The Impact of 30 Years of Neoliberal Reforms on Citizen Perception of the Relation between Democracy and Human Welfare in Costa Rica

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Executive Summary

This article sets out the findings of research undertaken in the framework of the invitation from the Latin American Council of Social Sciences (Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales - CLACSO) on "Thirty Years of Democracy in Latin America," which aimed to examine the current perception of Costa Ricans regarding the notion of democracy and human welfare, considering the effects of introducing the neoliberal model thirty years ago. This required the analysis of two dimensions: first, what is notion of democracy Costa Ricans currently have and, secondly, whether this notion of democracy contemplates specific demands in terms of human development and general welfare, that is, what do Costa Ricans believe should be contained in a democracy to be considered legitimate by the population. Six focus groups were organized for this purpose, where the participants answered various questions related to the topic. Two broad conclusions may be drawn from the information collected: first, there is a relation between the way democracy is defined and the capacity to observe the impacts of the neoliberal reforms on human welfare; secondly, most of the groups consulted exhibited great difficulties in identifying the neoliberal reforms and how they are responsible for impacting human welfare.

Thirty years of neoliberalism

In the framework of the periods of democratic transition in Latin America, Costa Rica was exempt from the convulsive effects of internal conflicts and, therefore, while other countries in the region endured periods of dictatorship and return to democracy, in Costa Rica democracy tended to stabilize and serve as an example in the region.

However, this does not mean the existence of exceptional conditions. Like other countries, Costa Rica was not exempt from the implementation of neoliberal reforms starting in the 1980s, which were not only framed by the country's own conditions, but also by the international conditions derived from the economic crisis of the late 1970s. The effects of this crisis, the elimination of the imports substitution model and the collapse of the so-called "Welfare State", resulted in a turn of the macro-economic policies, which changed from a State that broadly implemented social policies in education and health, to a State more concerned about reducing public spending and applying Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs)[1], for the purpose of improving State finances and thereby generate improved market conditions.

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[1] According to Calvo Coin (1995: 115), the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) had five objectives: 1) making the country capable of paying its external debt; 2) changing the trend of the previous development model as a means to access the global market; 3) ending the economic distortions (fiscal deficit, subsidies,

However, one area where Costa Rica differs from the rest of Latin American nations relates to the speed of application of the neoliberal adjustments, which compared with countries such as Chile, Mexico or Argentina, where these were applied quickly and strongly, in Costa Rica they were applied gradually, a situation that remains to date. The consequence of this process was that the economic and social effects of the adjustments were not felt by society until late in the 20th century. One indicator that highlights the effects of these macroeconomic policies is the Gini Index, which shows a pronounced increase in inequality, from 0.374 in 1990 to 0.515 in 2011[2].

This situation has resulted in a higher level of social dissatisfaction, expressed as less support to the democratic regime. As I indicated in some previous research, the way in which democracy is articulated in Costa Rica, at least in cases of political conflict, responds to the construction of a democratic myth which connects *being Costa Rican* with defending democratic values, and which in fact changes depending on the location of the actors in conflict, and leads to a dispute regarding the contents of democracy (Álvarez Garro, 2011: 9, 237). If to this dispute we add the drastic reduction in the index of favorable attitudes towards democratic stability, reflected in studies such as the one conducted by Alfaro-Redondo and Seligson (2012) which indicates that the values of this index between 2004 and 2010 remained stable at around 45% but in 2012 reached the lowest levels in the entire historical series (31.5%), then the scenario leads us to wonder whether the material and political results of neoliberal macroeconomic policies have affected the perception of democracy.

Several studies have been conducted in Costa Rica showing the social and economic impacts caused by the implementation of the neoliberal model and its relation with democratic stability. These include the analysis by Booth (1987: 48-51), which in 1987 found that the country's democracy was threatened by acute changes in the macroeconomic policies, as a result of reducing expenditures and, therefore, in the creation and continuity of social programs.

On the other hand, Trejos (1990: 47-49) found that the structural adjustment process initiated in the 1980s represented a break from the previous forms of political negotiation and consensus building, made evident in the rare participation of workers in the destiny and direction of state institutions, resulting in the creation of new social relations that have led to undemocratic forms of government management (Trejos, 1990: 52).

In another study, Gutiérrez Saxe (1990: 64) proposed that the impact of neoliberal reforms has been negative in terms of the distribution of wealth and of tax burdens, thereby increasing poverty among the population. According to Esquivel (2013: 87), as a result of the implementation of these reforms, extreme poverty increased almost 50% between 1987 and 1991, in addition to the reemergence of previously eradicated diseases, school desertion increased and real salaries were further deteriorated by increases in sales and incomes taxes. According to data compiled by the State of the Nation (2013), the total number of households in extreme poverty rose from 47,320 in 2001 to 85,557 in 2011, an increase of 81% in a period of ten years.

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exemptions, incentives); 4) regulating national production through supply and demand mechanisms; and 5) reducing the size of the State and eliminating the fiscal deficit.

[2] http://www.estadonacion.or.cr/estadisticas/compendio-estadisticas/compendio-costa-rica/compendio-costa-rica-social

This has impacted the exercise of democratic processes in the country. A first sign of alert was evidenced in the 1998 electoral process, where abstentionism had averaged between 18% and 19% since the 1962 elections, and increased to 30% in the 1998 elections (Seligson, 2001: 88-89), and has remained at that level to date.

Mora Alfaro (2001: 121) interprets that this situation of "discontent" is based on a generalized perception of unfulfilled demands and unachieved aspirations, due to the weakening of the Welfare State that existed before the 1980s. Mora Alfaro (2001: 122) finds that the prolonged transition between a development model based on active and continuous State intervention to a model of economic openness and liberalism, has meant that it is not shared by all economic stakeholders.

Raventós Vorst (2001: 376) shares the interpretation by Mora Alfaro when she explains the conditions under which the change from a Welfare State to a neoliberal model has occurred. The author argues that this process has taken place through elitist policies, with little participation by citizen groups. One example of this is that the negotiations for the implementation of macroeconomic reforms were not circulated for public opinion, which resulted in deep ignorance by the people of the reforms that were being discussed. In addition, this proves that the favoritism of the State for corporate mechanisms favorable to business groups continues to exist, which characterized the situation prior to the 1980s.

This interpretation is shared by Vázquez Rodríguez (2009-2010: 118), who states that a business corporatization of public policies has occurred in Costa Rica, through the chambers of commerce that have been incorporated in the boards of directors of public institutions which have then monopolized decision making without regard to popular opinion and representative democracy as such.

In addition to this, Pérez Brignoli and Baires Martínez (2001: 151) highlight that before the 1980s, what was before an incessant game of "voice" and "loyalty" between political parties and civil society that ranged between consensus and conflict has now become a monologue by the political elite with itself. This has resulted in an increase in social tensions, as most of the population feels frustrated (Pérez Brignoli and Baires Martínez, 2001: 149).

The situation further deteriorated upon the approval by referendum of the Free Trade Agreement with the United Stated (CAFTA), which was promoted by the government and related sectors as the privileged path toward the creation of better economic growth. However, as stated by Nuñez (2012), five years after CAFTA approval, more negative than positive effects are perceived, for example, higher underemployment and job insecurity.

In summary, although significant literature exists documenting the relation between social discontent and the macroeconomic policies, there is still no empirical research that qualitatively analyzes the people's perception of these reforms, in terms of their support of the democratic regime and what are the demands that it should fulfill in order to be considered legitimate and receive support.

Based on the above, the purpose of this research was to investigate the perception of Costa Ricans of the notion of democracy and human welfare, taking into account the effects resulting from the introduction of the neoliberal model thirty years ago. This requires analyzing two dimensions: first, what is notion of democracy Costa Ricans currently have and, second, whether this notion of democracy contemplates specific demands in terms of human development and general welfare, that is, what do Costa Ricans believe should be contained in a democracy to be considered legitimate by the population.

For this, six focus groups of Costa Rican citizens were organized[3], using a discussion outline with trigger questions. The groups were distributed as follows[4]:

- Two with citizens who were members of political parties with national scope. The parties Liberation Nacional (PLN)[5] and Frente Amplio (FA)[6] were selected because, at the time the information was collected, they were leading in the presidential election polls.
- Two with citizens who were members in Development Associations at municipal level[7]. Specifically, the Asociación de Desarrollo de Hatillo (urban) and the Asociación de Desarrollo de La Guaria (rural).
- Two with citizens who participated in social movements but were not members of political parties or local institutions. The Maleku Indigenous Community (rural) and the Colectivo Autónomo Anarquista[8] (urban) were selected.

This approach is based on two major assumptions. First, the proposal of Reinhart Koselleck (1993: 118), according to which each concept establishes certain horizons of action as well as limits to the possible experience and for the conceivable theory. And second, that the way in which we understand a concept is reflected in our discourse. These ideas will be further examined below.

Democracy as a controversial concept

The concept of democracy has generated endless debates throughout history. As it is a form of political power that organizes social aspects, it is associated to the question of how the social link is built, how order is achieved and how a community is constructed. For this reason, the discussion has taken multiple forms throughout history, resulting in debates that are still present in our contemporary thinking, from the first debates in Ancient Greece that analyzed democracy as a form of government, until it was presented by Rancière (2006) as the institution of politics itself, the institution of its subject and its form of relation (Álvarez, 2013: 4).

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[3] Research was qualitative in nature and the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was the methodological technique selected. The study attempted to guarantee equitable participation of men and women in each focus group. Participants had to be 18 years or older and had to be Costa Rica citizens that had lived in the country for at least ten years. Initially, it was stipulated that each group with have a minimum of six and a maximum of twelve people. However, neither this criterion nor equal participation were always fulfilled. A description of the participants and the data collection process is provided in Annex 1.

[4] Each group used a discussion guide, which included issues associated with the transformations undergone by the State and the democratic regime resulting from the implementation of neoliberal reforms.

[5] PLN was founded in 1951. Has been in power nine times since 1953. It denominates itself as social-democratic. For more information please visit: http://www.plncr.org/

[6] FA was founded in 2004. The recently created party defines itself as democratic left. For more information please visit: http://www.frenteamplio.org/

[7] The Development Associations are institutions created by Law 3859 – Law for Community Development - for the purpose of serving as a bridge between, Dirección Nacional de Desarrollo de la Comunidad (DINADECO) and the communities. Through these, communities would actively participate in all plans and programs related with their own development.

[8] Anarchist Autonomous Collective.

Therefore, it is necessary to define several theoretical assumptions that serve as the foundation to analyze the notion of democracy and how it can be influenced by macroeconomic policies. The first is that democracy acts as something that is inserted in all aspects of life and in all actions of a national community. According to Macpherson (1981:16), each political system entails a model of human beings and a model of society that is expressed in the material practice, since what people believe about a political system is not foreign to it, but is rather a part of it. Therefore, the way in which citizens perceive democracy is related to the way they perceive society and themselves. In the second place, following the German school of conceptual history, the starting point is that a concept such as democracy has direct implications over the political actions, limiting or expanding the sphere of participation of the citizens according to how this sphere is defined and how they perceive its importance. The concepts are understood as a reality check and, therefore, may become change factors of reality itself, thereby establishing the horizon of possible experiences as well as their limits (Villacañas and Oncina, 1997: 21). Thirdly, and related to the previous assumption, social and political concepts inherently establish a pretension of generality and are always polysemic (Koselleck, 1993: 116).

Thus, defining democracy as a polysemic concept implies accepting its condition of empty significant, which may be filled by contents according to the interpretation each group of actors assigns to it. This means, according to Schmitt (1990:60) that concepts are *polemic* and generate antagonism that result in political conflicts. In other words, the way in which democracy is perceived may affect the generation of conflicts, as diverging or converging positions may exist, depending on which contents are assigned by the actors.

In the case of social discontent in Costa Rica, it could be assumed that the actors demanding improvements in terms of social and economic policies aimed at improving human welfare, would be awarding a social objective to that empty significant of the concept of democracy.

Therefore, in order to answer the question posed in this investigation, regarding the relations between the notion of democracy and human welfare in Costa Rica, it is not enough to ask about what these demands would be, or to question the scope of neoliberalism, but rather how both, democracy and neoliberalism, are expressed in the discourse and generate a meaning. For this purpose, the discourse is defined as a significant configuration that includes linguistic and extra-linguistic actions, that is socially constitutive and that is of a relational, differential, open, incomplete and precarious nature, which expresses a social order that is permanently threatened by conflict and negativity (Torfing, 1991: 16). Thus, the discourse is not only influenced by its context, but also acts as a form or expression that builds contexts (Tistscher, et al., 2000: 156), in other words, it provides meaning.

This transmission of sense may be interpreted as a transmission of hegemonic contents. In this regard, I follow the line initiated in my previous work associated with the construction of the Costa Rican democratic myth in periods of political conflict, where I conclude that the construction of the notion of democracy in Costa Rica is traversed by a national ideological position, that acts as a model for imaginary and symbolic identification which results in the actors in conflict appealing to the myth as a privileged mechanism to achieve legitimacy (Álvarez Garro, 2011: 237). This myth associates *being Costa Rican* with a definition of democracy that respects the liberal principles and respects the procedures – liberal-procedural democracy –, through which the actors in conflict condemn any practice

outside of this scheme because they consider it "violent" and therefore "anti-Costa Rican" (Álvarez Garro, 2011: 238-246).

This myth, which acquired a condition of hegemony (Gramsci, 1975: 165-166; 1970: 290), is understood by following Barthes' line of interpretation (1980: 222), who proposes that the myth is not a lie or a confession, but rather an inflection of sense, it deforms it. Thus the myth, rather than politizing, it *depolitizes*, as it would establish the sense and would not permit action (Barthes, 1980: 239).

