemocratic institutions and migration. The

clearest relationship between migration and a change in state institutional power occurred when public services were diminished, and authoritarian control was strengthened. In 2018 President Ortega increased taxes and reduced benefits from social security. This led to massive protests against the president and his family for manipulating the political system to stay in power and funnel even more money from the public into their private accounts. These protests were met with oppressive force; between 320 to 500 protesters were killed by police and paramilitary, with at least 2,000 injured (Camacho, 2021; i Puig & Serra, 2020).

The combination of the decrease in public services and increase in oppressive state control led to an uptick in migration. The period of 2015-2020 has the highest increase in migrants leaving the country since the late 1990's (United Nations, 2020). This was the first time in his presidency that Daniel Ortega implemented a significant decrease in public services, whereas in prior years he mostly manipulated institutions. The increase in migration aligning with this action shows a relationship between people leaving the country and non-provision of public services. Additionally, state institutions protecting the rights of citizens and protestors were weakened as the state turned police and paramilitary against the public. The degradation of the protection of citizens was likely another source of distrust in the government and motivation to leave.

This supports my hypothesis that emigration is greater in countries with low levels of state institutions and provision of services because Nicaragua shows the same negative correlation where its higher level of state institutions leads to lower levels of migration. Nicaragua. However, in order for a true causal link to be drawn, the relationship would need to be further explored. The 2018 protests serve as an example, but they are the only instance where

a decrease in public services led to an increase in migration. Thus, further research is necessary to draw conclusive findings.

Corruption

Political corruption in Nicaragua is a pervasive and common practice. Public officials of all levels, from civil servants to presidents, engage in corrupt behavior to ensure maintenance of power and maximum profit. Police officers are known to profit off seized drugs and drug paraphernalia, as well as being quick to make a bribe deal with economic elites (Camacho, 2021). Presidents such as Arnoldo Alemán and Daniel Ortega both privately benefit from public funding and disaster relief efforts. Electoral officials with the national commission work with parties to skew polls and remove opposition votes. Furthermore, the judiciary both seems uninterested in addressing the corruption and holds no power to make the changes anyway.

Former President Alemán serves as a good example of how powerful politicians create an inner circle of beneficiaries and use public funding to further personal gains. After stepping down from office to make way for his hand-picked successor in 2003, Alemán's corruption was brought to light (i Puig & Serra, 2020). Alemán was sentenced to 20 years in prison for stealing more than \$100 million in public funds (Associated Press, 2003). He and his inner circle of appointees and party supporters regularly diverted public funds from sources such as international relief organizations to pay each other. Hurricane Mitch relief money is an instance of when government officials stole money intended for public services. This direct theft of public money obviously led to inadequate funding in many community institutions and services (Brown et al., 2007).

Nicaragua experienced a similar relationship between migration and corruption to El Salvador. In 2004, Alemán was ranked as the ninth most corrupt leader in recent history by Transparency International (BBC, 2004). His term, 1997 to 2002, coincides with a spike in migration between 1995 and 2000. To highlight this point, the years under President Alemán align with the highest period of migration out of the country in the past thirty years. This supports the finding that presidential corruption leads to increases in migration as funds, services, and institutions are depleted for private gain. The current president, Daniel Ortega, has been accused of many counts of corruption and illicit activity, but he has yet to face any trial as he holds much power over the judiciary. In fact, under his leadership the Supreme Court overturned the corruption sentence against Alemán and cleared his name (Associated Press, 2020).

Another form of corruption rampant in Nicaragua is the extraction of bribes from private companies; these bribes are for a myriad of reasons including mining concessions, avoiding fines, and operational permissions. During Ortega's second consecutive term, he engaged in what is now a massive corruption scandal: the building contract of the Nicaraguan canal. This canal would be built by the unqualified Hong Kong Nicaragua Canal Development Group (HKND) thanks to a secret deal between the organization's leader and the Ortega Administration (Plumer, 2015). The canal contract violated both constitutional and international treaties, giving HKND the power to bulldoze Indigenous lands and maintain sovereign authority over the infrastructure for 50 years (Camacho, 2021). In preparation, the Nicaraguan government illegally expropriated Indigenous land protected under the constitution and private property.

