The New Nicaraguan Revolution: Protest and Repression in the Shadow of History

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Abstract

What explains Nicaragua’s Movimiento Autoconvocado? The April-May 2018 mass protests caught most Nicaraguans and outside observers by surprise, quickly growing from initial demonstrations against social security reforms to a nationwide mass uprising calling for regime change and democratization, prompting harsh state and paramilitary repression. We argue that standard models for mass protest that highlight rational self-interest or underlying economic and political grievances fail to explain the speed with which protests grew and spiraled. Instead, the best explanation lies in history-based frames that shape actors’ perceptions of their opponents and the issues at stake. The initial April 18-21 interactions between pro-government forces and protestors activated powerful frames resonating with Nicaragua’s history of dictatorship and revolution. Nearly overnight, President Daniel Ortega’s regime was reframed as equivalent to the Somoza dictatorship. Protesters, meanwhile, set up barricades and adopted the symbols, rhetoric, and roles of the Sandinista revolution of the 1970s, contesting Ortega and his supporters’ claims to Sandinismo and nationalism, and seeking to control symbolic spaces. It is only by looking to historical precedents that protesters could mobilize a large coalition so rapidly, and thus it is only by examining history and the agency of protest leaders in using it that we can understand the eruption of unforeseen civil resistance.

Introduction

What explains the onset of sudden nonviolent civil insurrections? From the collapse of the Soviet Bloc to the Arab Spring, this political phenomenon has triggered epoch-making regional and global transformations. Yet for all their world-historical importance, “mass nonviolent uprisings are quite difficult to explain or predict in a generalizable sense.”¹ Existing theories emphasize political opportunities,² the accumulation and mobilization of human, financial, and informational resources,³ and modernization,⁴ but above all, grievances.⁵ Indeed, rather than assessing them as an explanatory factor, scholars often assume long-simmering and widely-

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¹ Chenoweth and Ulfelder 2017, 318
² McAdam 2010
³ McCarthy and Zald 1977.
⁴ Inglehart and Welzel 2005.
⁵ Kuran 1991; Petersen 2001; Tilly 2003
shared grievances are a necessary but insufficient condition for civil uprisings. Grievances are considered too ubiquitous to explain individual episodes of nonviolent civil resistance.

How then, should we understand the April 2018 civil uprising against Latin America’s then-most popular leader, President Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua? The protests against Ortega’s government were initially sparked by cuts to social security benefits, but spiraled into a mass pro-democracy civil resistance campaign leading to deadly clashes between protesters, paramilitaries, and police. The movement nearly toppled President Daniel Ortega’s government, while its repression, with over four hundred dead at the hands of police and paramilitary forces and thousands injured or imprisoned, marks Latin America’s largest single episode of one-sided state violence in almost three decades.

The literature on past nonviolent civil resistance campaigns points us towards political and economic grievances. Yet Nicaragua hardly fits the “pressure cooker” model of sudden popular revolution, as we detail below. Latinobarómetro, the most respected cross-national polling organization in the region, reports that in August 2017, just a few months before the uprising, the Nicaraguan government boasted an approval rating of 67%—the highest in Latin America. A higher percentage of Nicaraguan citizens trusted their government (42%) and believed that their government governed for the good of all (52%) than in any other Latin American country, while fewer saw their government as corrupt (28%) than elsewhere in the region. A year after the fraudulent 2016 elections that kept Daniel Ortega in power and installed his wife, Rosario Murillo, as Vice President, 70% classified Nicaragua as a democracy. While Nicaraguans declared poverty and unemployment as the country’s most pressing problems, they viewed Ortega’s government as an excellent custodian of Nicaragua’s rapidly growing economy. Latinobarómetro reported that “Nicaragua is the only country [in Latin America] where a majority of citizens perceive progress, with 58%.” These data suggest that the April 2018 uprising did not result from a slow unraveling of Nicaragua’s “ruling bargain,” but from a sudden breach.

We argue that instead of widespread anti-regime grievances, Nicaragua’s civil uprising is best explained by the role of history-based frames in shaping individual Nicaraguans’ high-risk mobilization decisions. Faced with images of bloodied protesters, individual Nicaraguans drew on decision-making schemas built from widely-shared historical memories of the 1979 Sandinista Revolution, in which Ortega’s Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) overthrew the repressive Somoza regime. The Revolution endowed Nicaraguans with a cultural repertoire of ways to resist dictatorship, composed of tactics, symbols, and slogans that reemerged 40 years later. Protesters drew on this repertoire, casting themselves as protagonists and recreating well-known episodes in the FSLN’s earlier struggle. By making analogies with the past, many Nicaraguans reassessed their present government as a dictatorship; by imagining themselves as occupying “paradigmatic roles” taken from Nicaraguan history, protesters

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6 See Nepstad 2011, 4-5.
7 Goldfrank 1979, 138–39.
8 Latinobarómetro 2017.
9 Latinobarómetro 2017, 57.
10 Kamrava 2014
11 Petersen 2001, 284–86.
developed prescriptions for collective action in an authoritarian context where political participation had been constricted.\textsuperscript{12}

This paper proceeds as follows. First, we present our research design and the evidence we have collected (and anticipate collecting). Then we analyze the stability of Daniel Ortega’s regime prior to April 2018 through the lens of common explanations of civil resistance campaigns, including widely-shared grievances, political opportunity structures, resource mobilization theories, economic modernization, and foreign shocks. We then present our favored explanation of Nicaragua’s civic rebellion, history-based frames, and trace processes of popular mobilization during the crucial first few days of the rebellion. We conclude with a discussion of Nicaragua as a “deviant case” that challenges conventional scholarly wisdom about civil resistance campaigns more generally.\textsuperscript{13}

\section*{Research Methods and Data}

This project takes a multimethod approach to studying mobilization dynamics in a nonviolent civil resistance campaign. We integrate quantitative and qualitative methods to generate comprehensive inferences about both aggregate-level patterns and more granular perceptions, experiences, and processes.\textsuperscript{14} Specifically, we analyze three types of data: participant-observation research conducted during fieldwork, careful process-tracing of participants’ oral histories of the uprising, and a highly-disaggregated events dataset that records not only violent episodes, but also claims-making and institutional linkages between actors.

First, the first author carried out fieldwork during the protest wave itself. He spent four weeks in Nicaragua in April through May of 2018 conducting participant-observation research on the civil resistance campaign. During this fieldwork, he marched with protesters and visited roadblocks, while observing both opposition and state strategies, organizations, claims, frames, and other dimensions of on-the-ground contentious politics. Furthermore, in 2019 we conducted an additional round of semi-structured interviews with 12 key opposition actors. These interviews with student activists, business leaders, journalists, and Sandinista dissidents helped us to reconstruct their pathways to anti-regime mobilization.

We have also compiled an events dataset that includes episodes of contention, repression, claims-making, and international involvement. The dataset is compatible with the Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO) Data Project.\textsuperscript{15} Rather than rely on international news reports, we collected data from local Spanish-language sources (specifically, the newspapers La Prensa and Nicaragua Verificado (@NicaraguaVe)) to gain a much higher degree of granularity and coverage than available in existing datasets on nonviolent civil resistance campaigns. We use these data to test our argument against other principal hypotheses

\textsuperscript{12} The prevalence of historical analogy and mimesis in revolutionary action was recognized by Karl Marx in his \textit{Eighteenth Brumaire}: “At the very time when men appear engaged in revolutionizing things and themselves, in bringing about what never was before, at such very epochs of revolutionary crisis do they anxiously conjure up into their service the spirits of the past, assume their names, their battle cries, their costumes to enact a new historic scene in such time-honored disguise and with such borrowed language.”

\textsuperscript{13} Gerring 2006, 32.

\textsuperscript{14} Thaler 2017a.