Therefore, the definition contained in academic texts on democracy is one thing, but the way in which a citizen makes sense of democracy and its practices is another. The same applies to the concept of neoliberalism[9], it is one thing to establish the critical path of its emergence and why it turned out to be a privileged economic model after the crisis of the 1970s, but how the State reforms and its economic effects are perceived by the population is another.

In summary, in the first place it is important to observe how the people interviewed articulate the concept of democracy and its relation to human welfare; secondly, whether they are able to recognize the impact of thirty years of neoliberal reforms; and finally, how the weight of the democratic myth operates in this relation.

The democratic discourse

As originally set out, hegemonic contents related to democracy are transmitted through discourse, understood not as a privileged category disconnected from, but instead in constant interaction with, ideology and culture. Thus, the CDA considers power, ideology and history as cross-cutting elements worth analyzing (Tistscher, et al., 2000: 156 - 160).

This is based on conceptualizing the discourse not as a privileged category that is different from ideology and culture, but also considers these as discourses that constantly interact with each other. For this reason, CDA includes the analysis of power, ideology and history as cross-cutting issues (Tistscher, et al., 2000: 156 - 160).

In this sense, the argumentative strategy used by the study subjects was analyzed through the following argumentation categories: premises and arguments.

In the category of premises, the use of presumptions and values was taken into account. Presumptions have a universal value because they are linked to the "normative", the normal, while values are used for the purpose of generating access for particular groups (Del Caño, 1999: 148 - 149).

In the category of arguments, the following types were analyzed: arguments, for example, which are facts that illustrate and support generalization (Del Caño, 1999: 150) and causal arguments which, as the name explains, relate an event with a cause or a fact with a consequence (Del Caño, 1999: 153). Based on the above, the intent is to establish the constitutive exterior of the discourse, the struggle for establishing the causal relations that make the particular vision of the world of each social actor natural, the construction of equivalence chains and the use of the past and the future as argumentation inputs.

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[9] The definition of neoliberalism proposed by David Harvey (2007: 8) is used: "Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human welfare can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices".

The groups were always conceived as a set of individuals expressing their opinions within a shared space, and therefore no statement was rejected but rather taken as an expression of the group as a whole. This is based on the framework of social psychology, wherein the spokesman is the person that at a given time states something that has been latent or implicit in the group. The spokesman is the vehicle of the emerging idea operating within the group. (Pichon-Rivière, 1978: 7).

Concept of Democracy

The discussion guide used by the participants included, as the first activity to generate ideas, defining democracy with a maximum of five words. As stated above, this research is based on the assumption that democracy, as a political and social concept, is a polysemic concept, which implies assuming a characteristic of empty meaning that may be filled with contents according to the interpretation made by each group of actors (Álvarez Garro, 2013: 116). For this reason, the participants used major premises to define democracy, specifically *presumptions* and *values,* since the former evoke what is "normal", what the normative establishes as part of common sense –common sense that responds to a context-; the latter result in group cohesion and express the valuation chain that sustains its idea of democracy. The presumptions may be used as a starting point for argumentation, although the degree of authenticity of the statements may be in question (Del Caño, 1999: 148).

As will be seen later, the contents mentioned by the participants differ in the way they conceptualized democracy, which may be explained by the different contexts –historical, political and social- surrounding these groups. However, this does not mean the presence of completely opposite notions of democracy, as described by Rancière (2007: 8-9), what arises is a *misunderstanding* (*mésentente*): a specific type of speech situation where one of the interlocutors understands and at the same time does not understand what the other is saying. In other words, the misunderstanding has nothing to do with one subject saying white and the other black, but rather that both have a different definition of whiteness. In the case of the concept of democracy, as we will see below, the way in which they understand participation differs among the various groups, as for some participation is conducted through elections while others prefer a more "direct" participation.

From electoral participation to popular participation

Presumptions, as mentioned, are premises that enjoy a universal value because they are linked to the "normative", to the normal (Del Caño, 1999: 148). Now then, in the case of the question on the definition of democracy, participants responded based on what they consider their "normalcy". In the case of the Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN), democracy consists in participating in decision making, in any group or country. For this sector, democracy is articulated through the possibility of deciding with full respect of the principle of majority and thereby adopting the idea that democracy is established by processes designed for decision making through some type of election mechanism:

> BERTA: "[…] I believe democracy is in participating in decision making
> in any group or country" (PLN, 2014).
> GONZALO: "Being able to decide according to the opinion of the majority" (PLN, 2014).

> MARIA: "For me it is also the power given to the people, who are the majority, to have the capacity for decision making" (PLN, 2014).
> MARCO: "For me it is a freedom with limitations and obligations because in it we contemplate the right to be able to elect whomever we want" (PLN, 2014).

In this last extract, it is apparent that participation is regarded in electoral terms and therefore the citizens are reduced to their condition of voters, who *participate* in democracy through this specific exercise.

At the same time, members of Partido Frente Amplio (FA) expand the definition of democracy, associating participation with organization and ideological debate. This presumption that citizen participation needs to be organized and have an ideological objective, is related with the context of the emergence of that party and with the type of organization that it aims to generate, wherein it aspires levels of participation that transcend electoral campaigns. Therefore, the incorporation of the need to "ideologize" the debate on democracy may be interpreted as an expression of discontent, as an indication of the limits toward a model of democracy they consider is not contemplating the debate about the political, economic and social future of the country. Thus, by using a broader concept of participation that incorporates processes of organization and debate beyond the electoral scope, it makes it possible for them to think of it as "popular" participation, although it remains as participation that delegates power:

> FERNANDO: "I used five words. Organization, history, people, participation and state […] Because we have to understand –in my opinion- democracy within a historic process […] produced by history" (FA, 2014).
> JESSICA: "[…] citizen participation, […] organization and debate […] ideological debate" (FA, 2014).
> CARLOS: "Power of the citizens… delegated, that is, it is delegated and grants legitimacy […]" (FA, 2014).
> LUIS: "I used participation, popular organization, equality and solidarity" (FA, 2014).

On the other hand, the people participating in the Asociación de Desarrollo de Hatillo (ADH), and the PLN members, used as a presumption that democracy is a political system where the government and the rights are elected by the people.

> SOFÍA: "I wrote that democracy is what we have, that it is the best thing we have in our country, we can elect our president and all of our rights" (ADH, 2014).
> JUAN: "Political system wherein the government is elected by the people […]" (ADH, 2014).

This same presumption is used by the members of Asociación de Desarrollo de La Guaria (ADG), where participation is associated with the election of the government of the exercise of the vote:

> EDUARDO: "Well, by democracy I understand, […] direct participation of the people in the decisions made by the government, when the people decide who is going to govern them" (ADG, 2014).
> MARGARITA: "For me it is the power to elect a president" (ADG, 2014).
> NELSON: "I also think it is being able to freely elect, using my own criteria, who will govern us in the municipalities and the president" (ADG, 2014).
> RAFAEL: "I think the sole fact of having the right to vote that they don't have in other countries, that is the word democracy" (ADG, 2014).

As can be seen, multiple interpretations emerge again for the concept of participation. In this case, Eduardo proposes that "direct participation" is equal to voting, a notion of participation that could be considered by other sectors as a "reduced" or limited participation, as is evident from the presumptions used by FA members. In addition, there is a comparison with other countries where the "right to vote" is not guaranteed, a condition that seems to be sufficient to consider a government as democratic.

On the other hand, the Maleku Indigenous Community (CIM) used as a presumption the fact that rights exist within a democratic government, rights which include the possibility to defend oneself, the right to health, to childhood. Different from the other groups, where there was some mention of participation, this group focused on defining democracy based on the framework of respecting the civil and political freedoms that evolved from political liberalism:

> MARCELA: "Well, I think or believe that democracy is where you have freedom, where all of us have the right to defend ourselves, in many aspects, not only, let's say, the right to health, to childhood and all of that, it comprises all of them, and that is why it is good, so then that is my opinion, that is free, that we can express what we feel" (CIM, 2014).
> NATALIA: "[…] practically that is what I understand, it is the freedom one has to speak, to decide and know what one wants, what is good for oneself" (CIM, 2014).

As will be seen later, these answers are related with the perception some indigenous people have of their participation in the State, which they consider distant and discriminating, as an entity that does not *take them into account*. However, despite the above, they maintain a positive image of democracy as having an institutionality of rights and freedoms and, thereby, the image of democracy as a regime is not completely questioned, just some of its practices.

This situation changed when members of Colectivo Autónomo Anarquista (CAA) were questioned about their perception of democracy. Although Celia and Lorena are able to argument that democracy is the power of the people, most of the participants defined it negatively, since they consider that democracy has served to perpetuate conditions of domination and to legitimize a system with which they cannot identify:

LORENA: "I, let's say, what I understand by democracy, and which perhaps is not what exists in reality is, let's say, the making of decisions by all the people" (CAA, 2014).
CELIA: "It is the power of the people" (CAA, 2014).
PEDRO: "My perception of democracy right now is a scam, centralism and business, that is it" (CAA, 2014).
AUGUSTO: "For me [...] is what has been happening for a long time in order to hide the truth, to brainwash people for a long time" (CAA, 2014).
JULIO: "For me this is an activity that happen every 4 years only in this country" (CAA, 2014).
NESTOR: "To legitimize the system" (CAA, 2014).

This negative perception of democracy can be interpreted based on the ideological position that this group maintains, wherein democracy appears as an act that does not reflect the social demands and the needs of the population. However, the way in which they conduct this opposition suggests there is a "true" form of democracy versus a "deviated" form, which is the one they believe is applied in Costa Rica. Now then, as will be seen later, this "true" form defines participation as direct, giving rise again to the misunderstanding between the different groups in defining democratic participation.

If we take into account the answers from all participants, what emerges is the appearance of a continuum, in which democratic participation circulates between two extremes: electoral participation, directed at making decisions through the criterion of majority of those governing and, in the other extreme, the direct participation of the people in democracy. Closer to the idea of electoral participation, are the members of the PLN and of the Development Associations, while the members of the FA are in an intermediate point, where they do not discard electoral participation but maintain the need for popular organization that transcends this space. The members of Colectivo Autónomo Anarquista are on the extreme of direct participation, who by conducting opposition by "true/false" democracy, seem to suggest the need for other types of procedures or mechanisms for the people to exercise their power. On the other hand, the members of the indigenous Maleku group do not visualize participation, at least in the definition of democracy, as one of its components, although their perception continues to be positive.

This first approach to the idea of democracy confirms previous studies regarding the presence of a hegemonic discourse in Costa Rica that considers electoral participation as one of the key aspects for its legitimacy (Álvarez Garro, 2011: 9; 237). If we consider the definition proposed by Gramsci (1975: 165-166; 1970: 290) of hegemony, as a compromise solution between the political and civil society that is inserted beyond the coercive plane and that is installed in the political and cultural plane as an ethical content of the State; in this case, electoral participation seems to occupy that space, since at least in the majority of the groups, it is seen as what legitimizes democracy. However, as with any hegemonic content, it has fractures, that are expressed in the discourse of the Maleku Indigenous Community and of the Colectivo Autónomo Anarquista, in which the dimension of participation, is absent or "deviated" from an ideal. Thus, this hegemonic nature is more strongly reflected when analyzing what values the participants use when defining democracy.

Freedom and juridical equality

In previous work I stated that modern democracy, in existence in the late 19th century as a consequence of the fusion of democracy and political liberalism, resulted in the value of equality, present in the classic definitions of democracy that privileged *the collective*, entering into conflict with this modern vision that privileges *individualism* and *freedom* as core values (Álvarez Garro, 2013: 66). This association between democracy and liberalism, which for some is a "natural" result (Bobbio, 2006: 39), resulted in a change in the hierarchy of the values associated to it and, therefore, the equality of the core values lost ground to the civil and political freedoms.

This chain of values can be observed in the way the participants in five of the focus groups used values to support their definition of democracy. In the case of PLN members, freedom appears as a core value of democracy:

> MARCO: "For me it is a freedom with limitations and obligations because in it we contemplate the right to be able to elect whomever we want" (PLN, 2014).

In this case, freedom is limited to the possibility of electing leaders, which is associated to a definition of liberal-procedural democracy, where the respect of freedoms, rights and procedures included in the definition of the regime is always privileged (Álvarez Garro, 2013: 66). However, this freedom appears to be limited to the obligations contracted with the State, a clarification that helps to understand how freedom does not act as a universal but rather, as described by Foucault (2007/1978-1979: 61; 83), responds to the relation between the rulers and the ruled. Thus, the uses of freedom are subject to judgment depending on the position of the stators, in this case, the members of PLN, in their condition of official party[10], can express what are the limitations that freedom should have, as will be analyzed later. Nelson of the ADG subscribed to this same line, citing freedom of election as one of the core values of democracy:

> NELSON: "I also think it is being able to freely elect, using my own criteria, who will govern us in the municipalities and the president" (ADG, 2014).

On the other hand, the freedom value was mentioned in the ADH but in specific reference to freedom of expression, a value they equate to the definition of democracy:

> MARTA: "I wrote that democracy is freedom of expression" (ADH, 2014).
> MÓNICA: "Democracy is freedom of expression" (ADH, 2014).

In the case of the Malekus, freedom appears as a broader sphere, that not only includes freedom of expression or the use of individual autonomy, but also the possibility of defense:

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[10] At the time the focus group met, before the first electoral round, PLN was the party in power and the result of the elections was not yet foreseen.

> MARCELA: "Well, I think or believe that democracy is where you have freedom, where all of us have the right to defend ourselves, in many aspects, not only, let's say, the right to health, to childhood and all of that, it comprises all of them, and that is why it is good, so then that is my opinion, that is free, that we can express what we feel" (CIM, 2014).
> NATALIA: "[…] practically that is what I understand, it is the freedom one has to speak, to decide and know what one wants, what is good for oneself" (CIM, 2014).