While this project involved corrupt action by the president, it had no significant impact on migration. This lack of impact is no doubt due to the project stalling and never entering a

construction phase. Indigenous peoples, however, still fear its resurgence and irreparable impact on their cultures (Cultural Survival, 2015). The concentration of the impact on indigenous populations could also be a reason for the lack of impact. Indigenous peoples make up a very small portion of Nicaraguans, so projects that impact their rights and land have less pushback from the general public.

Despite the incredibly high levels of corruption in Nicaragua, illustrated by its place in the bottom twenty countries with the highest corruption, the migration numbers are low relative to the region (Transparency International, 2021a). In fact, Nicaragua ranks considerably lower than the Northern Triangle countries in corruption levels, yet it has less than half of El Salvador's migration rate. With how many cases of police bribes and high officials involved in embezzlement, corruption is the norm of Nicaragua. The presidency of Arnoldo Alemán coincided with the largest increase in migration, but there remain few links between other Nicaraguan presidents and migration. This supports the finding in El Salvador, where corruption of high-ranking officials causes migration. However, Nicaragua ranks worse on corruption indicators overall, so the hypothesis that all corruption has an impact on migration appears to be a generalization.

Gangs

Integration of *maras* into politics is a common characteristic in El Salvador and other Northern Triangle countries, but it is largely absent in Nicaragua. Nicaragua does not face the same outrageous homicide rates and deals between presidents and gang leaders; in fact, Nicaragua hardly has any gang activity at all. This is primarily due to two reasons: migration flow in the 1990's and state institutions to address gangs. The gang presence in Nicaragua is akin

to the pre-*mara* gangs in the Northern Triangle: highly localized, small, street gangs. During the wave of migration out of Central America in the late Twentieth Century, most Nicaraguans went to Costa Rica and Miami instead of Los Angeles. Additionally, they were predominantly middle class and economically well off. Perceived as victims of communism, Nicaraguan migrants were often granted political asylum and integrated neatly into the Cuban American population (Brunea et al., 2011).

This positive experience fleeing regime change as well as higher average wealth meant that way fewer Nicaraguans were deported from the United States. Thus, the impetus for *maras* in the Northern Triangle was avoided by Nicaragua. There did exist local gangs of youths that could be described as social cliques more than criminal organizations. Members voluntarily joined and had positive views about their participation in a group that defended the community and upheld a code of conduct (Rocha, 2006). While petty crime and violence between rival gangs existed, the overall ethos was that of vigilante protection of neighborhoods and a means of forming community (Rodgers, 2017).

There was a spike in gang violence during the early 2000's when cocaine trafficking routes altered to pass through Nicaraguan neighborhoods. Within a year, crack cocaine was epidemic among young gang members, and they underwent a fundamental shift towards violence. Gang members stopped being neighborhood watchdogs and transitioned into violent actors who regularly dealt cocaine and attacked neighbors for money to feed addictions (Rodgers, 2017). This period of addiction was followed by the dissolution of gang identity, younger membership, and eventual replacement by trafficking organizations. However, the period of high gang violence does not show any relationship with migration. An explanation for the lack of impact on migration is the scale. While gang members increased their use of violence,

there were fewer people involved. The street gangs of Nicaragua are exponentially smaller than the *maras* of the Northern Triangle. As of the early 2000's, the average number of members per gang was 18, showing that instead of being powerful, transnational actors, these gangs are extremely local groups (Rocha, 2006).