\textsuperscript{15} Chenoweth, Pinckney, and Lewis 2018.
from the literature on civil resistance campaigns and sudden uprisings. These include economic and political grievances, political opportunities, and resource mobilization.

A Solidly Entrenched Regime

Simmering resentments and grievances play a key causal role in every account of sudden mass revolt that we have encountered in a substantial related literature. Timur Kuran famously argued, for example, that the revolutions of 1989 occurred when Eastern Europeans stopped falsifying their true preferences, thus “bring[ing] into the open long-repressed grievances” and ending “a system that many considered abominable.”16 Similarly, scholars of the Arab Spring cite a “cocktail of grievances that exploded in the uprising,”17 argue that an “accumulation of grievances had toppled over, like a huge pile of documents,”18 and tally up “the roots of rage.”19 Given the ubiquity of grievances in decaying authoritarian regimes, the task for social scientists then becomes to identify conjunctural causes that allow pent-up resentments to explode into mass protest. These can include political opportunities, resource mobilization, international diffusion of protest, electoral fraud, economic retrenchment, and corruption. Table 1 summarizes these arguments in an incomplete though representative set of mass civil resistance campaigns.

Table 1: Causes of mass civil resistance campaigns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>Movement</th>
<th>Necessary Cause</th>
<th>Conjunctural Causes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>People Power Revolution</td>
<td>“widespread grievances”20</td>
<td>Economic nosedive, political opportunities, electoral fraud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, etc.</td>
<td>East European Revolutions</td>
<td>“long-repressed grievances”21</td>
<td>Festering economic problems, diffusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Tiananmen Square Protests</td>
<td>“explosion of grievances”22</td>
<td>Economic liberalization, economic inequality, corruption, diffusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000 - 2005</td>
<td>Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan</td>
<td>Color Revolutions</td>
<td>“strong grievances against the regime”23</td>
<td>Electoral fraud, diffusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>Green Revolution</td>
<td>“accumulated grievances”24</td>
<td>Electoral fraud, economic dissatisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Syria, Yemen</td>
<td>The Arab Spring</td>
<td>“cocktail of grievances”25</td>
<td>Economic stagnation, diffusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

17 Hinnebusch 2015, 209.
19 Noueihe and Warren 2012.
20 Schock 1999, 358
21 Kuran 1991, 22
22 Zuo and Benford 1995
23 Tucker 2007, 536
24 Harris 2012, 442
25 Hinnebusch 2015, 209
Prior to April 2018, however, Nicaragua offered a stark contrast to this general picture of broadly-hated authoritarian governments. In an era of unpopular presidents in Latin America, Daniel Ortega stood out for his strongly positive polling across a number of issue spaces. Figure 1 shows that in 2017, Nicaraguans viewed their government not only as more competent, egalitarian, and honest than the Latin American average, but also as more democratic. At a glance, these numbers would not incline us to expect a mass pro-democracy civil resistance campaign absent a major shock. Moreover, as we will demonstrate, Ortega’s regime did not suffer from the same structural vulnerabilities common among the (largely) exclusionary, low-performing regimes in Table 1. Ortega had engineered a high-performing personalistic regime whose popular base incorporated most political, religious, and economic elites and a substantial majority of the population.

![Figure 1: Assessing political grievances in Nicaragua](image)

How had Ortega managed to achieve such high approval ratings while consolidating an increasingly authoritarian regime with few clear challengers? To understand this, we must look

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26 Rivas 2015, 1  
27 Ishkanian 2018  
28 Elamin and Mampilly 2018.  
29 Cherkaoui, Arnold, and Allouche 2019, 3
to the circumstances of Ortega’s return to power in 2007 and his subsequent strategies of regime consolidation. Ortega’s broad popularity domestically rested on several pillars: a) cooptation of right-wing and center-right former political and religious enemies; b) skillful stewardship of a growing market-based economy, with crony capitalism for allies and targeted social programs and public goods provision for the urban and small-town poor; and c) the undermining and suppression of potential resistance from civil society.

One of the most prominent theories on the timing and strength of civil resistance campaigns points to political opportunities opened up by divisions among elite actors. Yet Ortega’s coalition showed few signs of fracture prior to April 2018. Ortega began his return to the presidency by centralizing power within the FSLN itself. Once in control of the party apparatus, Ortega abandoned street confrontations for backroom dealmaking, culminating in an infamous 2000 Pacto (or pact) with conservative President Arnoldo Alemán. The Pacto created a party duopoly between the FSLN and Alemán’s Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC), and promised both men protection from potential legal charges around corruption allegations against Alemán and for Ortega most prominently sexual abuse allegations by his stepdaughter, Zoilamérica Narváez.

The duopoly lasted until 2007, when Ortega returned to the presidency on the back of a mere 38% of the electorate. But once in office Ortega was able to build new bases of support that persisted until 2018. He could still count on the support of Alemán and remaining PLC members, with Alemán in debt to Ortega for springing him from prison. Ortega had also begun outreach to Church and business elite who had been his enemies during the revolutionary period, consolidating a new elite alliance.

FSLN relations with Church leadership were poor during the 1980s, despite strong support among the Liberation Theology-inspired “base communities.” Archbishop Miguel Obando y Bravo, a key actor in this relationship, had initially supported the end of the Somoza regime, but quickly soured on the FSLN as they consolidated power. These strained relations continued through the 1990s, after the FSLN had left power. In the early 2000s, however, Ortega repaired ties with Obando y Bravo, with the archbishop giving a church marriage to Ortega and Murillo, who had lived together for decades. Ortega began rebranding the FSLN as a Christian party, giving religion top billing in the new slogan “Cristiana, socialista, solidaria” (Christian, socialist, in solidarity) and reversing FSLN commitments to women’s rights by banning abortion once he came into office in 2007. This social conservatism, including increased anti-gay policies and rhetoric, also appealed to Nicaragua’s growing evangelical Christian community. Obando y Bravo stepped down in 2005, but he remained close to Ortega as he eroded democratic institutions, and Ortega’s newfound affinity with evangelicals offered a more solid power base as Obando’s influence waned.

Even though Nicaraguan Church leaders had expressed concerns about Ortega’s democratic erosion in the past and distanced themselves from Obando y Bravo after 2005, there was little

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30 McAdam 2010.
31 Martí i Puig 2010. See also Santiuste Cué 2001; Close 2016.
32 Gooren 2010; Jarquín Calderón 2016, 43-44; Thaler, 2017b; Steigenga, Coleman, and Marenco 2017.
33 Kinzer 2018.
prior to April 2018 to suggest they would directly confront the regime. Evangelical leaders also had little to complain about as their increasing proximity to power and Ortega’s adoption of more conservative social policies boded well for them and their continued ascent.34

A third key alliance was with Nicaragua’s capitalist business elites. While also building up the commercial holdings of his family and the FSLN as an organization, Ortega forged a new relationship with major commercial actors, most prominently the members of the Consejo Superior de la Empresa Privada (COSEP) business association. While adopting neoliberal macroeconomic policies, Ortega worked cooperatively with business leaders to set domestic economic policies and developed a tripartite bargaining system on wages and labor issues between the government, business, and increasingly corporatist and FSLN-dominated labor unions. A growing economy kept the business elites and an increasing number of crony capitalists happy, while Ortega used targeted social programs and patronage to FSLN supporters to help reduce poverty and assuage the rising inequality his policies were generating. There was little indication of divisions between Ortega and any of these three elite allies prior to April 2018.