This constant reference to freedom as what defines democracy directs focus to the influence political liberalism has had in the reconfiguration of this concept, since it would seem that they confuse democracy with political liberalism, thus expressing how deeply installed the union between both schools of thought is in the social imaginary. This enables supposing that participants implicitly recognize the existence of legal equality, derived from the application of liberal principles that allow them to express and defend themselves and to think autonomously with respect to the State.

Thus, what we see is that they consider democracy as the only regime that can guarantee these freedoms. Now then, this centrality of freedom as democratic value has limitations, since the perception is that it would change depending on the context and its use, as will be analyzed later.

Regarding the other two groups, only the members of Frente Amplio (FA) mentioned values associated with democracy, while the members of Colectivo Autónomo Anarquista (CAA) did not quote any value associated with this form of democracy.

However, as observed in the use of presumptions, the FA members were able to articulate a broader concept of democracy than the other groups consulted. They associated values such as equality and solidarity when referring to democracy, which can be interpreted as a sign of the discontent mentioned previously:

> LUIS: "I used participation, popular organization, equality and solidarity" (FA, 2014).

In addition, despite the fact that four of the six groups consulted had a positive opinion of democracy, when consulted about the changes occurring in recent years, there were evident manifestations of discontent. This may be related with the construction of the *democratic myth* and the way in which it permeates the interpretation of historic events, mainly those occurring after the Civil War of 1948, that gave rise to a benefactor or interventionist State that improved the quality of life of the middle and low income classes, reinforcing the notion of Costa Rican *exceptionality* (Álvarez Garro, 2011: 117).

Current and Past Democracy

After this activity, participants were asked to respond to the following question: "Based on the definition of democracy you provided in the previous activity, has it changed (yes or no), and if so, how has it changed"? The purpose of this question was to observe whether the groups consulted established a link between the State of the current democracy and the effects of the application of neoliberal reforms without this being suggested by the

researcher. This time, the groups used argumentation elements that included *presumptions*, *for example arguments* and *causal arguments*. The presumptions used served as starting point for the argumentation, although the degree of authenticity of the statements depends on what each group considers to be "true" (Del Caño, 1999: 148). The above continues to reflect the *polemic* nature of the content associated with democracy. In the meantime, the for example arguments are events that illustrate and support a generalization and lead to a conclusion (Del Caño, 1999: 150). On this particular point, the examples were used to sustain on what aspects democracy was believed to have changed. Finally, causal arguments relate an event with a cause or a fact with a consequence (Del Caño, 1999: 153). Given the complexity of the topic discussed, it can be observed that participants mention several causes to explain the current state of democracy, according to the dimensions they consider relevant.

A weakened democracy

The presumptions used by the participants radically change depending on the space in which they were stated. Different from most of the groups consulted, members of Partido Liberation Nacional (PLN) indicate that democracy has improved with respect to the past. This could be due to several reasons. First, the condition of being the official party for the last eight years; second and related to the first, since the Civil War of 1948, PLN has been in power nine times, compared to six administrations by other parties and therefore the participants are expressing an association between the PLN achievements and the construction of the country. According to the participants democracy, defined as the power to make decisions under conditions of freedom, has remained constant in time, showing an improvement in access to information and the use of rights and duties.

In addition, given the changes observed in recent years, in particular with respect to popular expression during electoral periods, which exhibits a decrease in the use of external signs – flags – participants see increased political maturity in this:

> GONZALO: "[…] I do start from 1948 on. Based on the principle that democracy is the power to make decisions according to the majority, this has never changed, what has changed? That now we have more interaction with media, there are more communication media, we have internet […] for example, 30 years ago it was very common to have flags all over the counties and now not so much, that is not that there is no democracy, democracy is decision making, that is simply showing your political position. That is very different from making decisions (PLN, 2014).
> MARIA: "Probably it is that we have matured, really […]. But the reality is that I don't think it is apathy, I believe there is a political maturity that the country is showing and probably in the next campaign we will not have outdoor signs or those things. But I do believe that the democracy of the country has evolved for good; first, it is consolidated… the men and women that make up this country are clear on what are our rights and duties. […] and I believe that in that regard yes, yes it has improved, particularly when compared to democracies in Latin America, really, and one cannot stop looking at this as reference (PLN, 2014)."

One of the members of Asociación de Desarrollo de La Guaria (ADG) also makes a comparison with other countries in the region. This is anchored in that construction of the democratic myth, that indicates the condition of exceptionality compares to other countries in the region (Álvarez Garro, 2011: 19-20; 35; Quesada Monge, 1992: 195-196), the country that maintains a democratic government compared to those that do not.

However, this is a minority perception with respect to the opinions of the other groups consulted. In the case of Frente Amplio (FA) members, in accordance with a conception of democracy that goes beyond the limits of an electoral model, the people consulted expressed their concern for the way in which the notion of participation has developed, and for that reason they perceive that democracy has changed and has weakened substantially. In the first place, because they find the channels for participation have been reduced, mainly through what they consider is more repression by the State[11]:

> FERNANDO "Like the conception of democracy? Yes, for me it has changed substantially and it isn't like currently there is a single one… […] the conditions of democracy have deteriorated through history, like for example popular participation in democracy that used to exist particularly in street protests that is being ever more repressed by the state [*sic*] or by the governments that manage the State" (FA, 2014).

Second, participation is perceived through contrast: on one hand "manipulated" participation and on the other "true" participation. Let us dwell on "manipulated" participation. To explain this, FA militants resort to pointing at possible culprits, holding the powerful elite or "hegemonic" groups accountable for being behind the weakening of democracy:

> JESSICA: "[…] that can happen today in Latin American in some countries, like a facade of some, ah, some powerful elite that has taken over, let´s say, the Executive Branch […] in the biggest case and disseminate their ideas and make us think we have certain citizen participation […]" (FA, 2014).
> LINA: "[…] participation is seen like manipulation, which, let´s say, there is certainly a greater, like, desire among citizens to participate and be like, be part of, to be taken into account in decisions. However, it is

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[11] This statement is not sustained when analyzing the data reported by communication media and recovered by the Collective Action Database of the Institute for Social Investigation (IIS, Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales) of the University de Costa Rica (UCR) and by the State of the Nation Program of Consejo Nacional de Rectores (CONARE). According to data compiled for another investigation being conducted, for the period 1997-2010, 93% of the records show no evidence of the use of coercive or repressive measures by the State, while in 7% of the cases the most widely used form of repression is police presence, followed by the use of police force, the arrest of actors, and therefore the use of other means of repression is very scarce (Ramírez, 2011: 3). However, this does not mean that perception of repression is absent, but rather that it would require more in depth investigation, that will enable understanding why this perception exists among certain sectors of the population and the impact this has over their political actions. On the other hand, what they don't perceive is that the most frequent response by the State is the lack of response to demands, and therefore its strategy seems to be to make the sectors invisible rather than to repress them (Álvarez Garro, 2014, *investigation in progress*).

common […] by *participulation*, let´s say, by "manipulated participation" (FA, 2014).

LUIS: "[…] really, behind current democracy there are hegemonic groups, of one type or another, either transnational, national, global that certainly are behind –no doubt- this weakening of democracy as a people concept, of power for people and for the welfare of the majorities and which is indeed for a few, let´s say, that´s how it has been" (FA, 2014).

As is evident, the assumption of FA militants is that democracy has weakened from the actions of other agents – "hegemonic groups" – that have obstructed non- manipulated participation. Using Gramsci´s (1975: 165-166; 1970: 290) definition of hegemony, as a compromise solution between the political and civil society, here we see a rupture in the interpretation of that hegemonic discourse: by blaming others, there is an attempt to trade off this "agreement" between both sectors. However, there is still no articulation of the leverage of civil society within this hegemonic discourse, because the above cannot be seen only as the result of an ideological configuration decided by "power groups," but implies an organizational dimension that includes institutions and devices, material practices of an ideological, cultural and political struggle (Portantiero, 1987: 150 – 151). In other words, this shows how the other party is blamed for what one party considers is the weakening of democracy without proposing its own participation therein, drawing a line between those guilty of the democratic debacle and those attempting to revert the situation. This could result from significant country polarization which emerged during protests associated to the approval of the Law for the Improvement of Public Services of Electricity and Telecommunications and State Participation (known as "Combo del ICE") in 2000, and then gained strength after the 2007 referendum for the Free Trade Agreement with the United States of America (CAFTA). As this author proposed in previous research (Álvarez Garro, 2011: 187, 215, 234), during those periods of political strife, government sectors that proceeded to implement neoliberal reforms together with "large transnationals and private enterprises" started to be called *enemies*. In this case not only were they considered guilty of implementing macroeconomic measures, but also responsible for their effects on democracy in recent years.

In light of this, they report a participation they do not consider real, as it responds to the mandate of the "powerful elite" or "hegemonic groups;" instead, they assume that the notion of participation needs to transcend the election sphere and encompass a democratic participatory model for all areas of life:

PABLO: "[…] But democracy is, or democratic institutions are another bunch of things, right, that is, the media are democratizing institutions, or they should be, the Costa Rican Social Security System […] is a democratizing institution. Let´s say that, that is, really all aspects of life could be democratizing institutions. Now I think that, now there is less […] let´s say, space where you can come and express and execute your will is ever less, ever smaller, reduced to something symbolic where you vote, it takes you 2 minutes to vote every 4 years, and that is what the media, the Ideological Apparatus, the Ministry of Education, the official discourse and all the ideological scaffolding called democracy, right, to

those 2 minutes you have to decide who will figure are ceremonious events over a given timeframe " (FA, 2014).

JESSICA: "[…] People don´t understand the value of an institution like the Central Bank, the influence of its decisions on our daily life and then we start building everything I was just mentioning now about the facade, right, where we believe we participate, we believe that through them the decisions we would like will be made so the country can function, but there are really spaces that leave voids, that do not tell us they´re there, so it´s somewhat, let´s say, where is this going for me?" (FA, 2014).

The insistence on opening democracy to other forms of popular participation is related to one core value highlighted by the group: equality, which is why they can consider other institutions and other extensions of life as *potentially* democratizing. Now well, as proposed in the previous section, this conception of democracy responds to the context in which the Frente Amplio (FA) arose as a party, and the sectors it targets, which does not occur in the other participating groups, which, although they coincide when indicating a reduction or weakening of the democratic quality of the regime, use different premises to support the above.

In the case of participants from the Asociación de Desarrollo de Hatillo (ADH), opinions were divided at the beginning. Although Alejandra and Juan recognize that the economic situation has deteriorated, they state that the economy it not related to democracy since, by identifying democracy with political liberalism, they do not see a significant deterioration. But as will be seen later, although the assumption is that no changes have occurred, when examining the matter deeper, the group begins to use examples and causal arguments that express concern for the deterioration of democracy. Other persons in the group, however, indicated right from the beginning that democracy has worsened.

ALEJANDRA: "What I want to say is one thing […], the economic part in one thing and democracy, the democratic system of the country is another; I believe that it is no secret to anyone right now that the world is experiencing an economic crisis since `99 […] But, aside from that, in democracy we have the freedom to move about the country wherever we want to […] You have a right to choose the school you want, you have the right to go anywhere, you have the right to dress as you please, you have the right to a bunch of things that other countries do not have a right to" (ADH, 2014).

JUAN: "Besides all of this, I think that what we have is electoral democracy, so that is where I see things working well, ensuring there is the least fraud possible; it is a democracy where you are given the pleasure of voting for whoever you want. At least on February 2, we are all equal, so there I believe that is so" (ADH, 2014)

On the other hand, members of the Asociación de Desarrollo de La Guaria (ADG) indicated that democracy is worse off than ever before, using the assumption of a loss of the sense of meaning of democracy and the effect this has on citizen participation:

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EDUARDO: "Look at the organizational level, of course it is better now than before due to technological advances and everything else. But at the level of delivery of what democracy means, what democracy represents […] the sense of democracy by […] of the politicians, they forget that democracy is citizen participation […]" (ADG, 2014).

Once again we see a line drawn between those responsible for the decline of democracy and those who are considered harmed by these groups. This same perception is present in the assumptions used by the members of the Comunidad Indígena Maleku who, contrary to the previous two groups, do not see a single positive trait in democracy. For them, democracy is worse, and rights have been lost, along with the capacity to vindicate them:

MARCELA: "Worse" (CIM, 2014).
DIANA: "Things are getting worse" (CIM, 2014).
NATALIA: "No, not any more, many points have been lost, many things, that perhaps, are our rights and no, I don´t know, I feel that maybe unity is missing to fight for that, because let´s say if there are only three persons fighting for rights and the rest do not support, there is not enough power for that" (CIM, 2014).

This negative perception of the current status of democracy is also shared by the members of the Colectivo Autónomo Anarquista (CAA), except that the latter, as indicated in the previous paragraph, see in democracy something that has never "truly" existed. However, in the focus group they were asked to picture in their minds whether the conditions, negative in principle, had worsened or not. As will be seen below, they can identify events that have reinforced this negative conception of democracy:

PEDRO: "Since it started, I say so, since they implemented it here, it has always been like for that objective, to dominate the people, right, it has not been like collective participation but instead domination. There has never been a true democracy anywhere" (CAA, 2014).
JULIO: "Not only that, democracy or partisan attitude dates back to the beginning, after the independence, which came to us by letter and all, the fact that it comes down through family names themselves, everything, from the large landholders themselves that had everything right from the beginning, to date. Some names or family names have changed a bit of those that get involved to help or give money, but there it comes, that chain comes, but will continue, with the way things are, it will continue" (CAA, 2014).