Nicaragua has a slow, steady increase in migration, but it is not as fast as El Salvador, nor does it directly align with increased gang activity or violence. If gang violence were the primary cause of migration, I would expect a spike to show between 2000 and 2005. However, there was not spike. This lack of relationship between increased gang violence and migration supports my hypothesis that it is not strictly violence, but the integration into politics that make gang activity a cause of migration. Furthermore, despite the corruption levels, there are still genuine public services aimed at bettering communities in Nicaragua. To combat the rising gang violence related to cocaine in the early 2000s, Nicaragua launched the Office of Juvenile Issues to create pathways away from violence. For example, young gang members could serve as lifeguards or work in other community roles to promote better relations and opportunities outside of gangs (Rocha, 2011). Thus, the lack of gang involvement in politics, small scale of gang membership, and government programs to combat violence work together to keep migration low.

Chapter 6

Discussion

El Salvador and Nicaragua both suffer from poor implementation of democratic institutions and corruption, yet they differ significantly the prevalence of gangs and the level of migration. While the government of El Salvador has very little control over territory and weak institutions, Nicaragua has the same poor democratic institutions, but a much stronger government. The Nicaraguan government has been under the control of Daniel Ortega since 2006 and is consistently moving further towards total corruption and authoritarianism. With this power, the government has implemented minimal programs to keep gang membership low and invest in the community.

A key difference to be drawn between these cases is the strength of the current institutions and government. Overall, Nicaragua is more politically stable than El Salvador, and therefore has less migration. The government holds power over territory and has some provision of public services. On the other hand, El Salvador faces the consequences of a government that hardly controls the very territory it serves and increasingly interfaces with the very criminal organizations it claims to combat. This is not to say that Nicaragua is democratic; it is not. However, the authoritarian control is still control that gives a sense of stability to the nation as well as a deterrence for gangs to establish strong roots in the country. The 2018 crackdown on protestors was a display of strong control and weakening institutions that caused migration. Future analysis of Nicaragua will be important to understanding how this step impacts the political stability and migration levels of the country.

Corruption is rampant in both countries. Nicaragua has consistently higher levels of corruption than El Salvador and the corruption is present in every branch of the government. El Salvador also experiences a lot of corruption, especially in relation to gang extortions, bribery, and patronage. However, my case studies show that presidential corruption is a cause of migration, whereas generalized corruption is not. The case of President Antonio Saca coincided with the highest periods of migration. Antonio Saca used his access to public resources and funding to further his private interests. In doing so, he used up funds intended for public benefit and contributed to the weakening of institutions. The same phenomenon of presidential corruption scandals causing increases in migration occurred with Arnaldo Alemán in Nicaragua as well as other presidents in El Salvador. Presidential corruption scandals directly relate to the provision of public services, so they impact quality of life for citizens and cause migration.

Another common thread that runs through this weakening of institutions and strengthening of corruption ties is the *maras*. Political action by the *maras* is the indicator most significantly linked to migration. This is supported by the multiple cases of political action by *maras* being followed by periods of migration. During the times when the government has the most direct lines of communication and collusion with *maras*, migration increases. The link between gang involvement in politics and migration becomes even clearer when comparing Nicaragua with El Salvador. Nicaragua does not have the same politicization of gangs. In fact, they do not have much presence of MS-13 or B-18 at all. Furthermore, during the spike in gang violence in Nicaragua, there was no parallel spike in migration. This shows that violence is not the only factor spurring migration; the size, power, and political sway of gangs is instrumental to migration trends.

Nicaragua's lack of the *maras* is due to two main factors: the demographics of migration in the 1980's and the stronger state institutions. In a display of the cyclical nature of these indicators, the migration out of Nicaragua during the Contra War is a large reason why there are no *maras* today. The wealthier and more educated Nicaraguans fled the country and were welcomed into new communities whereas the Salvadorans entered dangerous and impoverished neighborhoods. Nicaragua never experienced the same mass reintegration of migrants into their community, and the migrants who did move to the United States were less involved in gangs overall.

In tandem with this lack of exportation of gangs back to the country, the strength of Nicaragua's government also played a pivotal role in the prevention of *maras*. For example, their approach to law enforcement was transformed after the war from militaristic to communitarian. The police assumed the role of a nonpolitical service institution instead of a repressive branch of government power (Johnson et al., 2012). This set a standard for police to become more integrated into the community instead of presiding over it. However, in more recent years under the control over Daniel Ortega, the police has engaged in more repression of the public.