Joshua Tucker argues that electoral fraud offers an important political opportunity for launching mass civil resistance campaigns, because scheduled elections help protesters overcome collective action problems.35 This explanation also fails in Nicaragua’s case. Ortega commissioned blatant fraud in the 2016 elections that returned him to office for a third term, yet “election day was eerily calm.”36 In part this may have been due to an opposition boycott, but many FSLN supporters likely also stayed home with Ortega’s reelection a fait accompli. Most significantly, there were few signs of street protest, and as shown in Figure 1, a majority of Nicaraguans expressed satisfaction with their democracy a year after the fraudulent elections.

34 Gill 1998 argues that in the 1960s and 1970s, Catholic Church leaders became more responsive to the poor and turned away from right-wing dictatorships when they faced competition for members from Protestant sects. This is a potential alternative explanation for the Nicaraguan Church’s gradually increasing distance from Ortega post-Obando y Bravo, but it does not explain the sudden, radical shift of the Church from pro-democracy rhetoric to active anti-government opposition from April 2018.
36 Thaler 2017b, 162.
Figure 2: Assessing economic grievances in Nicaragua

Though scholars often point to economic dissatisfaction as a key determinant of civil resistance, polling data does not support this explanation either in Nicaragua’s case. As Figure 2 demonstrates, Ortega’s policies generated substantial optimism about Nicaragua’s economic future. This is unsurprising, given that Ortega had delivered four to five percent annual growth rates since the mid-2000s. An important subset of this literature theorizes that neoliberal policies in particular can fuel dissent by expanding precarious and informal employment while cutting the social safety net—hence calls for “dignity” during the Arab Spring. Yet as mentioned above, neoliberal economic policies in Nicaragua came packaged with significant public goods provisions, with many services aimed at the poor—Ortega’s most important and loyal political base. Low-income families benefited from free, universal healthcare and zinc roofs delivered through programs like Plan Techo. Other public goods included renovated town squares and public spaces, and frequent, well-attended government-sponsored festivals and holidays—factors whose role in buoying Ortega’s popularity should not be underestimated. In the Latin American context, public security was perhaps the most important public good of all, with Nicaragua boasting a homicide rate comparable to Costa Rica and the United States rather than the violent Northern Triangle. While many of these services were underwritten by diminishing Venezuelan subsidies, the effects of that country’s economic crisis were only beginning to be felt by April 2018. As historian Mateo Jarquín points out, in sharp contrast to other mass civil resistance campaigns and “although Nicaragua is one of the poorest and most unequal countries

37 Chenoweth and Ulfelder 2017, 303-304.
38 Critics note that both macroeconomic policies and high growth rates predate Ortega’s return to power by several years: Thaler 2017b.
39 See, among others, Gause 2011, 85-87 on the Arab Spring.
40 Martí i Puig 2016; Sáenz 2016; Spalding 2017; Thaler 2017b.
in the hemisphere, the debate over economic models and development has stood out for its absence in the crisis of Orteguismo in 2018’s popular revolts.”

Scholars of social revolutions also point to foreign shocks, whether through international pressures or the diffusion of protest. Yet Ortega was also able to thread the needle in terms of foreign policy. Diverging from the pattern of the revolutionary period, he had tolerant, if not exactly warm, relations with the United States. The Nicaraguan military cooperated with US security forces on anti-drug trafficking efforts, and Ortega earned ire in the region, but appreciation from the United States, for blocking northbound migrants at the southern border with Costa Rica. Economically, Nicaragua remained a member of the Central American Free Trade Agreement, attracting increasing investment from the US, along with a growing tourism industry. Though the US reacted negatively to the election fraud Ortega oversaw, there was little costly follow-through: the long-gestating Nicaragua Investment Conditionality (NICA) Act was only finally passed by the US Congress after April 2018.

At the same time as maintaining these relatively calm relations with the US, Ortega forged a strong alliance with Venezuela under Hugo Chávez and then Nicolás Maduro, gaining cheap oil, massive economic assistance that enabled the new social programs and business investments described above, and also vast opportunities for graft. Finally, resource mobilization theories argue that strong, autonomous civil societies can push forward civil resistance campaigns. Yet a lack of anti-regime protests was in fact a constant following Ortega’s return to the presidency in 2007. Ortega and the FSLN had engaged in street protests against privatization and economic liberalization in the 1990s and early 2000s, but with Ortega himself coming to power and embracing the Washington Consensus, this mobilization route closed. Political opponents saw their demonstrations suppressed by pro-FSLN youth groups and turbas divinas, party-linked mobs, getting a first taste of Ortega’s disdain for political protest following the disputed 2008 municipal elections. Over time, these anti-opposition shock forces began receiving acquiescence or active support from riot police, the antimotines.

The most sustained anti-regime protests were weekly protests by a dissident Sandinista faction, the Movimiento Renovador Sandinista (Sandinista Renewal Movement, or MRS), in central Managua. These demonstrations were always small, and quickly and easily suppressed by the regime when desired. The MRS, thanks to its core leadership of prominent, educated ex-FSLN militants and officials from the revolutionary era, has had an outsized influence on social scientific discourse in Nicaragua and abroad, but a negligible base in Nicaraguan electoral politics after 2006.

A resurgence of political protest occurred in 2014 and 2015 around the Ortega government’s pushing through of a shadowy deal with a Chinese company to construct an interoceanic canal across Nicaragua, an economically destructive project that would entail large-

41 Jarquín. 2019. The important exception to this, of course, is that the uprising began with small protests against pension austerity measures. We contend that state violence, not austerity, motivated the civic uprising, based on our experiences in Nicaragua shortly before and during April-May 2018.


43 Martí i Puig 2016; Sáenz 2016; Thaler 2017b; Waddell 2018.

44 McCarthy and Zald 1977.

45 Pineda 2016.
scale land seizures, including the appropriation of indigenous lands. Peasants and environmentalists organized against the canal plans and staged major marches, but these protests were met with violence by the regime, and they never transitioned from a narrow anti-canal focus and coalition to a broader anti-government movement, in part due to the anti-canal organizers’ own distrust of and distaste for electoral politics and the state.46

As civil society organizations and independent media were gradually squeezed tighter and tighter by Ortega,47 concern grew among opposition elites that Nicaragua’s youth and the public more generally were becoming politically apathetic, tacitly accepting the Ortega regime as avenues for dissent were closed off. Protests by environmentalists and students against the government response to fires in the Indio Maíz in early and mid-April attracted a few hundred demonstrators in Managua--and government repression.48 Not even these first-moving student activists could rely on established civil society infrastructure; after April 18, 2018, students “had to create new organizations ad hoc because the Unión Nacional de Estudiantes de Nicaragua (UNEN), which might have been a good platform for struggle, has functioned for many years as an extension of the FSLN.”49

In short, nearly all existing structural explanations for mass civil resistance campaigns fail to gain purchase in explaining Nicaragua’s civic rebellion. We thus turn towards cognitive structures, history-based frames and their role in shaping reactions to unexpected events, in order to understand the rapid mobilization and spread of Nicaragua’s anti-regime protests.

Frames and Master Templates

This paper takes its cues from arguments in the literature on nonviolent civil resistance to privilege “agency-based” and “processual” approaches to explaining sudden mass contentious action.50 We emphasize how frames shape individual pathways to mobilization and help groups to initiate and maintain spontaneous collective action.51 As Benford and Snow write, “[f]rames help to render events or occurrences meaningful and thereby function to organize experience and guide action.”52 Frames thus serve interpretive and signaling roles, identifying what a movement stands for, who it stands against, expectations of success, and how to carry out the struggle. In the sociological and international relations literatures alike, movement leaders are held to promote frames they believe will resonate with local belief systems in order to effectively mobilize individuals.53 Frames rooted in a society’s “‘myths,’ […] its ‘domain assumptions,’ or […] ‘inherent ideology’” resonate due to their “narrative fidelity.”54 Narrative fidelity may be particularly valuable in explaining sudden mass mobilization where central leadership emerges

46 Pineda 2016; Amnesty International 2017a, 2017b; Goett 2018.
47 Pineda 2016; Rothschuh Villanueva 2016.
48 Salazar 2018.
49 Luis Rocha 2019, 13.
50 Chenoweth and Ulfelder 2017, 318; Lawson 2016.
51 Snow and Benford 1992; McAdam et al. 2001.
52 Benford and Snow 2000, 614.
53 See also a parallel literature in constructivist international relations: Keck and Sikkink 1998; Legro 1997; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Checkel 1999.
54 Benford and Snow 2000, 622, citing Campbell and Moyers 1989; Gouldner 1977; Rudé 1980.
slowly if at all\textsuperscript{55} and actors have little opportunity to promote novel framings of surprising events.