In summary, the assumptions applied by the different groups highlight several interpretations. Firstly, with the exception of PLN followers, they tend to notice a deterioration of democracy. Secondly, they perceive levels of deterioration, depending on the use of democracy-related values. The sectors that appeal to a greater participation and a greater content of equality are most critical of the liberal-procedural democratic model. Thirdly, there seems to be a tendency to radicalize social polarization in the country. This was seen when analyzing three political conflicts in a previous paper (Álvarez Garro, 2011:

270; 279), contrasting a heightening o polarization of sectors, because each person sees in the *other* a threat to democracy. This condition, seven years after the last conflict analyzed, seems to prove itself. The participating sectors that see a decline in the quality of democracy point their fingers at others as responsible, i.e., the government and the economic sectors. This is even clearer when analyzing the arguments for example, of the focus groups participants.

Lesser participation and fewer public policies

Example-based arguments were used to a lesser degree than causal arguments, but allow identifying exactly where participants see an improvement or a reduction in democratic quality.

In the case of participants from the Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN), consistent with a definition of democracy linked to the liberal-procedural model, they used examples such as improvements in procedures and in citizen access to suffrage to support their claim that it has improved over time:

> MARCO: Yes, there have been changes. Starting with women´s rights to vote, which was a very important step, and now that we also see gender equality, right, that a participation of almost 50/50 is being demanded in most […] for any political echelon (PLN, 2014).

Conversely, when PLN followers mention better procedures and greater opportunities to participate, specifically for women, FA member instead claim a lack of participation in binding decision-making, such as who appoints members to the Boards of Directors of state banks:

> JESSICA: "Well, that is, I believe that an example that could very well illustrate what I feel about national democracy, which has transcended time throughout the history of democracy in Costa Rica, is for example, that we elect an Executive Branch and a Legislative Branch but really, *who* selects the Board of Directors of the Central Bank, for example, which is all the financial power of the country, the economic power, which is where all the economic policy will come from for all of us. Who selects them? Is it us the people? It is not the people. And that should be one of the issues we should better relate to and they make us believe it happens, that is, we overlook it" (FA, 2014).

Now well, it is interesting to note that both parties make value judgment about the status of democracy based on participation in the decision-making process from positions of power – participation in the Legislative Assembly, election of Boards of Directors –, or through balloting, a condition not shared by other groups consulted. Member of the Comunidad Indígena Maleku (CIM) shared examples that include deficient social policies and lack of access to health services:

DIANA: "For example when, well, it is bad in itself, because with the privatization of the Ebais[12], well they were closed down here and this has affected us very much here in the community" (CIM, 2014).
SILVIA: "Yes, because as I say, this is a lie, [...] I am an indigenous person and supposedly we have insurance by law and what have you, because it is not the law and then I go and they say no because since he is my husband, since he is white, that is what we call people who are not Maleku, then no, not any more" (CIM, 2014).
MARCELA: "It gets worse little by little, let´s say for example, there is no high school here, right, a high school was opened there at night, a night school [...] and I heard rumors but I don´t know, that they were going to demolish it and there would only be one downtown, that is like closing down opportunities because also, well, there are many institutions, I hear, that say that, well, since we are indigenous peoples we are a priority, in quotation marks, right" (CIM, 2014).

Therefore, the examples shared by the CIM people point at the neglect of State social policies, and therefore, it seems they do not even consider themselves *participants* in democracy, which could explain why they only defend its respect for liberties and fundamental rights, and feel they cannot participate in the election of decision-makers, since they do not see themselves as citizens.
This is clear in the following excerpt:

NATALIA: "And that doesn´t just happen like that, it happens in all territories in Costa Rica, which are 8, for example I am not Maleku, I am Cabécar, but I have been here for almost 12 years, but at the end of every year I go visit my family and spend a month, 15 days, and there you see it, [...] maybe what you see here is some 30 years ahead, and over there they are 30 years behind and they never get [...] help, we never get medicine, or shoes, or clothes, that is what it is, there is people [*sic*], they died or did not die, there they are, just as she says; my mother was very ill, she went to that outpatient thing and since Mom had an expired card they did not want to see her, nothing, and she was very sick and had to come back that way; what she did was buy some pills and come back. That is, that is, on paper it says we are [...] on paper democracy should consider everyone and you see that right now democracy does not consider them and that, let´s say, before you could go back, it was the same or it has gotten worse (CIM, 2014).

These excerpts show that indigenous peoples feel they are *invisible* to the government, that they are no object of public policies tailored to their needs. This proves how, contrary to groups better positioned to influence decision-making, such as PLN and FA followers, some sectors claim to be invisible to the State because they feel they have no interpellation mechanisms to be *taken into account*. This image of government directly affects how they define democracy, not only because they see it as a legal scaffolding that protects their

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[12] Local public primary health care centers.

rights and basic liberties. As will be seen in the following section, these examples are later added to the causes each group links to a better or worse democracy.

Interpreting the past. From political causes to moral causes.

Although the values section indicated that Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN) could issue moral judgment on liberty because of its privileged inclusive position, as the party in office at the time, now the reconstruction of historical events after the 1948 Civil War and the participation of Liberación Nacional therein becomes the anchor point of the argument, since they consider that national democracy improved thanks to that event.

This anchor point takes us to the interpretation given by Sandoval García (2002: 132), indicating that the Civil War, which lasted approximately 5 weeks and caused some two thousand casualties, was described in history as the turning point in Costa Rican political history, where references to "before" and "after" depict a "return" to the traditions of "equality," "democracy," and "exceptionalism," values that describe the strengthening of the democratic myth. Thus, he concludes that the historical recovery responds to an epic narrative where loyalty to the nation is more important than a debate around controversial events. This narrative is teleological in nature, where events and processes result from the "national will," a "democratizing" fate (Sandoval García, 2002: 201-202). This condition is evident in the following excerpts where Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN) partisans claim that democratic progress resulted from the 1948 Civil War, which they call the 1948 Revolution:

> MARIA: "[…] Costa Rica had a real change, marked by the 1948 Revolution. Before that, it was our grandfathers who went and voted but there was no system to protect them, so there was electoral fraud. The raison d´ etre of the 1948 Revolution was to defend what we have today, which is the electoral suffrage, so there has been a change in our democracy in the political sense" (PLN, 2014).
>
> BERTA: "[…] regarding suffrage, there was a very important change after the Revolution and the processes got cleaner. But people are ever more conscious, not only at the electoral level but also at the level of public institutions, the Office of the Ombudsman, the Constitutional Tribunal, that people are first claiming their rights –which they were not used to- and little by little and manifesting and demanding that the opinion of majority be the one that, whose opinion is taken into account, not something more patriarchal as it was, let´s say, at the beginning" (PLN, 2014).

The fact that PLN militants see that as the turning point is directly related to building the history of the party, the participation of José Figueres Ferrer as the "warlord" and the narrative that positions this character as the advocate of an electoral process described as fraudulent. Although the two major parties accused each other of transgressing the law and obstructing the voice of the people, the harsher attacks targeted followers of Rafael Calderón Guardia, that is, against the ruling party (Bell, 1986: 151). Moreover, Calderón Guardia had expelled Figueres in 1942, at which time Figueres started to plan and prepare a conspiracy against the government, which he launched on occasion of the irregular 1948

election. Figueres attracted sectors that were unsatisfied, on one hand, with the social policies of the government in office, and on the other, with the many claims of corruption and waste of public coffers (Bell, 1986: 35-91).

Once Figueres assumed leadership of the insurgent army that took over power and won the war, the related narrative was reconfigured. Solís Avendaño (2006: 437) proposed the thesis of co-innocence to interpret the reconstruction of this historical episode. According to the author, if everyone in the armed conflict was innocent, there would be no need to declare anyone responsible or guilty. To do this, it was necessary to weaken social memory, modify it. This explains the continuous reference of PLN militants to that period, viewing that event as the birth of the party and, therefore, the turning point after which democracy improved; and it also explains why other groups did not preserve this as a major historical event.

Contrary to this reading, Frente Amplio (FA) militants, when describing how democracy has worsened, point at changes in the articulation between democracy and associated groups of power. As with the previous excerpt, Frente Amplio (FA) militants blame specific groups of interest for obstructing the development of a democratic government:

> LUIS: "[…] I think that the rupture is, for me, when you go from, when you go from… groups of power mostly linked to exports, to those groups, a financial elite that is now in control and which I think is what has further reduced participation […]" (FA, 2014).
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> LINA: "That is, previous governments, it was like that, that people who represented us were *people* people, let´s say, they were people that had a certain, a certain status, but their interests matched, managed to match somehow what was expected of them, let´s say, they had certain legitimacy. What happens is that since about the 80s onwards that pact was broken, let´s say, that the people had with their rulers and many of the things that the government was expected to do, let´s say, the representatives, was withdrawn, that is like the rules of the game changed and many transnational entities that have no interests here started to get involved, where their interests, let´s say, in Costa Rica are not those of its people, they only come with economic interests, take what they can and leave; they have no country project and are not interested in connecting with the people, only with ideal conditions for their business. I also believe that the greater influence of transnational actors in the country has had an effect, because for them it is only a place to do business, not a place to live; that is, they have no interest beyond that, as could have happened with previous administrations that did want to connect somehow with, because they lived in the same country" (FA, 2014).

However, these excerpts show a longing for the past, responding to a statement in a previous paper. Appealing to the past as *something* better is a strategy not only used by the opposition but also by the official party because it transports back to that imaginary post-Civil War which gave rise to a benefactor or intervening State which, in material terms, implied a better standard of living for the middle and low classes, reinforcing in ideological terms the notion of Costa Rican uniqueness (Álvarez Garro, 2011: 117). This reference to the past arises when mentioning that, before, politicians came from the *people*, that there

was a pact that allowed things to get better; the turning point is in the 1980s when Costa Rica changed the rules of the game and opened up to participation of transnationals, as seen throughout this text, a group pointed at as to blame for the democratic rupture. Therefore, any mention to a deteriorated democracy indicates that groups of power have shifted and focus on generating wealth instead of setting social objectives.

Now, although FA militants claim that the rupture started three decades ago, around the 1980s, with the introduction of neo-liberal macro-economic reforms, this view is not widely shared. As the following excerpts will show, although some participants do make this connection, most believe that democracy has weakened, but for other reasons.

For the participants from the Asociación de Desarrollo de Hatillo (ADH), although they mention some neo-liberal reforms, as in the following case, most blame moral problems for the deterioration of democracy, specifically greater corruption and the indiscriminate use of liberty:

> ROBERTO: "The problem is not that simple, not that simple, because just as we were saying, now we have been losing democracy as an international imposition, neoliberalism driven by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, and here we also have the Arias brothers that imposed neoliberalism on the country; in essence what I said […] because additionally the SAPs[13] and the CAFTA have constitutional level in this country […]" (ADH, 2014).

For this group, corruption has covered all spheres of life, even affecting the execution of social policies since the State, in order to protect certain sectors, has granted them privileges:

> JUAN: "[…] It is interesting to analyze, people that don´t have a job, social programs are made for these people that don´t have a job; now we would have to see if that person without a job does not have one because he is lazy or because he is facing tough times; the problem is that there are people that live from that and there is no control, there are no control statistics; excessive paperwork everywhere has complicated matters, so not even neighbors report abuses and nobody takes interest in whether someone is getting help or not and whether they really need it […] it is really difficult now because it is a problem of personal values; I defend the FONABE[14] program, scholarships, but there are individuals, youngsters only waiting to get the 50 thousand pesos to go drink or buy a cell phone or spend it on other things, not all of them, right, thank God, but we do have this problem of liberty that ends up in licentiousness" (ADH, 2014).
>
> MARTA: "I say that Costa Rica is no longer the same, we would never say it is the same, both in our customs, they are not the same customs of before; morals have been lost in Costa Rica, now Costa Rica is a country where there is no censorship office anymore, because, let´s just go to

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[13] Structural Adjustment Plans.
[14] Fondo Nacional de Becas (National Scholarship Fund).

television, at any time we see exposed women, now even men are lending themselves to appear there provocative […] And we confuse the word liberation with liberty, so everyone felt they had the right to do as they pleased, the wife to cheat on the husband, the husband to cheat on the wife, […] because of liberty, because as I say […] we confuse the word, right, we did what was convenient for us" (ADH, 2014).

Consequently, this group on one hand considers that liberty is a condition for democracy[15], but could also be a condition for its downfall because it introduces dissent, disorder and anarchy. This shows a paradoxical relationship to the concept of liberty. On one hand, freedom of speech and freedom of movement are deemed to define democracy, but excessive liberty is seen as the cause of a weaker democracy. This begs the question: When it is legitimate to use liberty in democracy and when not?

For this group, licentiousness results when people do not follow the rules dictated by democracy, only focusing on their rights but not on their obligations:

> ALEJANDRA: "The only thing I will say is that the excessive freedom we have had has taken us to the point of establishing laws and so many rights have been given to humans beings that they are hardly punished when we do something wrong, we have come to that point which is fatal" (ADH, 2014).
> MÓNICA: "Liberalism is not good, never, because it leads to licentiousness […] and now youngsters cannot, parents cannot impose their authority because they get reported, and then that is where licentiousness comes […] homes completely destabilized, because now youngsters go drug addicts, others are robbers. So now that liberalism, in every aspect, I think is now something terrible. It´s a mismatch" (ADH, 2014).