An important confounding variable to address is the level of violence. Increases in gang membership typically align closely with increased violence in addition to increased political power. Furthermore, while homicide rates include violence committed by non-gang actors, they have been linked to migration in other cases. My thesis incorporates this relationship into the argument that it is the involvement in politics that impact migration in that it addresses violence as a part of the process. In some instances, violence is used as a negotiation point between the government and gangs. The 2012 gang truce was enacted to lower homicide rates from their spike after *mano dura*. Violence and integration into politics is cyclical. After all, it is the very

involvement of gangs in politics that permit higher levels of control, and therefore higher levels of violence.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

The case studies of El Salvador and Nicaragua show the impacts of political instability on migration through different avenues. In El Salvador, there is little state control over territory or provision of services, corruption runs rampant at all levels, and *maras* are primary political actors. The strongest association was found between gang involvement in politics and migration; recent years of major migration waves align very closely with increased political negotiation and illicit corroboration with MS-13 and B-18. I also found that presidential corruption has an impact on migration as it diverts funds and resources from public institutions. The weakest connection was between state institutions and migration. Weak institutions serve as a ripe context for migration, but typically require other factors as well to directly increase the number of migrants.

Nicaragua provided a good case to compare with El Salvador because it has very similar socioeconomic conditions and is geographically close. Migration from Nicaragua is increasing, but at nowhere near the same rate as in the rest of the Northern Triangle. I found no evidence of gangs getting involved in politics and a spike in violence had no impact on migration. Overall, corruption and weakening public services are on the rise, aligning with increasing migration. I found the same relationship between presidential corruption and migration as El Salvador. This supports the hypothesis that corruption increases migration, but only when the corruption is high-profile. The weakening of public services in 2018 caused another notable increase in migration, but this is the only example that supports this hypothesis. Thus, there is evidence of a relationship, but further studies would be necessary to confirm this finding.

Implications

This distinction between economic migrants and political refugees is important to make because currently thousands of Northern Triangle emigrants are being denied applications for political asylum. This system of mass-denial is expedited by the exclusion of “unconventional violence” as a legitimate reason for political asylum. Unconventional violence is a term used for harm enacted on a community or individual from sources other than government action (Medrano, 2017). Thus, asylum applications are not seen as sufficiently politically motivated if the violence suffered is not directly caused by the state or government officials. However, the political climate of ungoverned spaces, gang involvement in politics, and rampant corruption have caused incredible damage to standards of living and security in the Northern Triangle. The elimination of political instability as a valid reason for pursuing asylum leaves thousands of migrants in a dangerous situation and intentionally excludes certain populations from gaining protection as a refugee.

Future Research

I would also recommend a study that compares all three Northern Triangle countries with El Salvador and Nicaragua to confirm whether these indicators have the same effects. While I found a causal link between migration and gang involvement in politics, I would recommend a study directly comparing politicization with violence. Additionally, future research could improve on this thesis by finding more data on gang membership, whether through surveys or access to government reports. Another avenue future research should explore is the impact of democratic institutions. While these countries are democracies by name, many of their institutions are authoritarian and only benefit a handful of elites. A study that looks at how the

presence of democratic institutions impacts migration would be the next step to expanding upon this research.