Shared history can be an important source of “myths” that lend frames narrative fidelity. As McAdam and Sewell note, revolutions often begin with the collective interpretation of a transformative event.\textsuperscript{56} Collective interpretations, in turn, depend on shared frames. When unexpected events occur, historical events—or at least, popularly-held narratives about them—may be particularly “available” for comparison.\textsuperscript{57} Thus, first-moving protesters are especially likely to draw on and appeal to “shared understandings of history and identity” to mobilize others.\textsuperscript{58}

In Nicaragua’s case, we argue that Movimiento Autoconvocado protesters framed their movement using historical memories of the 1979 Sandinista Revolution. These memories comprised a bundled set of frames, a “master template” which offered Nicaraguans “a cultural recipe for the making of contentious claims.”\textsuperscript{59} Perhaps ironically, the FSLN state itself was responsible for transmitting historical memories of the Revolution by giving them pride of place in the national educational curriculum and through constant invocations in public ritual.\textsuperscript{60} The FSLN, once in power, may have taught the youngest generation of Nicaraguans how to overthrow it.

Individual Nicaraguans drew heavily on the constituent frames of the Sandinista Revolution template in the early weeks of protests. Observing paramilitary attacks on elderly pensioners on April 18\textsuperscript{th}, 2018, many Nicaraguans—particularly students—interpreted this event through a Dictatorship frame, identifying President Daniel Ortega as the target of collective action and proffering new attributes (dictator) that fit with historical narratives. The Dictatorship frame invoked a paired frame, Revolution, providing Nicaraguans with guidelines for collective action. As in 1978-9, this meant mass street uprisings and a symbolic and tactical repertoire inherited directly from the Revolution. The resulting mobilization initiated an escalatory process, in which state repression further activated and spread the adoption of the Dictatorship and Revolution frames. Widespread adoption of these frames led to mass participation in protests across the country.

Critically, this participation cascade did not occur because of “preference falsification,” as per Kuran’s influential theory of sudden revolutionary mobilization.\textsuperscript{61} Nicaraguans did not falsify their true preferences prior to the uprising, nor did they reveal their true preferences afterwards. Rather, the adoption of highly resonant frames in the face of unexpected events caused preference transformation.\textsuperscript{62} Strikingly, preference transformation occurred even among

\textsuperscript{55} Leadership becomes more important over time in sustaining a movement and formulating strategies that consolidate initial, less organized tactical development and successes. See DeNardo 1985.
\textsuperscript{56} McAdam and Sewell Jr 2001, 119.
\textsuperscript{57} Kahneman 2011, 129–45.
\textsuperscript{58} Shesterinina 2016, 413, see also Wood 2003 and Viterna 2013.
\textsuperscript{59} McAdam and Sewell Jr 2001, 113.
\textsuperscript{60} Aguilera Espinoza 2017.
\textsuperscript{61} Kuran 1991.
\textsuperscript{62} As discussed further on, Latinobarómetro data suggests that nearly half (44%) of all Nicaraguan s turned against the regime from summer 2017 to summer 2018, as government approval ratings dropped from 67% to 23%.
long-time regime allies (business leadership) and staunch supporters (the pro-government newspaper El Nuevo Diario).

Drawing on sociological and political science theories of mobilization, we identify five components of the Sandinista Revolution master template. These include “analogic thinking,” the assumption of “paradigmatic roles” from the Revolution, the use of historical “symbolic” and “tactical repertoires,” and the concentration of protest events in Nicaragua’s geographic “symbolic space.” In the next section, we discuss each of these components and develop measures of their adoption by Nicaraguans in April and May of 2018.

**Analogic Thinking**

According to Beissinger, Color Revolutions diffused across Eastern European in the early 2000s because a “sense of interconnectedness across cases produced by common institutional characteristics, histories, cultural affinities, or modes of domination, [allowed] agents to make analogies across cases” and “see themselves in analogous structural positions.” Protesters then emulated the prior successes of neighboring people power movements, borrowing “frames, strategies, repertoires, and even logos from previously successful efforts.” As Selbin points out, analogic thinking helps explain the 1979 Nicaraguan Revolution itself: “A Nicaraguan revolutionary from the earliest years told me how he and others were inspired by ‘the triumph’ in Cuba. Their reasoning, he told me, was simple: ‘If they can do it there, we can do it here.’”

Nicaragua’s Movimiento Autoconvocado differed from the “Color Revolution” and Arab Spring cases in that, rather than follow a regional example of prior success, activists were inspired by an example of prior success taken from Nicaragua’s own history. As one observer told us, “Nicaraguans have beaten dictators before. There was a confidence that history gave [the protesters]. There was sense of destiny or fate. We’re not like those other countries. Nicaragua wins its revolutions.” In this sense, revolution diffused not across space but over time.

Nicaraguans’ analogic thinking particularly influenced the outbreak of mass mobilization in mid-April by helping to establish a “diagnostic framing” (or “problem identification and attribution”). The pertinent analogy was summed up in the widely-chanted slogan, “¡Ortega y Somoza, son la misma cosa!”---Ortega and Somoza are the same thing.

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63 Beissinger 2007; Bellin 2012.
64 Petersen 2001.
65 Tilly 2003; Selbin 2009; Tarrow 1993.
67 Beissinger 2007; see also Bellin 2012 who applies the term “analogic thinking” to Beissinger’s insights.
68 Beissinger 2007, 263.
69 Selbin 2009, 69.
70 Latin America’s last successful examples of mass popular protests toppling presidents were over a decade earlier in Bolivia and Ecuador.
71 Interview with foreign journalist living in Nicaragua, July 17, 2019.
72 For comparison, consider the (roughly) half-dozen Parisian uprisings between 1789 French Revolution and the 1871 Paris Commune. Across nearly a century of collective action, would-be revolutionaries drew analogies and drew on symbolic and tactical repertoires (i.e. barricades) established in previous revolutions: Tarrow 1993.
73 Benford and Snow 2000, 615.
In our view, two specific events in mid-April 2018 offered Nicaraguan observers strong parallels with powerfully-mobilizing past events. First, state violence against elderly\textsuperscript{74} and, in particular, student protesters on April 18-19 recalled a famous massacre of student protesters on July 23, 1959 (see Figure 3). The 1959 student massacre, five months before Fidel Castro’s shocking victory over Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista, is often held to mark the beginning of popular struggle against the Somoza dictatorship. The second event, the murder of journalist Ángel Gahona by unknown assailants on April 21st, 2018, echoed the murder of journalist Pedro Joaquín Chamorro by unknown assailants on January 10th, 1978.\textsuperscript{75} The latter event is universally held to have sparked the mass popular uprising that culminated with the defeat of the Somoza dictatorship. Aside from provoking moral shock and widespread revulsion, state violence in April 2018 compelled Nicaraguans to compare Ortega with Somoza, jolting many into adopting the Dictatorship frame.

\textbf{Figure 3: Parallels between 1959 and 2018.} On left, a mural depicting the 1959 student massacre in León. On right, a photo of the April 19, 2018 student protest in León, less than three blocks from the famous mural.