Although the opinion of this group cannot be considered representative, some trends indicate that this position, perhaps conservative[16], has influenced the analysis and practice of democracy. The exercise of dissent must be controlled by the State and framed within laws to prevent transgressing basic values, because broader rights can weaken democracy. In other words, the State must be questioned in a respectful and constructive manner, not through actions that threaten morals. Thus, one participant considers that one way to solve these problems is through a dictatorship term, to eliminate all laws that "protect" and foster corruption and licentiousness:

> JUAN: […] it is hard to be president, it is hard, I don´t know, I don´t know what the deal is, it`s personal vanity of the candidates; I don´t know, I think a strong hand is needed, I don't know if a period of

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[15] See section on the concept of democracy.
[16] Conservatism is understood as the schools of thought that defend traditions, and reject radical social, political, economic changes, opposing progressiveness. On the political spectrum, it is usually right or central-right. Additionally, it favors nationalistic or patriotic positions.

dictatorship is necessary, to eliminate so many laws that protect everybody (ADH, 2014).

Other participants in that group blamed the moral debacle on "foreign" influence. Thus, the assumption of "uniqueness" appears again, something that "sets us apart" from other non-democratic nations. Consequently, decadence only occurs from "foreign influence," and Costa Ricans are not responsible. So there is a call to "recover" these values, to show what "true" democracy really is, where we fulfill our obligations and do not "abuse" of our rights:

> MÓNICA: […] I think that the biggest mistake in our country is to copy foreign influences […] I see young people poorly informed and then there has to be […] at home and also at the universities, high schools and elementary schools, teach what democracy really is, what freedom of expression is, but not to misinterpret that expression because it is fine and we can shout, […] say things we should not say and so I think that human beings need respect, both them and us, and both children as well as the elderly, so we are distorting what democracy is, so much, that is our problem, copying foreign influences, that is what I think (ADH, 2014).

This insistence on a moral weakening is also seen among participants from the Asociación de Desarrollo de La Guaria (ADG). They claim that there was more honesty and less corruption *before*:

> MARGARITA: "I would say it was better before […] There was more honesty" (ADG, 2014).
> NELSON: "I think so too […] some things were better before because people believed more; now […] with the technological advances we have now, well it is much better now, it facilitates the execution of democracy, but politicians themselves, they have ensured that people lose credibility in politicians […] really honestly, if you ask me if there is 100% democracy in Costa Rica, I say, would say it does not reach 60% […]" (ADG, 2014).

As opposed to ADH, which claims that a weaker democracy is caused by loss of traditional values, ADG participants mention lack of transparency and non-inclusion of communities, and conclude that people end up losing "faith" in politicians:

> NELSON: "Technology in fact is a benefit and there it goes, everyone moves towards that […] and the government itself and the, let´s say, everything, government, I mean all political positions, it is a very important tool to inform everybody of what they are doing and if they don´t, well, they are setting aside something very important […]" (ADG, 2014).
> RAFAEL: "No, worse, worse, we have been losing all that democracy let´s say […] because some years ago the people at the top […] the ones

that steal the money and create bigger messes, then that is where democracy is lost, then people begin with what they are saying there, that people did not vote, people gradually lose faith, they lose, I say this is getting worse, my opinion, every day, it is worrisome" (ADG, 2014).

These excerpts, as well as the previous ones, reflect a moral reading of why democracy is worse now than before. As exposed above, this refers to the Costa Rican mindset of better times, of the "uniqueness" that characterizes us, where the relationship between politicians and citizens was closer and they could be trusted. However, the difference between these two groups is the assignment of responsibilities. The causes sketched out by members of the Asociación de Desarrollo de Hatillo (ADH) blame citizens for misappropriating or misusing State resources, abusing their liberty, emulating "foreign influences." Contrarily, members of the Asociación de Desarrollo de La Guaria (ADG) hold that politicians are responsible, for not communicating their actions or listening to the citizenship.

This moral reading was not present in other groups consulted. Members of the Comunidad Indígena Maleku (CIM) consider that democracy is worse off because they have been made invisible by the government:

> SILVIA: "[…] Well, I speak as an indigenous person directly, I cannot generalize: let´s say what we have experienced, because the truth is that institutions and the government itself, the day Johnny Araya came was funny […] he never mentioned indigenous peoples or anything […] and where are we?, are we just painted?; and he apologized, that this thing and the other, because the truth is, he forgot, and if he forgot now, when they get over there, they will also forget us; so, democracy is supposedly equal for everyone but that is reality […]" (CIM, 2014)

As stated before, the Maleku analyze democracy based on how distant they see State institutions and leaders. They exemplified this distance with the approval of the Free Trade Agreement with the United States of America (CAFTA) which, albeit subject to a referendum, was not duly consulted with them according to ILO Convention 169[17]:

> SILVIA: "Look at the CAFTA, it was that way […] let´s say, the Presidents never consulted the CAFTA with the indigenous settlements […] they did as they pleased, and there I think that someone, I don´t remember where form, Térraba, or who, took the case to the Constitutional Tribunal, that there was no consultation with the indigenous communities and then it was passed and then many things happened, they do and do and never consult with the indigenous communities, that is, they don´t consider us important I think (CIM, 2014).

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[17] Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization (ILO) refers to the right to labor, land, territory, health, education; it provides that such rights must be guaranteed and that indigenous peoples must be consulted when such rights are to be modified, since indigenous peoples have the privilege and the right to preserve their own culture, traditions and political integrity.
http://www.ilo.org/public/spanish/region/ampro/lima/publ/conv-169/convenio.shtml

> NATALIA: "[…] The CAFTA for me, that should not have been accepted by Costa Rica, but it was accepted, that is, in simple words, it killed the liberty that Costa Rica had […]" (CIM, 2014).

To claim that the CAFTA was evidence of a deteriorated democracy could be interpreted as an effect of the political and social impact of such process in Costa Rica, also revealing the polarization in the country around the idea of development.

As indicated by Vargas Cullell (2008: 152), CAFTA advocates presented it as the cornerstone for further national development, as a strong step to reaffirm the development style initiated in the 1980s. Opponents claimed that CAFTA would end up burying the Costa Rican state of law by promoting the opening of the telecommunications, insurance and social security sectors. Moreover, they took CAFTA as an imposition of the United States on national politics, with the complicity of the local political-economic elite.

This dispute on the country´s direction led the governing party to strategically position CAFTA as a continuation of social benefits and national development, indicating that the agreement was considered the answer in "changing times" (Álvarez Garro, 2011: 202). The opposition voiced its repudiation based on a social economy proposal (Álvarez Garro, 2011: 206).

Consequently, one could interpret that the Maleku peoples use the CAFTA as an example of how the government has made them invisible; despite the referendum, they were not duly consulted.

This opinion is not exclusive of the Maleku peoples. It was also mentioned by the Colectivo Autónomo Anarquista (CAA) when asked why democracy has deteriorated:

> NESTOR: […] since the CAFTA, everything has been going downhill considerably (CAA, 2014).

Although they consider that representative democracy is not adequate, they feel it is worse due to paternalistic and clientelist State practices, which besides using the electoral arena as the favorite dispute settlement method, they extort votes through this practice.

> CELIA: "For me, things come from the definition itself that we give of democracy, because we can simply not overcome suddenly [*sic*], that the only type of democracy is representative democracy and the only one […] ever since we were in elementary school and in that democratic process, we vote for whoever gives us more treats; we come to high school and we vote for whoever puts on the best party, gives us more things; we come to the university, whoever reserved the best bar, hosted more parties; we see the same thing now where most Costa Ricans come and instead of reading the government plan, say I like such and such project, we get carried by political giveaways instead of by the substance of what they come to say […] from the simple fact of coming to vote for one of these persons; they should be accountable to us, be fair, say OK, my political responsibility, I voted, I will pretend I have political responsibility; I voted so I have the right and the duty to tell these people: OK, what did you do with my vote? These are all matters that we, right from the meaning, from the construction itself of the word, are giving

something completely erroneous; so for me, democracy comes from that"
(CAA, 2014).
LORENA: "It´s that I also think that, let´s say, that people who vote, the
time comes when the PLN or the PUSC[18] comes to their communities
and tells them, well, we will promise, we promise such and such, the 4
years go by and none of those promises reach the communities, right,
especially the vulnerable areas, and the time comes when people get
tired, people say: I have been voting for these people for 8 years and they
have not solved our problems which they supposedly came to promise
they would solve […] (CAA, 2014).

What both Malekus and anarchists highlight are the limitations of the liberal-procedural
democracy to solve specific social demands. For the Malekus, their indigenous condition
and their acquired rights are invisible to the State until the next political campaign. For the
anarchists, voting cannot be seen as legitimate because it is mediated by State paternalism
and clientelism.

In synthesis, returning to the assumptions and arguments used by different participants,
three major trends can be pointed out. First, if four of the six groups consulted in the first
activity evaluated democracy in positive terms, when they are asked to assess democracy,
past and present, five had a negative impression. This shows a clear social discontent with
the recent evolution of democracy. Second, dissatisfied groups have different views of why
democracy was worsened. It is worth noting that, with the exception of Frente Amplio (FA)
militants and one person from the Asociación de Desarrollo de Hatillo (ADH), the
implementation of neo-liberal reforms was not mentioned as a cause, although they referred
to a deterioration of services such as health and education, corruption, clientelism, scarce
transparency in public office. This seems to reinforce the interpretation of Raventós (2001:
376) regarding the conditions under which the model of a welfare State has shifted to a
neoliberal model, through elitist policies and limited citizen participation, resulting in
widespread ignorance. When directly asked to draw a line between democracy and
neoliberal policies, several points of convergence arose, as discussed in the next section.

Third, there are three major explanations for why democracy has deteriorated. The first
relates to the limitations of the liberal-procedural democracy to include other sectors of the
population in decision-making. This is mentioned mostly by members of the Frente Amplio
(FA) and of the Asociación de Desarrollo de La Guaria, who feel marginalized by the
political-economic leadership in any decision-making process. Additionally, the Colectivo
Autónomo Anarquista (CAA) complains about ongoing paternalistic and clientelist
relationship that directly influence voting. The second refers to sectors made invisible by
the State, from neglecting social policies destined to meet specific demands to approving
draft laws that directly influence their communities. An example of the former is the
Comunidad Indígena Maleku (CIM), and the latter is exemplified by members of the
Asociación de Desarrollo de La Guaria (ADG). Finally, we have those participants that
relate a weaker democracy to a limited adoption of moral values. The Asociación de
Desarrollo de Hatillo (ADH) stresses "liberalism" as a cause of licentiousness which,
claiming "human rights," has undermined the authority, and exhibits social

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[18] Partido Unidad Social Cristiana (PUSC). This party, and the Partido Liberación Nacional, received the
highest number of votes for the 1982-1998 period; some historians have called this a "bipartisan" period.

authoritarianism. Although this conclusion cannot be generalized for several reasons, including group size and average age, it does not differ from the conclusion of a study in Costa Rica by Alfaro-Redondo and Seligson (2012: 57), which defines social authoritarianism as the advocacy of social conformism, observance of the established order, annulment of autonomy – one´s own and that of others – and a vertical notion of authority. In that study, the authors detect an increase in social authoritarianism in Costa Rica, not yet significantly impacting the support for democracy as a regime, basically because it is not yet solid enough to become a major or influential player and go down the political path.

As can be seen, the current state of democracy in Costa Rica has many interpretations. In this activity, the author did not specifically mention the effect of economic neoliberal reforms on the notion of democracy. The following section analyzes the response of participants to this matter.

Relationship between Democracy and Human Welfare

For the third activity, participants in the focus groups were asked to – if they had not already mentioned neoliberal reforms – to relate the macro-economic changes of the last three decades with their impacts on democracy and human welfare. Just as in the previous activity, participants resorted to argumentative assumptions, example-based arguments and causal arguments, either to stress a previous comment or to offer new information. As will be seen below, the argumentative line does not change much among groups, showing more coincidences than discrepancies.

The fall of the welfare State and its effects

To identify and understand the connection made by the groups between democracy and human welfare, it is necessary to recap the above answers. Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN) followers defined democracy as taking part in decision-making through the opinion of the majority. The central value is freedom, one which considers rights and obligations. They opine that democracy is stronger now than before, especially when assuming the democratizing effect of the 1948 Civil War, described as "revolutionary."

In consequence, the articulation between current democracy and human welfare is positive. In their view, the sectors or groups that claim a deterioration of human welfare as result of economic reforms are mistaken – the examples used to support their ideas will be analyzed later –. In fact they state that Costa Rica is better prepared politically and economically than thirty years ago:

> MARIA: "I don´t believe the statement that says that Costa Rica has declined in the last 30 years, […] I don´t think so; otherwise we would not have the bridges or the roads or the elementary schools or high schools or the education that we, men and women, have had access to" (PLN, 2014).

Moreover, they can accept that some sectors or parts of the population have not been considered in this economic model, but assume this comes from the adoption of poor economic reforms. As will be discussed later, PLN militants say the crisis was caused by

how the 1978-1982 Administration, Rodrigo Carazo Odio (PUSC), addressed the country´s difficult economic situation.

> MARIA: "What I think is that there have been isolated facts and events that […] at the beginning the State, when it shifted, when it changed our economic system in the 1980s and substituted the import-based economy for an export-based one, that is where we make a change, right. This change brings a series of economic things and this way, let´s say that… it forgot, I don´t think the word is forgot, but it happened, part of the population was maybe unable to access these mechanism and at some point lagged behind, but this does not mean we have backtracked, which is what they are trying to tell us, that is not so, I personally don´t think so (PLN, 2014).