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EDUCATION

The Pennsylvania State University

College of the Liberal Arts

- Bachelor of Arts in Global & International Studies
- Bachelor of Arts in Communications Arts & Sciences
- Minor in Spanish

University Park, PA

Class of 2022

IES Abroad: Buenos Aires – Latin American Societies & Cultures

Semester Abroad

Buenos Aires, Argentina

January – June 2020

FELLOWSHIPS AND HONORS

Schreyer Honors Scholar

August 2018-present

- Rigorous Honors Program at the Pennsylvania State University during which students must maintain a 3.40 GPA, complete an Honors Thesis, and complete at least 23 credits of Honors coursework
- Honors Thesis: Migrating Along the Pipeline: How political instability shapes mass emigration out of the Northern Triangle

Paterno Fellow

August 2018-present

- Honors program including advanced academic coursework, thesis, study abroad and/or internship, ethics study, and leadership/service commitment

Top Papers in Undergraduate Honors Conference at the Southern States Communication Association

April 2021

- Selected as one of the top four papers submitted to the Undergraduate Honors Conference
- Presented original work on the topic of female ethos and social movements

Dean's List

Fall 2018-present

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Honors Career Development Center

Career Development Intern

University Park, PA

January 2022-present

- Assist to build a database for high social impact career opportunities, scholarships, and communities
- Coordinate speaker events and alumni panels, organize logistics of career info sessions, network with other university career advisors

Ayllon-Ramirez Law Firm

Paralegal

Kennett Square, PA

June 2021-August 2021

- Organize large quantities of evidence provided by clients, assemble and format personal statements, and build comprehensive legal arguments
- Research current US statutes, USCIS forms and procedures, and data from clients' countries of origin
- Translate personal statements and official documents from Spanish to English

Community Justice Project

Legal Intern

Landenberg, PA

June 2021-August 2021

- Advocate for Tuition Equity at Pennsylvania universities through sharing Dreamers' stories, providing data, and meeting with college boards and elected officials.
- Research demographic statistics and legal codes to compile convincing arguments

Penn State University Library

Part-Time Staff

University Park, PA

June 2021-present

- Aid patrons in locating library services that fit their needs as a welcome desk attendant and through monitoring phone calls

LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE

Penn State International Affairs and Debate Association

Secretary-General, Pennsylvania High School United Nations Conference

University Park, PA

December 2020-October 2021

- Elected to oversee the planning and implementation of the ninth PHUNC conference hosted at Penn State University
- Selected a Chief of Staff, Secretariat, and Crisis Directors to assist in creating, advertising, and running a 3-day national Model UN conference where 150+ high school students debate and create solutions to critical real-world problems
- Accountable for all aspects of the conference, including communicating with administration, local businesses, and sponsors

Integrity Counselor

May 2020-January 2021

Emma W. Lutz

ewl5256@psu.edu

- Moderated and responded to integrity reports, ensured organization adheres to University Policies and the Club, reviewed club policies and amendments Constitution
- Conducted interviews for chair positions within the organization and oversaw executive board decisions
- Upheld positive club culture for over 50 active members and mediated conflict among members

Schreyer Honors College

Scholar Ambassador

April 2019-August 2021

- Represent the ideals of scholarship and leadership to potential freshmen, donors, alumni, and families
- Participate in academic panels, lead tours, and organize events for both current and future scholars

SHOTIME Mentor

January 2012-August 2019

- Organized team building activities, helped plan Move-In and Arrival/Finale, and served as leader and point of contact for incoming freshmen

AURORA Orientation Leader

August 2019

- Served as the first Schreyer representative leader on the AURORA Outdoor Orientation Program
- Co-led students through a week-long backpacking trip in Central Pennsylvania, ensured trip safety, and helped ease the transition to college

VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCES

KACS – Kennett Area Community Service

Kennett Square, PA

Volunteer

January – June 2020

- Translated and assisted Spanish speaking community members at pop-up COVID-19 testing clinics
- Organized and categorized food pantry for 420 families a week

Tamani World Children Project

Lincoln University, PA – Nairobi, Kenya

Volunteer

January 2018- July 2018

- Collaborate to raise \$11,000 for Tamani World Children Project: a nonprofit orphanage and school in Kwa Njenga slums outside Nairobi, Kenya

Urban Promise Wilmington

January 2020-February 2020

- Create relationships with potential interns for a youth-centered nonprofit organization, market program at career fairs, contact program alumni

State High Area School District

January 2019-May 2019

Tutor high school students one-on-one in Spanish, History, and English