We test two types of evidence for analogic thinking. First, we perform content analysis on centrally-situated Twitter accounts in Nicaraguan civil society to quantitatively measure the salience of analogic slogans like the above. Figure 4, which measures the appearance on Twitter of “Ortega y Somoza, son la misma cosa” since 2014, provides our initial efforts. The phrase existed prior to the uprising, but with very little traction among the broader public. It was deployed almost exclusively in protests associated with the MRS, the small breakaway faction of the FSLN that has sought to portray itself as the true carriers of Nicaragua’s revolutionary heritage.\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{74} Jarquín 2019 discusses the importance of respect for the elderly in catalyzing the protests’ spread.

\textsuperscript{75} In both cases, the unknown assailants were popularly assumed to be linked to the state.

\textsuperscript{76} While small in popularity and electoral impact (gaining 8% in the 2006 elections, and declining since), the MRS boasts the lion’s share of high-ranking revolutionary-era FSLN commanders as members, legitimizing its claim to represent true Sandinismo.
Had political or economic grievances been slowly building against Ortega’s regime, we might expect to see a gradual increase in the use of analogic slogans like “Ortega y Somoza son la misma cosa.” Yet the slogan had little traction even during the fraudulent 2016 presidential election which returned Ortega to power for an unconstitutional third term. April 2018 represents a clear disjuncture, with suddenly broad uptake of this formerly factional slogan. This sequencing supports our argument that the adoption of a Dictatorship frame in response to unexpected events, rather than structural factors, explains April’s mass anti-regime protest. On April 17, most Nicaraguans appear to have believed that they lived in a flawed democracy; by April 22, many if not most had come to believe they lived under a dictatorship comparable to Anastasio Somoza’s.

Yet the Dictatorship frame did not simply spring out of nowhere. It likely resulted at least in part from “priming;” that is, “a pre-sensitizing process that increases the probability of activating a concept, frame, emotion, or line of action based on exposure to an earlier, similar stimulus or experience.” In this light, extensive fraud during the 2016 election, along with January 2018 charges of corruption against Supreme Electoral Council head Roberto Rivas and Vice President Murillo’s proposal to censor Nicaraguan social media in March 2018 may have rendered Nicaraguans more sensitive to a Dictatorship frame prior to April 18’s transformative event.

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77 Thaler 2017b. In this scenario we would still expect to see a disjuncture in April following a rapid increase in expressions of anti-regime sentiment.
79 Snow and Moss 2014, 1134.
Our fieldwork and interviews suggest that analogic thinking operated through slightly different mechanisms on three different types of opposition actors: first-movers, second-movers, and third-movers. As sociologist José Luis Rocha concludes in his study of fourteen first-moving student activists, “the first trait that stands out in the profiles of the majority of the most visible youth in the revolt is their Sandinista roots or even militancy… [a] Sandinismo of a diverse nature rose up against its own party.”⁸⁰ First-moving students grew up steeped in stories of the Revolution recounted by parents and other family members who fought against Somoza.

However, most had grown disillusioned with the FSLN’s failures to live up to its revolutionary ideology prior to 2018. Madelaine Caracas, a student activist who became famous for her heartrending listing of the names of those killed by government forces at the first National Dialogue, offers a typical background: “My father was in the revolution. He was a guerrillero. I grew up with those stories, but I also grew up having political debates with my parents.”⁸¹ Many young dissident Sandinista first-movers had already been active in the feminist, LGBT, and environmental social movements that immediately preceded the uprising, or with the anti-Orteguista MRS party. In the first days of the April 2018 protests, dissident Sandinista first-movers became conscious and active promoters of historical analogy.

Yet first-moving activists were few in number. Far more important for launching a major civil resistance campaign was the presence of a vast catchment population who would respond to first-movers’ historical framing. The killings of first-moving students on April 19 served as a moral shock that transformed preferences and spurred risky action. For most second-movers, “Sandinismo decided to write its own end the moment when it repressed, or rather, killed the first Nicaraguan.”⁸² One such second-mover, an older businessman who attended marches following the beatings and killings of students, outlined how analogic thinking provoked massive civil resistance on April 20:

This is worse than the times of Somoza. You can compare it. Nicaragua's got a unique history that we can compare to another dictator. The comments are that Somoza was a child compared to what is going on with this guy [Ortega]. And remember, during Somoza's time you had a war. Both sides were armed. In this case, you have only one side that is armed; the other ones, they have freaking flags. They are unarmed.. You're seeing how you have snipers killing young people. Maybe I'm wrong, but I don't remember Somoza killing young people. Children.⁸³

Nicaraguans in general and even many rank-and-file members of the FSLN turned against Ortega once first-moving student activists were attacked by Orteguista paramilitaries. As an ex-Sandinista journalist and activist told us, the uprising would not have occurred without “the thousands and thousands of Sandinistas who flipped [into opposition]. And they turned because they were being loyal to their convictions, to their way of thinking, of seeing life, to their

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⁸⁰ Luis Rocha 2019, 66.
⁸¹ Luis Rocha 2019, 68.
⁸² Interview via Skype with ex-Sandinista activist, August 15, 2019.
⁸³ Interview via Skype with businessman, November 11, 2019.
Another student activist told us how at a protest shortly after the first deaths, that

I see my cousin. A cousin that is Sandinista…And I'm like, “What the fuck are you doing here?” And I get close to him and I'm like, “Are you here to fucking hurt us?” He said, “No! I'm here helping you guys, fighting!” And I'm like, “What the fuck, you voted for Daniel Ortega! I don't get it. What the hell are you doing?” And he's like, “No man, we cannot accept this. They killed students.”

Third-movers like the business community represented by COSEP, then, aligned with the opposition only after hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguans took to the street. In large part, business leaders were forced to bend to the tide of anti-regime sentiment that swept through their employees’ ranks. Yet even rent-seeking actors who might have preferred business as usual under Ortega deployed analogic thinking as a heuristic to make boundedly rational decisions: “COSEP turned because they examined the historical context of Somoza, when COSEP placed itself very quickly in opposition to Somoza, and here [in 2018] COSEP went over to the students’ side at the beginning because they’re not fools--they knew that the great majority of the people [was against Ortega].”

Paradigmatic Roles

Once individuals have begun drawing analogies between historical memory and ongoing events, when and why do they decide to engage in risky collective action? According to Petersen’s observations in 1991 Lithuania, they may do so by referencing “paradigmatic roles” drawn from their society’s cultural and historic inventory. By offering a salient model, paradigmatic roles allow actors to cast themselves as protagonists in previous historic struggles and experience what Wood calls the “pleasure of agency;” that is, protesters may be “motivated in part by the value they put on being part of [making] history.” Upon assuming paradigmatic roles, actors’ preferences may be transformed even to the extent that ordinary people seek martyrdom: “the paradigmatic role may redefine the meaning of risk and in certain cases turn risk from a cost into a benefit.”

Though the Movimiento Autoconvocado protests targeted FSLN leader Daniel Ortega as a new Somoza, the Sandinista Revolution also offered Nicaraguan protesters no shortage of FSLN “héroes y mártires” to emulate. For example, Lesther Alemán, a key student leader who

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84 Interview via Skype with ex-Sandinista journalist and activist, July 16, 2019.
85 Interview via WhatsApp with exiled student activist, June 9, 2019.
86 Interview via Skype with LAFISE manager, July 11, 2019
87 Interview via Skype with exiled activist, August 15, 2019.
88 Much like McAdam’s and Sewell’s argument that revolutions begin with the collective interpretation of transformative events, Petersen argues that “it is the specific match-up of events and paradigmatic roles that produces first action and other risk-insensitive actions:” Petersen 2001, 285. Petersen draws heavily on Benn 1979 for his discussion.
89 Wood 2003, 18–19. It may be more accurate to say that Nicaraguans placed value on re-making history.
91 Heroes and martyrs, a frequently-invoked FSLN phrase.
famously denounced Ortega during the National Dialogue, declared that “the founder and paragon of the Frente [Sandinista], Carlos Fonseca, dead before the triumph of the revolution, is his hero.” Most important of these paradigmatic figures was Leonel Rugama, a student and poet who joined the FSLN’s urban underground movement in 1967. Rugama became an FSLN martyr when he was cornered by a battalion of Somoza’s National Guard in 1970. Ordered to surrender, he famously shouted “¡Que se rinda tu madre! (Let your mother surrender!)” prior to being shot to death.