They also assume that in order to overcome the situation, production needs to be further diversified, since they consider this to be a positive effect of the economic reforms implemented to correct the mistakes of the Carazo Administration. They mention education as the right channel to include these sectors: education which encompasses all areas of life, not just professional training:

> MARIA: "That there has to be a change, that there has to be inclusion, that there is a need to generate opportunities to study, that there has to be, diversify […] Then, we have to find a definitive mechanism to have a more inclusive society, no doubt about that, […] they have to start with education, education is fundamental because education pulls people out of the poverty circle. I have a theory. I think that poverty is inherited and it is inherited not because they do not have a way to obtain money but because, just like all social groups, each social group has its customs and behaviors. Then, I work in the agriculture sector and you go to a farming community and you say OK, the farming community is poor and we give it a school but the teacher himself comes from the same community and then they continue in this circle; there is no one to change the *sketch*. It´s not that it´s bad, because it´s not that it´s bad, but someone has to come and tell them: no, look, the way to walk or to sit at the table, to put it that way, is like this, this is where you put the plate, and the tableware goes like this, because you have to break the paradigm of poverty […] So in that sense I do believe and I do believe that Costa Rica has to move to reduce the poverty levels we have, that we have to try to do it" (PLN, 2014).

In the excerpt above, two assumptions are used. First, education is a necessary condition to rise from poverty. Second, not only professional education but also social education is necessary to convey appropriate behavior, which implicitly means transferring values associated with a *must be* originating from the elite that has access to this particular type of education. Therefore, the improvement of human welfare is not only necessary to tackle poverty as the lack of income, but also the lack of "culture."

In synthesis, Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN) militants do not consider that human welfare has deteriorated or that economic reforms have affected, but instead, some sectors still cannot access the overall improvements of the country:

> GONZALO: "In the crisis mentioned, in the eighties, maybe it was easier to see the country growing after Carazo because our economy was only focused on products, then it began to produce more, that was fine, it is easier to see a finished product and say: hey, look, we are producing, we are exporting; today we possibly do not have the same impression because we do not export products but instead services, the economy was diversified and that is why we did not feel the 2008 financial crisis, we didn´t feel it as much, yes we felt it but not as much as other places, here we did not see unemployment like other countries, even globally" (PLN, 2014).

However, changes were seen in how democracy is politically organized, specifically the political party structure. In first place, the assumption is that the Rodrigo Carazo Administration made the mistake of using a "statist" strategy, when the rest of the world was no longer "statist;" but the Partido Unidad Social Cristiana (PUSC) became consolidated thanks to him, strengthening national governance by reaching agreements, particularly between the two major political actors, PLN and PUSC:

> MARÍA: "And he was very skillful and he did it, but too statist at a time when the rest of the world was no longer statist, and at a time when we were heading to the end of a bipolar world […] something that nobody analyzes. But Costa Rica experienced a boom, from 48 let´s say to the 80´s, huge, but we received significant aid, that is, we had the Alliance for Progress […]" (PLN, 2014).
> MARIA: "Because what Carazo really did was lift up the Partido Unidad Social Cristiana. And we got to a bipartisan situation where the Costa Rican left wing had one or two, at most three congressmen, then governance –although nobody wants to believe it- was better; that is, I come later and work at the Legislature and I get to live the golden years of the Legislature and the *ungolden* years are the ones right now, right. It´s not that multi-participation is negative, but definitely […]" (PLN, 2014).
> BERTA: "Definitely consensus is best between two than among a bunch of political parties and, then, that leads to national governance. Why? Because regulations are designed in such a way that is at some point one single Congressman wants to obstruct, and the example is Otto Guevara when he was Congressman […] stopping thousands of projects and they were not passed" (PLN, 2014).

Second, the assumption that, despite the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall, the left wing continued to exist as a political position, divided into a "good" left and a "bad" left[19].

> MARÍA: "But the reality is that communism did not die. Communists remained ideologically communist and continued to do their work more easily because when people thought, no, that will never happen, no, that will never come, well that's it, it is latent in Latin America in many ways, because not all of them are the same, because for example take Bachelet who thinks differently, Lula himself, his leftism is different and his approach is quite democratic, contrary to that which Chaves left us, he really left a dictator who will increasingly go in that direction, Nicaragua is on that same path, the same [...] "(PLN 2014).

Consequently, when mixing the two assumptions mentioned above, PLN militants see in the increase of parties in government and in the presence of "leftist" parties as a threat to the democratic order as it introduces more complexity in decision making, which decreases - in their perception - when fewer parties compete for power. In addition, they interpret the left as a group that imposes dictatorial measures and introduces violent methods into politics:

> GONZALO: "But there are two that point out to the left, we have Frente Amplio, which whatever they say goes completely to the extreme, and we have a little bit in PAC[20]. Trends are very similar to what they are, for instance, in Venezuela and Nicaragua, which is creating an enemy (quote and quote). Who is this enemy? The official party, the system, attacks to the system. Why? Because afterwards I arrive and say: I'm the hero, I am going to save you from that enemy. See it with Maduro. Maduro although there is no toilet paper, no flour, the Refinery went bankrupt, and what they said was that it was the entrepreneurs' fault because they are capitalists; I'm going to save you all; see the whole country is in ruins, but at least I will give you half a loaf of bread. What is he saying? I am a martyr. And that is what has happened, that what they have done is what is directly attacking institutionality. First, seen from the side of the public administration, and second, from the government's side. They are creating this famous enemy and that is what we now have; before when bipartisanship was all we had, what we had until recently: on a sidewalk members of Liberación across from those from Unidad, with flags, and there was no violence. Now, with this range of parties, and that some go too far, so to speak, the excitement of the moment takes them overboard,

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[19]This reference to the distinction between left wings could have responded to the electoral situation in which the focus group was conducted. However, as the electoral topic was not covered, no interpretations can be made in this regard. We can only infer that the growth in the voting intentions of the Frente Amplio (FA) party was probably influenced.

[20]Citizen Action Party (PAC) was created in 2000 by disgruntled ex-militants of the PLN party ideological bias. At the moment on which the focus group was conducted, it was fourth in the polls of voting intentions, but it ended up winning the elections in the second round against PLN.

and thus we have come to have violence. I personally suffered one event, and I did not even have, I was not even wearing green, and why was it? Simply because I did not accept a flag from Frente Amplio, and I got slapped with a kilo of sausage in the face [...] "(PLN 2014).

This allows them to conclude, first, that there is no deterioration on human welfare in the country. It is the media that generated this unhappiness, which has a negative impact on public opinion, especially during the last two periods of government:

> GONZALO: "[...] And we have the media, let's not say yellow press because it is different, but populists who are seeding to get in the news all that is bad because that's what sells; if they will sell me a newspaper that says that everything in Costa Rica is well, what am I going to read it for?" (PLN 2014).

Second, they claim that there is deterioration in democracy but associated with the creation of new parties that destabilized the "way" in which agreements were established during the "bipartisanship". In addition to these new parties, the ones that are perceived as more threatening are those located to the left of the political spectrum, which qualify as populist:

> GONZALO: "Here in Costa Rica we have only had a political party with a structure, that is Liberación Party. The others are trendy parties that do not last more than 3 campaigns and then are taken down. See the case of PAC. PAC was allegedly the second force after Unidad, and see now, the protest vote passed; that is another topic, it is not that they do not believe in the system, it is not that they are not interested; it is that those who oppose the system simply do not vote. Thinking about it, it is like expressing their protest, or they vote for these populist parties that sell that idea "(PLN 2014).

However, the other participating groups do not share these assumptions. In the case of Frente Amplio (FA), the way in which they interpret the relationship between neoliberal reforms, democracy and human welfare is mediated by a definition of democracy that ranks as core content the participation, under the values of equality and solidarity. Therefore, unlike the militants of PLN, the presumption is that neoliberal reforms are not associated with human welfare and which have affected democracy, that the political class has dissociated the people, and the people react by drifting away from political participation:

> ALEJANDRA: [...] I believe that in no way can I let go of the crisis that has involved the neoliberal measures at the global level, that is true, i.e., the people realize that the political class is dissociated from the interests of the people, then they will say: Why would we participate in this? If in the end they do what they want and we are not taken into account in any decisions, they do not take into account our needs to live well, to have dignity when walking on the streets, among other things (FA, 2014).

In addition, unlike participants of PLN, militants of FA who were interviewed declare that the low participation of left parties has had negative consequences, as they have not provided an organized reference that articulates social unrest. Here you can see how political actors interpret the same event differently. Frente Amplio (FA), self-denominated leftist party, finds in plurality a negative aspect of the party system, compared to PLN, which finds this as a positive point. Therefore, the way in which they value the last thirty years is opposite from each other. For members of FA, as social participation was demobilized, negative effects were produced on democracy; for members of PLN, that was the period when the country changed according to global circumstances:

> FERNANDO: I think there is an important thing, which is that there are not only the neoliberal reforms, we can say. In this country, there was an important counterweight in society, which made reforms such as the type made by the Communist Party, it is true, Vanguardia Popular; [...] because also Vanguardia Popular in itself represented another kind of democracy than that represented by other parties internally, including the scope of the party which reached community institutions such as juntas progresistas, for example, then democratic participation occurred through those juntas progresistas at the community level; none of that exists now. I think there is no other reference to democracy, or until now a new one is being built in Costa Rica; then I think that there was a very strong break up, true, a break-up which our generation is just going back to conceptualizing a form of democracy that fits the historical reality of the country, but for 30 years the popular forces had no organized reference [...] because it was a consensus in this partisan society, a time in which parties are divided and the vast majority of society is left without a partisan representative, right, it is precisely due to this that I believe that all these neoliberal reforms went through more easily, really, without popular resistance (FA, 2014).

Meanwhile, some members of the Association for Development of Hatillo (ADH)[21], who had defined democracy as a political system where the government and the rights are elected by the people and whose core value is freedom of expression, use as a presumption that the application of neoliberal economic reforms has directly affected the state administration and increased inequality:

> ROBERTO: "[...] Then it has undertaken a neoliberal policy which ultimately intends to consider the state as a small manager [...]; it simply is a sequel to a state of affairs where we are losing democracy, that is the sequel, which unfortunately brings upon corruption, with a few becoming rich and others who no longer see even beans. But I insist, seeing that global capitalism is threatened, it sets a model to remain longer in power, but those here, the "bombetas"[22] we have here, being such a small and

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[21] We must remember that for some participants in this group there is no relationship between democracy as a political system and economy.
[22] Proud, smug.

underdeveloped country, take that model as implemented here, impose it by force, and what we got was the losing of democracy, losing, losing, losing, that's the truth" (ADH, 2014).

Similarly, in the case of the Association for the Development of La Guaria (ADG), which had also defined democracy as the participation in the election of the government through voting, established the presumption that neoliberal reforms have affected democracy and welfare, without being able to specify the connections explicitly. What they perceive is that governments have enriched themselves without considering the development of the people

> RAFAEL: "[...] Unfortunately I voted for Carazo and then the country started going in reverse gear and it was not, I think, at the worldwide level, but here, from then on governments have failed us; there was Oscar Arias, who won the Nobel Prize for [*sic]*, but no, no, always, they were governing for themselves"(SBA, 2014).

The above answers show, at least in the two previous groups, that there is a possible association between a narrow definition of democracy - associated with participation in the choice of government positions - and the difficulty of identifying factors that affect it, since as we will see later, people do identify specific changes in everyday life that relate to the level of human welfare, but fail to establish presumptions that explain these events.

The same interpretation can be applied to the participants of the Indigenous Maleku Community, who defined democracy as a system that protects rights and freedom, without reference to the other groups or to participation as core content. Thus, when asked about the relationship between neoliberal reforms, democracy and human welfare, they continued talking about their experience in the community. This reinforces the interpretation provided above, that the experience of being made invisible by the State, makes the demand of recognition by the State rather than the analysis of the national situation to rule:

> OLGA: "Well, I do not know if other institutions or other entities, but right now I am referring to the Municipality of Guatuso because otherwise when we get grip on money or other project [*sic*], it is corruption, that's theft, it is corruption, and it is not unusual, as I said before for the government and for many institutions we are not a priority, and I imagine that there is no money that goes to indigenous peoples, and it never gets there [sic] [...] "(CIM, 2014).

This relationship between the definition of a concept and its impact on social policy practices responds to Koselleck's approach (1993:118) in which certain concepts set horizons and limits for the possible experience. In other words, restrictive definitions of democracy not only impact the way in which the concept is articulated, but also how they perceive contents associated with democracy, and how legitimization is done through these. For groups that define democracy in a restricted manner, it is difficult to identify relationships between the application of economic measures, human welfare, and political participation; while groups who chose to broadly define democracy - the members of Frente Amplio (FA) and the members of the Colectivo Autónomo Anarquista - are more able to identify this relationship.

As can be seen in the following extracts, the latter group used as a presumption that democracy must provide minimum welfare, thus, identifying a reduction in the implementation of social policies by the State, they conclude that it not only affects the human welfare, it also affects political participation of citizens:

> LORENA: "[...] it comes from more than 30 years ago; it is what was known as a Welfare State, indeed, let's say, in that Welfare State, institutions such as the Costa Rican Social Security were acquired, the right to education, among others, really, more accessibility to universities, higher education. (CAA, 2014).
> MICHAEL: "Yes [...] there was a decline, because with all these policies that have been implemented to, as I say, to align the country, say, the development that only certain people want, then the programs they had before, maybe some benefitted more people but are being reduced now [...] "(CAA, 2014).
> JULIO: "[...] has been declining, the situation in relation to elections, to call it that way, since more than 30 years ago or maybe more, participation was slightly higher, it is changing because of policies, not only policies that have sought to implement, some that have done so, others not due to social struggles [...] this has been done in the past 4 or 5 elections which has greatly increased absenteeism [...] (CAA, 2014).