In an insightful 2012 article, historian Hilary Francis traces the politics of memory surrounding Leonel Rugama. Noting that the poet’s legendary final words are absent from the Rugama memorial built by the Orteguista government in 2010, Francis writes that this omission “reflects the present Sandinista regime’s discomfort with the revolution’s original radical intent.” The inherently radical slogan had instead been increasingly taken up by opposition youth groups who, “by paraphrasing Leonel Rugama, […] positioned themselves as the rightful heirs to the legacy of Sandinismo.” Francis concludes that for many Nicaraguans, [Sandinista memory’s] revolutionary possibilities have not been diminished. Sandinista heroic memory is not a throwback, or a peripheral case of arrested development: it continues to engage and inspire a significant section of the Nicaraguan population. It would be naive to overstate the radical potential of this legacy, given the current government’s extensive efforts to assimilate it, and the wider difficulties that Nicaragua faces.

Francis’ assessment has proven remarkably prescient. Rugama’s status as a student, his young age at death---he was twenty years old---and his legendary last words made him an ideal paradigmatic role for the (predominantly) students who made up the early Movimiento Autoconvocado. In April 2018 “¡Que se rinda tu madre!” became the principal battle cry of Nicaraguan students facing often-lethal violence from riot police and paramilitaries armed with military-grade weapons.

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92 Capárros 2018.
93 Francis 2012.
94 Francis 2012, 235.
95 Francis 2012, 248.
96 The riot police were naturally seen as the Orteguista version of Somoza’s National Guard.
As Figure 5 shows, the sudden widespread adoption of “Que se rinda tu madre” closely resembles that for “Somoza y Ortega son la misma cosa.” But there is a key difference: prior to April 2018, tweets of “Que se rinda…” come predominantly from pro-FSLN Twitter accounts. Afterwards, they come almost exclusively from anti-FSLN Twitter accounts. In the face of the protesters’ appropriation of a core hero from the Sandinista Revolution, government counterdemonstrators could only respond, “Aquí no se rinde nadie,” or “Nobody surrenders here,” a slogan not from Nicaragua but from the Cuban Revolution.

This highlights how the opposition’s adoption of the Revolution frame placed the Ortega regime in a double bind. Political elites employ “national myths, memories and symbols” to legitimize their governance and to facilitate individual and collective mobilization on behalf of the nation.97 The Nicaraguan government’s claims to embody continuity with the Sandinista Revolution served this core legitimating role. By adopting the Revolution frame, first-moving protesters mobilized widespread participation while depriving the regime of its main symbolic source of legitimacy, thus complicating pro-government countermobilization.98

Symbolic and tactical repertoires

Protesters, like those engaged in any kind of collective action, draw on their culture’s symbolic repertoires to “provide templates for interaction, bases for collective memory, and switchpoints for collective struggle.”99 Symbols can guide onlookers to similar interpretations of ongoing events, encouraging and reinforcing the tendency towards analogic thinking described

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97 Githens-Mazer 2008, 43.
98 This complication can be seen in the apparent absurdity of a national government placing a de facto ban on its own national flag and blue and white balloons. See vandalica 2019.
above. They also serve as scripts allowing crowds to spontaneously coordinate, easing collective action when there are too few leaders, or too many.\textsuperscript{100}

The 1979 Sandinista Revolution left Nicaragua with a cultural repertoire of symbols for resisting dictatorship. Protesters drew on this repertoire, recreating widely known episodes in the FSLN’s earlier revolutionary struggle. For instance, protesters chanted “Patria libre o morir,” or “Free fatherland or death,” the FSLN’s most famous revolutionary slogan.\textsuperscript{101} Only after two weeks had passed did protesters move beyond mimesis to creatively adapt such slogans to new circumstances, now chanting “Patria libre para vivir,” or “Free fatherland in order to live.” Marchers also carried photo placards of killed protesters,\textsuperscript{102} recalling an iconic 1978 march for slain FSLN student activist Arlen Siu.\textsuperscript{103} In a ritual straight from the Sandinista revolution, protest leaders commemorated the names of those killed by police and government mobs with a resounding “¡Presente!”\textsuperscript{104}

The revolutionary-era slogan “Ni un paso atrás,” or “not a single step backwards,” was similarly appropriated by protesters. Labor rights demonstrators in Nicaragua had used the slogan in the 1990s and early 2000s,\textsuperscript{105} but in more recent years it was primarily chanted at revolutionary commemorations organized by the FSLN. In 2018, however, it became a rallying cry among protesters as the Ortega government turned toward repression, and Ortega could only weakly reply, “Ni un paso atrás en la defensa de la paz,” or “not a single step backward in defense of peace.”\textsuperscript{106}

Much as with symbolic repertoires, past events gift future generations with distinct tactical repertoires. As Sidney Tarrow points out, the barricades that first appeared in scattered neighborhoods of Paris during the 1830 July Revolution reappeared in 1848, subsequently spread across Europe.\textsuperscript{107} Barricades likewise appeared during Nicaragua’s revolutionary struggle in the late 1970s and reappeared in April 2018. The Cathedral in Managua sheltered student demonstrators in April,\textsuperscript{108} echoing student church occupations throughout the Sandinista Revolution.\textsuperscript{109} Homemade mortars similarly resurfaced, setting off clashes with riot police. These tactics, some not well-suited to the nonviolent civil resistance campaign to which most Nicaraguans were committed,\textsuperscript{110} had been consciously emulated from the Sandinista Revolution.

In many cases, combatants from the 1970s taught younger generations tactics from the revolution. In Monimbó, after Orteguista paramilitaries beat up “ancianitos” [old people] on April 19, the señores [older men] “talked with [the muchachos] about how to make the contact

\textsuperscript{100} Snow and Moss 2014, 1134.
\textsuperscript{101} Munguia 2018.
\textsuperscript{102} Romero 2018.
\textsuperscript{103} Le Lous 2016.
\textsuperscript{104} Tarzán 2018.
\textsuperscript{105} Armbruster-Sandoval 2005, 110.
\textsuperscript{106} Bello 2018; La Voz del Sandinismo 2018.
\textsuperscript{107} Tarrow 1993, 80–81.
\textsuperscript{108} Álvarez 2018.
\textsuperscript{109} Dodson and O’Shaughnessy 1990, 122
\textsuperscript{110} Though see Kadivar and Ketchley 2018 on how many ‘nonviolent’ resistance campaigns in fact involve significant “unarmed collective violence.”
bombs that they made during the war.”\textsuperscript{111} As one Nicaraguan told journalist Tim Rogers, “The difference is we’ve had a successful revolution before. Thirty percent of the country is old enough to remember that moment. We know how to do this.”\textsuperscript{112}

**Geography and symbolic space**

Several scholars emphasize how civil resistance campaigns make use of symbolic space.\textsuperscript{113} In Nicaragua, historical memories of the Sandinista Revolution defined symbolic space and provided opportunities for activists and observers alike to invoke historical frames. A preliminary analysis of Nicaragua’s 2018 civil resistance campaign suggests that protest events clustered in geographic centers that had seen Sandinista popular uprisings from 1977 to 1979. The largest and most combative of 2018’s protests occurred in traditional Sandinista strongholds like Monimbó, León, Estelí, and Matagalpa.