Less access to services, insecurity and little transparency

As discussed above, examples function as enhancers of the greater premise, in this case, presumptions in relation with neoliberal reforms, democracy, and human welfare.
For participants of the National Liberation Party (PLN), examples served to reinforce the presumption that there has been no decline in human welfare:

> BERTA: "[...] the standards of 30 years ago were much lower than today's standards. And I say this because 30 years ago I was a doctor in Guanacaste and I walked around installing latrines, right now if I go to Las Juntas de Abangares and nobody has latrines, everyone has sewers; then, of course, that is, we have been improving. Probably we have not improved at the pace we were improving after the Revolution of 48, and especially in the years when Don Pepe and Daniel were presidents, etc., when it increased a lot. [...] Well, 30 years ago there was no internet, right now Costa Rica is among the Latin American countries that have more internet access and more homes have internet access ... health, there are waiting lists, yes; but at this time, surgeries are done in this country that were not done 30 years ago; 30 years ago it was very easy to solve the problem of public health because the health problem was to prevent children from dying of diarrhea, [...] then lines are because well, I have 5,000 patients on the waiting list of which nearly 3,000 are for hip replacement. Why? Because 30 years ago hip replacements were not performed nor did senior citizens have the quality of life they have right now and then there were not as many elders. "(PLN 2014).

GONZALO: "[...] It would not have increased the level of average age of the population; second, we would not be sponsoring or rather exploiting the blue tourism market, which is why foreign patients come here to be treated [...] (PLN 2014).

However, the rest of the participating groups do not share this optimism. The examples used to report a decline in human welfare included major situations and conditions. In the case of militants of Frente Amplio (FA), they identify the relationship between neoliberal reforms and the reduction in human welfare through a reduction in the quality of government services that directly affect the chances of social mobility and increased citizen insecurity:

LINA: "And it affects the quality of services of the institutions that we say are part of democratization, right? It affects the quality of the Caja[23], say, a service, then those with access to quality health care are the ones who can access private medical services and that's part of breaking that process [...] Education, exactly, those who enter, true, and those who do not, those who are left out; and that in turn affects social mobility, true, many, say in my case, my mother went through the process of social mobility, that is, she could not even eat 3 meals a day when she was my age, and now we are middle class, say, where we can get along well, and it was thanks to the National University and public educational institutions "(FA, 2014).
LUIS: "Oh yes, here you cannot go out at 8 or 9 at night because inequality has created a state of insecurity and violence and high crime levels. I think that it has affected the welfare of the majority; of an elite group, as I keep saying, no, that is, those still traveling outside the country, those are still living very well, very well, they have done very well over the years, but there has been a larger group "(FA, 2014).

Meanwhile, members of the Asociación de Desarrollo de Hatillo (ADH) also identified a decrease in social policies, specifically in supporting small farmers, the housing sector, and an increase in inequality:

JUAN: "Well I think we have changed, of course, we went from a welfare state that was in the 49 to 80, where presidents arriving the first thing they saw were the social problems, CNP[24], ICE is more visible than IMAS[25], and as they had resources to support all classes, to everybody, to all the poor and to everyone, as of the 80's are the SAP's, and it causes that strangulation of the economy, and it is the transformation that removes the social part, now give us just a little help [...] (ADH, 2014).

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[23] Costa Rican Department of Social Insurance.
[24] National Production Council.
[25] Social Assistance Institute.

In the case of the Asociación de Desarrollo de La Guaria (ADG), the examples they provide are directly related to the last political and social conflict in which they participated, which was the concession of the road to San Ramon to a private consortium. For residents of neighboring communities this concession dramatically increased the cost of tolls without receiving any apparent benefit, which came out to demonstrate and managed to avoid the project. However, the government had to pay indemnity. For this reason, participants of the group noted as an example of the application of neoliberal reforms and their impact on democracy, the fact that they have not been consulted, accusing the government of being corrupt:

> EDUARDO: "[...] If the people related to the road to be built by OAS[26], which was not done, thank God, had been taken into account, had been involved, a good decision would have been made as it should be [...] how is it possible that a road like this that does not cost 200 million colones [...] how is it possible that these people wanted to invest 900-odd million dollars of which nearly 600 were commissions, [...] and that the people did not realize, until now, I remember, (...) It is a clear example of non-participation of the people in the decisions that politicians make (ADG, 2014).

However, in the case of the Indigenous Maleku Community (CIM), references to problems of the community are constant. As stated earlier, this can be interpreted as a sign that these people feel little connection with the State and its institutions, thereby, the examples they provide relate to the obstacles they have to sustain their crops, livestock, access routes to the community:

> ANGÉLICA "[...] Even I have understood that there was a specific amount of money that came to the Municipality of Guatuso that was meant for the Maleku communities [...] then when we realized it had already been diverted [...] I do not know if they think on how to claim that money because there are convincing documents which specify that the money came for Maleku communities, I think we should fight for it because it is a right we the Malekus have and besides [...] it was not diverted, it was stolen, then I do not know what they think, if they think they will claim for that money [...] "(CIM, 2014).

Finally, in the case of members of the Colectivo Autónomo Anarquista (CAA), their examples reinforce the assumption previously mentioned. For them, the effects that neoliberal reforms have had are evident in reducing access to health and education:

> LORENA: "And all this happens as a result of the CAFTA, with the Structural Adjustment Programs, and all that. The Welfare State has been gradually shrinking and has been reduced to the point that currently we have a crisis with the Costa Rican Social Security. There are people who have to wait in lines and lines and lines to be operated, to see a doctor,

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[26] A Brazilian company to which the road was given under concession.

whereas before it was perhaps a bit more accessible. Furthermore, now EBAIS are being shut down in communities, then all those people have to be commuting a lot more to have access to that, to that security. And there is also the whole process with the World Bank, which now will privatize the top universities [...] increasing external debt and setting policies more related to the technification of higher education. Then a comparison of 30 years, actually the State of Costa Rica today has decayed enough; yes, it has declined a lot "(CAA, 2014).

The "other" as responsible

Just as such arguments for example, causal arguments work as auxiliary of the major premise. In case of participants of the National Liberation Party (PLN), even though they deny that there is a decline in human welfare, they point out that in the government of Rodrigo Carazo there were deep economic distortions that still impact the quality of life of Costa Ricans:

> BERTA: "After the crisis of the 80s and as a result of the problems in which Carazo left the country, which made every person 16 times poorer, that is, I was a resident physician when I started during the time of Carazo and earned $96, and when I finished studying I still earned 110 dollars. Our purchasing power varied terribly, then there were many things that could not be done, that is, we did not continue to grow at that pace, but one notices the standards "(PLN 2014).
> MARÍA: "[...] The monetary crisis that was generated by Rodrigo Carazo Odio in this country was at such levels that even in that year, Don Bernal, in all decency, told Don Rodrigo's son: "Rodrigo, the thing is that we could never recover from what your father did." So now, this economic consequence that we have and the fiscal reform and everything we have to do is not due to the latest governments; it is not the result of this government; it is not a result of the past government and the one preceding it; this comes from 1979." (PLN, 2014).

Thus, the responsibility for the situation of human welfare in the country relies with past actions that have failed to be reversed by subsequent governments. For this group, neoliberal economic measures that were adopted have had to recover the country from those economic distortions; this goal has yet to be achieved. Moreover, this economic problem has become worse due to the presence of migrants, who do not pay taxes and have contributed to the increase in the deficit:

> BERTA: "[...] Then we began to have a migration that we never had before... a million, because even though they say it should be about a million Nicaraguans who request services, or who have an illegal status, many do not pay taxes, do not pay Social Security. Well, they do now because they are being charged, but that just began; it was not until 2 years ago that they started charging everyone who came, before, everything was given to them" (PLN 2014).

The reference to the period of government led by Rodrigo Carazo Odio also appeared as part of the causal arguments of members of Frente Amplio (FA), although the association is different. For this group, the economic reforms carried out by this president were not the ones which generated distortions, but rather it was the neoliberal thrust of the next government. Furthermore, not only in the economic pressures are the reasons why the country began to implement the neoliberal model, but they interpret that the geopolitical situation of the region contributed to the way political processes were in Costa Rica, since it not only impacted the State but also the left wing parties, which were weakened in the process and were divided:

> PABLO: "Right now, several things happened, not only the neoliberal thrust that began with the government of Luis Alberto Monge, but also, let's say the moment when Carazo expelled the IMF and provoked a sharp devaluation that the Ticos, let's say, what that generation tells us, because none of us are, but what you tell us: we felt what communism was, didn't we? [...] The victory of the Sandinista Revolution in 79 helped with the fact that the United States began to put a lot more attention on Central America; let's say, to send more cultural investment, much more structural investment, let's say, of every kind, especially in this country, which would be the ideological counterweight to the Sandinista Revolution in the continent; in addition, in 1984 [...] the Popular Vanguard Party and the Socialist Party divided and began to spread out, let's say, the political and ideological references that made a counterweight to the neoliberal regime. I think all those things together are those that we can say [...] that happened from 78 to 84, the division of Vanguardia Popular. For me that is the time when one might say, that's where it starts, let's say, the setback of democracy as we understood it here in Costa Rica (FA, 2014).

Finally, according to the above, members of the Asociación de Desarrollo de Hatillo (ADH) and of the Asociación de Desarrollo de La Guaria (ADG) indicate the cause of the deterioration of the relationship between democracy and human welfare and moral decay associated to certain effects of neoliberal reforms:

> JUAN: "I think that with that business opening that occurred, multinational companies got us into so many things, and we have been very weak in terms of the identity of Latin Americans to defend those things, but I do say that there are some families that have firm values [...]. What multinational companies are doing is to try to convince the government to make it very easy to eliminate all taxes that could be used to maintain our society and as no taxes are charged, then all goes in and out without any benefit to the government, to the country; that is a serious problem [...] "(ADH, 2014).
> RAFAEL: "I think that yes, it was 30 years ago when it began to affect and that is where governments begin to stagger. I think they were previously more honest and worked more for the people and from then

on I do not know why there was this imbalance; you feel that hence
governments begin to stagger and then, when they want a government
job, it is in order to benefit themselves and not to benefit the country, and
I feel that's where it all begins [...]" (SBA, 2014).

In summary, it can be noted at this point that there is a relationship between the way in which democracy is defined, its associated content and interpretation of how it affects the human welfare. The groups which since the beginning used definitions of minimum democracy associated to civil liberties and basic policies, as well as of procedures for popular election - liberal procedural democracy - are those that have more trouble articulating the relationship between the application of neoliberal reforms and their impact on human welfare. Although all groups, including members of the National Liberation Party (PLN), which started from the premise that there was a decline in human welfare, perceive that there are problems in the democratic regime that affect the generation of human welfare, not all able to identify this as a result of thirty years of implementation of neoliberal reforms. Rather, it seems that the way these reforms were negotiated and the lack of public debate impacted the way in which people reconstruct the historical narrative and try to give meaning to it.

For this reason, different positions can be understood, ranging from the position of the members of the National Liberation Party (PLN), who associate the problems of democracy not with neo-liberal reforms, but with an increase in the complexity of the political party system and a weakening in the ability to build consensus among political actors. For these people, the fact that now there are more political parties has not contributed to decisions deemed necessary to correct the distortions of the past. This shows that this conception of democracy is aimed at consensus building as an end in itself to exclude the expression of dissent, which is identified as threatening[27].

Meanwhile, members of Frente Amplio (FA) not only directly associated deterioration of democracy with the implementation of neoliberal reforms, but they did a counterbalance opposite to the previous group. For them, this process affected the low presence of opposition parties that were able to articulate popular dissatisfaction, which reduced the chances of organization and affected political participation. In the same line are members of the Colectivo Autónomo Anarquista (CAA), who accused the neoliberal reforms to deepen the damage caused by the liberal-procedural democracy. In other words, if beforehand they perceive democracy as a regime that does not allow them to articulate their economic and social demands, under a neoliberal economic model, reducing the population's access to health services, education, and decent housing exacerbates these failures.

In the case of members of the Development Associations, either in Hatillo (ADH) or La Guaria (ADG), most of these preferred to identify a decline in human welfare in moral terms. While they identify that there has been an increase in social inequality, a reduction in

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[27] Although you can interpret the references made by some participants of the National Liberation Party (PLN) against left wing parties due to the electoral situation of the moment (at the time that the focus group was conducted, surveys pointed Frente Amplio (FA) as the main competitor in the presidential elections), the use of anti-communism as a strategy to break up social movements and opposing political parties is not new in the country, as stated above. This strategy had its high point after the 1948 Civil War, when political participation of communist parties was forbidden (Solis Avendaño, 2006: 122, 368; Sandoval García, 2002: 132-133). This prohibition disappeared in 1975. However, accusing the *other* of being Communist remains a common strategy for political disqualification (Alvarez Garro, 2011: 62).

the quality of government services and an increase in corruption, the interpretation of why this has happened tends to refer to moral reasons over changes in the macroeconomic structure.

Finally, members of the Indigenous Maleku Community (CIM), as mentioned above, put before any other popular demands their need for recognition by the State. Thus, the way in which they interpret the relationship between democracy and human welfare is contingent and framed by the routine of their community.

As can be seen, the way how democracy and its relationship with human welfare is assessed is determined, first, by the contents associated with the concept, which limit or expand the exercise of political practice; and secondly, by the political, social, and economic context in which each group is embedded. This also impacts the development of proposals that link democracy with human welfare, as discussed below.

Democracy and welfare. Necessary content.

As a closing activity, participants of the various groups were asked to complete their reflections by proposing what political, economic and social content must a democracy have that points towards human development and the generation of welfare. In this case, the analysis trends shown above are the instrumentalization into concrete suggestions about what should be done to improve the conditions of the present democracy.