In Monimbó, for example, where the first mass uprising of the Sandinista Revolution occurred, protesters again donned the masks and threw up the barricades for which the barrio became famous in 1978.\textsuperscript{114} Monimbó had been a Sandinista stronghold for decades.\textsuperscript{115} One young resident who brought water to the muchachos [boys] manning the barricades in April 2018 told us how in Monimbó,

> the majority of the people were Sandinistas, everybody. They made contact bombs during the war [against Somoza] here. The brother of Daniel Ortega died here [in 1978]. We identified with that history.\textsuperscript{116}

But Monimbó was among the first neighborhoods to rise up against Ortega precisely because “in the 1970s, it was always Monimbó that rose up against Somoza. Our ancestors taught us how to defend ourselves. It's always been Monimbó that stands out in the protests.”\textsuperscript{117}

Similarly, one ex-Sandinista activist described the atmosphere in León in the first few days of the April 2018 insurrection,

> León was burned [in 1979] -- well, a lot of cities were burned -- but the collective memory of the Leoneses on seeing the city center burning [in 2018], I feel that it revived all the collective memory of the war with Somoza, because Somoza ordered León bombed. Still for many years after there were ruins of that war. Burned houses in the center of León. Many people seeing the center relicved their experiences of that war. The

\textsuperscript{111} Interview via Whatsapp with Monimbó resident, November 24, 2019.

\textsuperscript{112} Rogers 2018.

\textsuperscript{113} Butcher 2017; Sewell Jr 2001; Endres and Send-a-Cook 2011

\textsuperscript{114} Martínez 2018.

\textsuperscript{115} According to Monimbó residents we spoke with, prior to the protests, sixty percent of Monimbó’s residents had supported Ortega, and 40% didn’t care about politics. After the protests and their repression, 90% of Monimbó opposed Ortega; only the municipal employees continued to support the government.

\textsuperscript{116} Interview via WhatsApp with Monimbó resident, November 20, 2019.

\textsuperscript{117} Interview via Whatsapp with Monimbó resident, November 24, 2019.
lights [going out], young people running, the patrols. It was very strong. Very, very strong.118

Here we conduct a statistical analysis of our hand-coded NAVCO 3.0 events dataset to test to what extent historical framing played a role in determining the geographic diffusion of protest within Nicaragua. If many Nicaraguans drew on historical framing to inform their decision of whether or not to protest, we expect protest events to cluster in two types of locations. First, we expect to see more protests in municipalities with a higher proportion of dissident Sandinistas (the first-movers discussed above), as Sandinistas who oppose Ortega are most likely to be sensitive to framing that invokes the Sandinista Revolution. Second, we expect to see more protests in locations with symbolic links to events during the Sandinista Revolution itself.

Our dataset covers events from March 19 to August 11, 2018, which includes a month prior to and after the most intense period of the civil resistance campaign. We used La Prensa, Nicaragua’s preeminent newspaper, and a crowdsourced fact-checking Twitter account, Nicaragua Verificado (@NicaraguaVe) as sources in building the dataset. For analysis, we created a dichotomous municipality-day variable capturing the presence of demonstrations, marches, or tranques (roadblocks). Our dataset contains 922 protest events over nearly five months, with protests reported in 90 out of Nicaragua’s 153 municipalities. On any given day in this span, 5.1% of Nicaraguan municipalities on average reported a protest event.

We sought to determine whether protest events were associated with two municipal-level proxies of opportunities for historical framing. The first proxy, locations of anti-Somoza protests and battles from 1977-1979, indicates the availability of local historical memories of the revolution, along with local symbolic repertoires, paradigmatic roles, and intergenerational networks that can transmit knowledge and behaviors.119 We relied on Esteban Duque Estrada’s authoritative chronology to measure this variable, coding it as 0 for municipalities where no events occurred, 1 for municipalities where only FSLN-initiated battles occurred, 2 for municipalities with contentious events during the final insurrection of May-July 1979, 3 for municipalities with contentious events during the 1978 September insurrection, and 4 for municipalities with contentious events during the 1978 February insurrection.120 The second proxy, the MRS’s vote share in the 2006 elections (the last free and fair elections prior to Ortega’s monopolization of power), indicates municipalities harboring a significant population that identifies with the Sandinista revolution but rejects Ortega’s leadership. Thus, our first variable captures local historical memory (the raw material for historical framing), while the second captures the presence of political entrepreneurs likely to adopt and promote the Revolution frame.

We also draw on survey and census data to test alternative explanations. Specifically, we pooled municipal-level responses to questions from four Latinobarómetro surveys conducted 2013-2017, a period characterized by macroeconomic stability and in which Ortega’s approval rating varied only from 60% to 69%. These data were available for 126 of Nicaragua’s 153 municipalities.

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118 Interview via Skype with ex-Sandinista activist, August 15, 2019.
119 Zukerman Daly 2012.
120 Duque Estrada 2014. Among other sources, Duque Estrada relied on contemporaneous radio reports to compile his chronology.
municipalities. Table 2 summarizes the Latinobarómetro questions we tested. We took data on municipal population, ratio of 14 to 27 year-olds to total population, and poverty rates from the most recent national census, conducted in 2005.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable name</th>
<th>Survey question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ortega approval rating</td>
<td>Do you approve or disapprove of the way Ortega is leading the country?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economy approval rating</td>
<td>How would you describe the country’s present economic situation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would vote for FSLN</td>
<td>Which party would you vote for if elections were next Sunday?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left-leaning</td>
<td>In politics, people normally speak of “right” and “left”. On a scale where 0 is right and 10 is left, where would you place yourself?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wealth unfairly distributed</td>
<td>How fair do you think is the distribution of income in Nicaragua?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corruption (available only for 2016 and 2017)</td>
<td>How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the fight against corruption?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal economic optimism</td>
<td>In the next 12 months, do you think your economic situation and that of your family will be much better, a little better, about the same, a little worse or much worse than now?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic satisfaction</td>
<td>In general, would you say you are very satisfied, quite satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the working of the democracy in Nicaragua?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook use</td>
<td>Do you use any of these social networking services?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal trust</td>
<td>Generally speaking, would you say that you can trust most people, or that you can never be too careful in dealing with others?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results

Tables 3 and 4 report the results of mixed effects logit regressions with standard errors clustered on date. The results supports the hypothesis that historical framing helps explain mass participation in protests, and are largely inconsistent with alternative explanations that focus on
pre-existing political and economic grievances. Beyond this, the clearest pattern we identified is that protest events were more likely to occur in more urban, wealthier, and more geographically central municipalities.