Members of the National Liberation Party (PLN), in line with its previous argument, concluded that to improve democracy, social welfare programs should be promoted with the objective of distributing that wealth through state programs to eliminate extreme poverty:

> BERTA: "[...] The reality is that it is true, but the only way to improve a certain population is by ensuring they have certain things. When it became IMAS[28], people jumped with joy because there was IMAS, and IMAS would give them economic aid, because it would help them pay for their house. [...] Then came the Oscar Arias administration which established the *Avancemos* program that consists on giving scholarships so that teenagers can finish school, and people say that they use the money for other purposes. Well, this is the risk that must be run; the country has to take a risk in this regard; it is very possible that out of 100 teenagers, 2 of them pay for their cell phone with that money, or buy food for the family [...] (PLN 2014).
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> MARIA: [...] Doña Laura has the *Red de Cuido, Manos a la Obra* in rural areas, which is a program for girls and young women, especially for those women who are heads of their households. There is also *Empléate* and [...] Liberación Nacional is proposing to guarantee the 3 meals. [...] Unfortunately poverty is measured in economic terms, I think that poverty should not be measured in economic terms but we have to do it. That will cause that families, that families which qualify for receiving this aid, get scholarships; the mother has to leave her children somewhere where they are well and safely cared for, not with the next door neighbor

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[28] Social Assistance Institute.

or with the next door boy, who you never know what they might do to the little ones; then you are ensuring a part of the kind of solidarity that should exist [...] "(PLN 2014).

The mention of social welfare programs created by the two previous governments of the Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN), points out that these people would not be willing to make big changes in the government or in the kind of state, but rather they would deepen on already made actions in order to observe better results. Thus, the trend expressed throughout the analysis that the members of PLN do not perceive that there are problems within the kind of democracy and that it affects the level of human welfare, thus they choose to support a continuity strategy. For them, the most vulnerable sectors must be tackled through supportive government programs:

> BERTA: "[...] I mean, you, someone who is malnourished will never be able to study, will never be able to get out of this condition of poverty. And I think that has to be with a spirit of solidarity, and it is important to see where the money comes from and to organize all existing programs which can be made. And I think that this is part of democratic accountability, solidarity with those who have less (PLN 2014).

As has been analyzed so far, the rest of the group does not share this assessment. The members of Frente Amplio (FA) indicate that political, social, and economic changes must be made in order to improve the living conditions of the population. Among the political changes, they point out the need to articulate a greater participation outside the electoral sphere, through the creation of spaces for public consultation and community participation:

> PABLO: "Our strategy has advanced [within Frente Amplio][29], and it is good. Our democracy is representative, but it is also participatory, meaning that the people get involved; in South America now there is talk of representative, participatory and furthermore protagonist, or a permanent leading role [...] of the organized people in the decision-making process, and that would be one way in which would understand the true democracy, I think, in the XXI Century". (FA, 2014).
> JESSICA: "[...] A democratic government should be able to gather the opinions and needs of all people, then there should be more like a -I do not know if this is the correct word- a decentralization of power in the Executive Power and also in the Legislative Power, which somehow goes down to the communities, and they are able to have one, that is, that one can achieve a coming and going of communication between communities and governments for that what people really need which is to have an echo "(FA, 2014).

As for social change, those consulted expressed that public education should improve in order to be informed and to participate in decisions made within the government, as not

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[29] Brackets added by the researcher.

only should participation from above be enhanced but also so that people can find something relevant within participation:

> CARLOS: "No but there goes education and information, you attend inasmuch as your understand how important it is to participate in this and how much it will affect you and how much you can bring into that space, then where you inform and educate people about how important it is as a citizen within the government network, i.e., that it is essential then people are empowered, let's say, and will participate in those spaces, that's the point. It is not to open just for the sake of it [...] (FA, 2014). "

In addition to this, participants noted the importance of having a socially based economy, since not only mechanisms of social distribution of wealth are needed but also the tax burden needs to be proportional to the income level:

> FERNANDO: [...] If you are talking about democracy in the economy so that the wealthier pay according to their condition of being wealthy and the poor pay or even do not pay, really, I think that this is necessary in this country, here all tax reform proposals have been backwards, right, increasing value-added taxes, lowering income taxes. I think that is something that a government should do; it is something that is in our program and that by voting democratically, if we win, it would be something we would promote, and that I think that it will generate welfare. The other is the debt with the Caja and the general social security system of the country, which has economic and political reasons and which is something that is necessary for the welfare of the country that this institution (FA, 2014) works properly.

As can be seen, the differences that can be found among the proposals of PLN and the FA depend on the way in which democracy is defined and on the particular interpretation that both parties have of the current national situation. Not only play a political party program is at stake, but two different ways of thinking about the relationship between political, social, and economic fields.

This form of providing content to democracy changes when consulting other actors who do not belong to political parties of national scope. In the case of the Asociación de Desarrollo de Hatillo (ADH), although one states the need for the people to resume a role in politics, the majority decided to stress on the need to restore "moral values." Although one person pointed to a reconfiguration of the political field as a necessary condition to strengthen democracy and caused a slight reflection on the condition for voting and its effects, this reflection did not have much echo within peers who continued to defend the urgency of education with a predominance of respect to duties and not to abuse rights:

> ROBERTO: "That is going to be a bit radical because the truth is that to enjoy a democracy, true democracy, it can only be achieved on the day when the people overtake power because there is a social class that since long ago has governed us. It is changed every 4 years, and the one that is at the service of this millionaire class in this country who are behind the

Arias brothers [...] you go to vote but you do not choose, candidates are imposed on you; the president or presidential candidates are imposed on you. Here, there is no democracy, if I go to see a ballot for congressmen, I meet a lot of guys and women who do not even know who they are, and I have to vote for that party " (ADH, 2014).

ALEJANDRA: "And on that ballot it would be fantastic if you could vote for the one you know and who you know is really going to make a good representation, but we must vote for all [...]" (ADH, 2014).

For these people, the weakening of democracy is associated with a moral problem. Education has to provide emphasis on the obligations of children so that they grow up to exercise their duties of citizenship without abusing their rights:

ALEJANDRA: "The first thing I think that should be done is to educate children in good schools so they know what rights, duties, and obligations they have, because now they only have rights, they have no obligations, what rights and obligations they have, so that when those children grow up and get to the Legislative Assembly because they will be eligible to be in congress, they can become congressmen who are aware that when they are going to vote a bill, they must first think on the people, then there is the people, and in the last place, his own pocket. " (ADH, 2014).

MONICA: "I first would remove the office of human rights, because since human rights were introduced, offices have been a disaster, licentiousness because nobody can complain because a claim is filed at the Sala Cuarta, anything happens. I would remove it first because what it has done is to hinder many things "(ADH, 2014).

This perception about democracy, which was previously associated with the presence of social authoritarianism, is also present when those consulted suggested that to mitigate unemployment, it is necessary not only to create jobs, but also people must work under "anti-vagrancy laws" and late working hours:

JUAN: "I mean I do not know if forcing people is the right word, but creating jobs for everyone to have the opportunity to work, I do not know if Ticos are bums or not, I do not know; but it seems that we need to create jobs, places to study to be able to climb socially. Young people who have no opportunity to study [...] like to look for an entity that makes us improve ourselves mentally, as one sometimes sees the Chinese, those guys sometimes work 18 daily hours, why don't we?" (ADH, 2014).

ALEJANDRA: [...] before there was the anti-vagrancy law. If you were merely standing on a corner for a while, the police would say "ah walking, walking, walking" or you were sent to jail. Now, if they spend there all night, all year round, there is no anti-vagrancy law." (ADH, 2014).

On the other hand, members of the Asociación de Desarrollo de La Guaria (ADG), if a moral interpretation is presented about the current state of democracy, they exhibit less social traits of authoritarianism, thus, their suggestions for what content there should be in a democracy for it to drive human development targeted for greater transparency in the public service, to have greater communication with communities and to have a decentralization in the decision-making process. Thus, this group advocates for greater participation beyond the electoral sphere. In this sense, they have a similar request to the one proposed by members of Frente Amplio (FA):

> NELSON: "[...] To be more communicative with the community, from the youngest to the oldest; that democracy is, that it would be to inform everyone [...]" (SBA, 2014).

> EDUARDO: "To make it more participatory, decentralized, it has been attempted [...] for example now they decentralized [...] the taxes that are managed by local governments. But see how funny, they decentralized something that generates revenue to the government, to local governments, but they did not decentralize the most important thing which is the decision-making of communities, if I could, the first thing I would do is to decentralize decision-making, that communities have a say about the decisions made for their people "(ADG, 2014).

As stated above, this item is associated with the recent experience of the community with a road concession, which was rejected, by the affected communities. This relationship between the community experience and content partnerships is necessary for democracy and human welfare. It also appears clearly on what was expressed by the people of the Indigenous Maleku Community (CIM). In this case, contents revolve around the idea of recognition as they feel that many of their problems stem from discrimination not only from the state but also from the rest of the citizens in the country. In addition to this, consider that the State must comply at all times with the provisions of Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization (ILO):

> ANGELICA: "And also that Convention 169 on indigenous people is enforced at the national level [...] because it is only on paper. It is a document that exists because there you have but they do not validate it or we do not validate it either [...] so in one way or another we always feel discrimination" (CIM, 2014).

Finally, in the case of members of the Colectivo Autónomo Anarquista (CAA), when presenting from the beginning that the contemporary form of democracy has only served for domination and the exercise of power, the proposal focuses on the implementation of a new form of political organization that is horizontal and participatory. Unlike other groups that continue to operate through popular demands to the state, this group believes that we should organize and inform communities to carry on concrete actions that can lead to this transformation:

PEDRO: "Organize ... Right now I think it is important to inform the public, mostly communities, organize, and act immediately" (CAA, 2014).

CELIA: "I think they also say something important that is part of the communication topic, let's say, break this myth that many people believe that the State is necessary to be able to live in order. Let's better say that the State is the one that is causing a lot of problems that we live through today. And I'm sorry, let's say that to show other forms of organizations that are working in other Latin American countries such as in Mexico, the Zapatistas; that the Zapatistas are completely dissociated from the State, and through autonomy and self-management they have achieved most things than before when they were living together with the State, it is possible, and that is possible if we translate it here into work and also work on other forms of organizations which for sure can give us a better quality of life with the State" (CAA, 2014).

From concept to action. The limits of liberal-procedural democracy.

As stated at the beginning, this research was articulated around two dimensions: the first one, what is the notion of democracy managed by Costa Ricans today; and second, if this notion of democracy includes specific demands in terms of human development and general welfare. That is, what are the contents that Costa Ricans who were consulted consider that a democracy should have to be legitimized by the people.

While the groups consulted do not allow to make general interpretations, they do allow to visualize trends in interpretation. First, the majority of people interviewed used a notion of minimal democracy. They perceive this political model as one that protects civil and political liberties through a set of basic procedures. This definition significantly impacts the way in which the scope of democracy is articulated; and therefore, what claims can be considered valid. Thus, demands that challenge the order of the State are perceived as threatening.

Second, although people perceive negative impacts on their welfare as a result of neoliberal reforms, specific identification of this reforms does not appear clear and distinctive. Only in cases where a concept of democracy outside the liberal-procedural scope is used, a more clear association between these reforms and the impact not only on human welfare, but also on democratic participation is achieved.

Third, the democratic myth remains effective to support the model of political identification and citizenship building. The constant references to the past as a better time, to return to values, to that idyllic time in which politicians were closer to the public, reinforce this interpretation. This construction of meaning, which appears in most of the groups, affects how the current democracy is evaluated and what contents it should have to provide welfare. Except for the Colectivo Autónomo Anarquista, and to a lesser extent, members of Frente Amplio (FA), none of the groups mentioned the possibility of a reconfiguration of the political order to change or improve the current situation, but the contents associated with what democracy should be, refer us to a yearning for the Welfare State which operated until the eighties of the last century, or refer to a conservative view of society -social authoritarianism-.

In summary, it can be concluded that while there are references that indicate social discontent against the State and the implementation of neoliberal macroeconomic policies, the way to carry on the association between these and democracy does not seem clear. It seems that the lack of public debate has had a negative impact on the ability of citizens to be informed and to defend themselves against these, as they can only vaguely identify those responsible for these and why they are applied - except for members of the Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN) who observed the implementation of corrective measures for the economic distortions created in the past -. Therefore, this setting significantly impacts on the ability of political actors to perform specific actions to change all that is harmful to society.

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Annex 1

In total, 36 people participated in the focus groups, 18 women and 18 men, 20 to 82 years of age. Although the initial requirement when the groups were convened was equal presence of men and women, due to the electoral moment and the difficulties in convening some of the groups, the work was done with volunteers. The difficulties that arose during data collection included two groups that did not meet the minimum number of participants stipulated (five rather than six people). This situation applied to members of Partido Liberation Nacional (PLN) and the Maleku indigenous group. In addition, in the latter there was a person who chose to abstain, even though in attendance at the meeting.

Group	Pseudonym	Age	Place of Origin
Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN)	Gonzalo	28	Montes de Oca, San José, Costa Rica.
	Silvia	40	
	Marco	46	
	María	55	
	Berta	56	
Partido Frente Amplio (FA)	Luis	24	San José, Costa Rica
	Jessica	26	
	Lina	26	
	Fernando	28	
	Carlos	29	
	Pablo	32	
Asociación de Desarrollo de Hatillo	Sofía	56	San José, Costa Rica
	Juan	59	
	Julio	59	
	Marta	65	
	Mónica	70	
	Roberto	78	
	Alejandra	82	
Asociación de Desarrollo	Valeria	38	La Guaria de Piedades Sur de San

de La Guaria	Eduardo	44	Ramón, Alajuela, Costa Rica
	Nelson	46	
	Margarita	54	
	Rafael	58	
Maleku Indigenous Community	Silvia	24	Guatuso, Alajuela, Costa Rica
	Héctor	25	
	Natalia	26	
	Diana	33	
	Olga	35	
	Irene	42	
Colectivo Autónomo Anarquista	Michael	20	San José, Costa Rica
	Augusto	20	
	Celia	21	
	Pedro	22	
	Néstor	23	
	Lorena	24	
	Julio	31	