Table 3: Municipal-level determinants of protests and tranques (March--August 2018)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
<th>(3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Revolutionary events (1977–1979)</td>
<td>1.278***</td>
<td>0.819***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.089)</td>
<td>(0.103)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MRS vote share (2006)</td>
<td>0.933***</td>
<td>0.516***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.075)</td>
<td>(0.092)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FSLN vote share (2006)</td>
<td></td>
<td>−1.092***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.100)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ortega approval rating (2013–2017)</td>
<td>0.486***</td>
<td>0.566***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.104)</td>
<td>(0.114)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economy approval rating (2013–2017)</td>
<td>−0.030</td>
<td>−0.079</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.101)</td>
<td>(0.105)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>log Population (2018)</td>
<td>2.855***</td>
<td>2.147***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.100)</td>
<td>(0.118)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>−5.641***</td>
<td>−6.211***</td>
<td>−6.583***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.297)</td>
<td>(0.333)</td>
<td>(0.369)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>22,338</td>
<td>18,104</td>
<td>18,104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log Likelihood</td>
<td>−2,642.783</td>
<td>−2,241.713</td>
<td>−2,110.639</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akaike Inf. Crit.</td>
<td>5,293.565</td>
<td>4,493.426</td>
<td>4,237.279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bayesian Inf. Crit.</td>
<td>5,325.622</td>
<td>4,532.446</td>
<td>4,299.710</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 3 reports the relationship between the 2006 election results and protest events in 2018. As predicted by our theory, protests were more likely in municipalities which experienced contentious events during the 1977-1979 revolution, and municipality with a higher share of MRS voters saw more protests. Models 2 and 3 provide important evidence that pre-existing political and economic grievances do not explain the diffusion of mass protest in Nicaragua. In fact, municipalities reporting a higher approval rating for Daniel Ortega from 2013-2017 were more likely to see anti-Ortega protests in 2018.121 Assessments of the economy do not demonstrate a statistical or substantive relationship to protests in this analysis. The FSLN’s vote share in the 2006 elections (which the FSLN won with a mere 38% of the vote) do predict fewer protests, indicating that these municipalities harbor the hard core of Ortega’s base.

Table 4 presents further evidence on political grievances and identities. Municipalities with more self-identified FSLN voters from 2013-2017 were weakly associated with more protests, though this relationship does not reach statistical significance. Interestingly, left-leaning municipalities were more likely to see protests than right-leaning municipalities, providing more

121 These results sharply contrast with the 2006 vote share. That share has shrunk from 38% of the country in 2006 to 23% (his approval rating in the 2018 Latinobarómetro survey), likely through a process of generational replacement.
evidence that disaffected Sandinista sympathizers played an important role in sparking protest, and according with the view of Ortega’s regime as increasingly economically (neo)liberal and socially conservative. Many of our interviewees decried Ortega’s corrupt practices, but perceptions of corruption in 2016 and 2017 do not demonstrate a statistically or substantively significant relation with protest.

Table 4: Municipal-level determinants of protests and tranques (alternate explanations)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ideology</th>
<th>Corruption</th>
<th>Economy</th>
<th>Color Revolution</th>
<th>Networks</th>
<th>Geography</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Would vote for FSLN (2013-2017)</td>
<td>0.202</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.107)</td>
<td>(0.092)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left-leaning (2013-2017)</td>
<td>0.554***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.092)</td>
<td>(0.092)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wealth unfairly distributed (2013-2017)</td>
<td>-0.278*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.110)</td>
<td>(0.096)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corruption (2016-2017)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.092</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.093)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal economic optimism (2013-2017)</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.317**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.099)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty rate (2005)</td>
<td></td>
<td>-1.080***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.087)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic satisfaction (2014-2017)</td>
<td>0.289**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.096)</td>
<td>(0.096)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth ratio (2005)</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.956***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.093)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Facebook use (2013-2017)</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.084</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.325***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.095)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.086)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Inter-personal trust (2013-2017)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.410***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.100)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of universities</td>
<td>0.024***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.101)</td>
<td>(0.100)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance from capital</td>
<td>-0.859***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.100)</td>
<td>(0.100)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent urban (2018)</td>
<td>0.511***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.091)</td>
<td>(0.091)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.103)</td>
<td>(0.117)</td>
<td>(0.099)</td>
<td>(0.109)</td>
<td>(0.105)</td>
<td>(0.110)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.343)</td>
<td>(0.334)</td>
<td>(0.352)</td>
<td>(0.350)</td>
<td>(0.339)</td>
<td>(0.567)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-6.173***</td>
<td>-6.264***</td>
<td>-6.388***</td>
<td>-6.452***</td>
<td>-6.332***</td>
<td>-7.409***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.324)</td>
<td>(0.314)</td>
<td>(0.352)</td>
<td>(0.350)</td>
<td>(0.339)</td>
<td>(0.567)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>16,352</td>
<td>12,994</td>
<td>18,104</td>
<td>16,936</td>
<td>16,066</td>
<td>22,192</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Other results are mixed. As noted above, poorer and younger municipalities (and relatedly, those where many survey respondents held that wealth was unfairly distributed) were less likely to protest. Pessimism about one’s personal economic future, however, was linked to protest, and this may suggest a “relative deprivation” explanation for protest in a country whose economy had expanded rapidly but remained poor.122 Municipalities reporting satisfaction with Nicaragua’s democracy from 2013 to 2017 were more likely to see protest in 2018, corroborating a key contention of the historical framing hypothesis: that violence against student protesters jolted many observers from a Democracy frame to a Dictatorship frame. There is support for the role of social networks as well, though it is difficult to disentangle Facebook use and interpersonal trust from wealthier, more urban municipalities in general. Moreover, we argue that both intergenerational and online social networks served as conduits for historical framing.

122 Gurr 1970.
In sum, the statistical results offer strong evidence in favor of the role of historical framing in explaining the sub-national diffusion of protest during Nicaragua’s 2018 civic rebellion, and are largely inconsistent—in some cases strikingly so—with explanations based on pre-existing political and economic grievances.

Conclusion

A close examination of the Nicaraguan case portends major implications for the broader study of nonviolent civil resistance campaigns. Nicaragua may be a “deviant case that disproves a deterministic proposition;”\(^{123}\) namely, that simmering grievances are a necessary condition for unexpected civil revolt.\(^{124}\) Our research instead strengthens the notion that frames,\(^{125}\) cognitive heuristics,\(^{126}\) analogic thinking,\(^{127}\) and shared understandings of history and identity\(^{128}\) inform high-risk mobilization decisions. The political science and sociological literatures largely agree that framing matters, but it is typically difficult to isolate its causal contribution. Nicaragua’s civic rebellion shows that powerful framing can be a sufficient condition to spark a mass nonviolent civil resistance campaign. This in turn suggests the need to reassess the importance of framing in otherwise overdetermined cases of civil resistance.

Our findings are not only important for scholars of civil resistance. They could also help domestic and international NGOs focused on supporting nonviolent democratic change to craft mobilization campaigns that resonate with local interpretations of history. For NGOs, local actors, and activists committed to peacefully resolving Nicaragua’s current crisis, it is vital to have a clear understanding of how and why protests and repression unfolded and evolved as they did in 2018. By collecting original data and placing recent civil resistance in historical perspective, this paper offers key insights for assessing the prospects of future efforts for a nonviolent restoration of democracy. Our research also contributes to the collective understanding in Nicaragua and beyond of the potential for nonviolent methods to challenge dictatorship.

Bibliography


\(^{123}\) Gerring 2006, 32.

\(^{124}\) Just as there are countless cases of long-standing grievances without revolt (DeNardo 1985; Fearon and Laitin 2003), so too can there be revolts with only more proximate grievances.

\(^{125}\) Snow and Benford 1992.

\(^{126}\) Kahneman 2011; Tezcür 2016.

\(^{127}\) Beissinger 2007.

\(^{128}\) Shesterinina 2016.


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Kinzer, Stephen. 2018. “Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, Key Figure in Nicaraguan Turmoil, Dies at 92,” *New York Times*, 3 June. Available from


vandálca, hormiguita. 2019. “En #Nicaragua detienen a ciudadanos por portar nada más y nada menos que: la bandera nacional. Si la bandera nacional. @CIDH @OEA_oficial @hrw_espanol @CorteIDH @ignaziocorrao @AnaGomesMEP @RJaureguiA @Europarl_EN @EP_President @AmbCTrujillo @marcorubio @MarioDB @ErikaGuevaraRhttps://twitter.com/98carlosvarmar/status/1111724403677630467 …. Tweet @vandalant. At https://twitter.com/vandalant/status/1111744918798680072, accessed March 30, 2019.


