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Economic Crisis, Incumbent Performance and Regime Support: A Comparison of Longitudinal Data from West Germany and Costa Rica

STEVEN E. FINKEL, EDWARD N. MULLER AND
MITCHELL A. SELIGSON

While much is known about the effects of the economy on the popularity and electoral fortunes of political leaders, political scientists know very little about how economic decline and political performance influence support for the political regime and the stability of democratic systems. We use three cross-national longitudinal surveys to address this issue: two collected in Costa Rica in the midst of a severe economic crisis in the late 1970s and early 1980s; and one in West Germany during the recession of the mid-1970s. We show that in both countries, overall support for the political regime remained extremely high during the economic decline, while satisfaction with incumbent performance fluctuated much more sharply. Moreover, at the individual level, changes in satisfaction with incumbent performance were only weakly related to changes in regime support. These results provide strong evidence suggesting that if democracies enter economic downturns with initially high levels of regime support, they will be able to withstand even severe, prolonged crises of economic performance.

INTRODUCTION

The disastrous chain of events culminating in Adolf Hitler's *Machtergreifung* of March 1933 raises important questions about the relationship between political support, economic crisis and the stability of democracy. The global economic crisis that came as an aftershock of the crash of the New York stock market in October 1929 hit Germany harder than any other advanced industrialized country.¹ Did this severe crisis of macroeconomic performance cause sentiments of legitimacy to decline from a level sufficient to maintain regime stability to a level so low that the breakdown of the Weimar Republic became inevitable? Or was the economic crisis merely an accelerator that hastened the demise of a

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¹ M. Raine Lepsius, 'From Fragmented Party Democracy to Government by Emergency Decree and National Socialist Takeover: Germany', in Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, eds, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 34–79.

regime that already was vulnerable to breakdown because of insufficient legitimacy even during the 1920s?

The answer to this question is not obvious. On the eve of the Great Depression, Germany was one of the leading industrial powers in the world, the labour force was well educated, and communications and mass media were extensive. Thus, Germany had very high levels on all of the socio-economic indicators presumed to be conducive to the development of stable democratic systems. Moreover, the fact that democracy had been externally imposed on Germany, and that the German party system exhibited what Sartori² calls 'polarized pluralism', does not necessarily indicate that the level of legitimacy was insufficient for stable democracy. Democracy was imposed on Italy by foreign powers in 1945, just as it was imposed in Germany by the Versailles Treaty of 1919; and the disloyal opposition initially in Italy during the 1950s was about as large as in Germany during the 1920s; yet there seems to have been sufficient legitimacy sentiment among the approximately three-fifths of party elites occupying the centre of the left-right continuum in Italy to stabilize democracy during its formative years. Thus, if German democracy in the 1920s was as legitimate as Italian democracy in the 1950s, it is quite possible that the Weimar regime could have evolved into a stable democracy were it not for the unusual severity of the economic crisis of the early 1930s. If so, perhaps it was the *erosion* of legitimacy sentiment due to failure of economic performance, rather than an insufficient initial level of legitimacy, that caused the breakdown of democracy in Germany.

The question of the legitimacy of the Weimar Republic leads to a more general question of importance for empirical democratic theory: how close is the relationship between satisfaction with the performance of the incumbents and support for the political system or regime? Two fundamentally different interpretations of the breakdown of democratic regimes emerge from the answer to this question.

If regime support is assumed to be a relatively volatile response to change in performance satisfaction, then the explanation for why democracy failed in Germany but not in other advanced industrialized societies at that time assigns predominant causal importance to the factor of performance failure or lack of effectiveness. If regime support is easily eroded by perceived ineffectiveness, then by implication the Great Depression could have caused a breakdown of democracy in any of the industrialized countries. Given an assumption of volatile legitimacy sentiment, the reason why regime breakdown occurred in Germany is that the greater magnitude of the performance failure there eroded support for the regime more deeply than in other countries.

Alternatively, it is possible that regime support is quite resistant to erosion even in the face of severe performance failure. An explanation of why a breakdown in democracy occurred in Germany but not in other industrialized coun-

² Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

tries, based on the assumption of robust legitimacy sentiment, would assign predominant causal importance to the factor of regime support instead of performance satisfaction. The argument would be that, in contrast to older democracies such as France, Britain and the United States, the Weimar Republic was not accorded much support by many Germans even as late as 1928; Germany was therefore far more susceptible to regime breakdown than the other countries, which, because of their much higher levels of regime support, withstood the crisis that Germany could not.

In this article we report an analysis of contemporary data from long-interval and short-interval panel surveys that focuses on the issue of the role of effectiveness and legitimacy as determinants of democratic regime stability. Our cases include an economically advanced country (West Germany) and a less developed country (Costa Rica). The results address the question of the sensitivity of regime support to economic crisis and performance failure in general, and they are relevant inferentially to a retrospective understanding of the particular instance of the breakdown of German democracy.

The Relationship Between Effectiveness and Legitimacy

In the seminal theoretical work on the link between performance crises such as the Great Depression and democratic political instability, Lipset hypothesized that the stability of a given democracy depends upon an interaction between effectiveness and legitimacy.³ If effectiveness is high, a regime can maintain stability regardless of the level of legitimacy; if legitimacy is high, stability can be maintained regardless of the level of effectiveness; the stability of the regime is threatened only if both effectiveness and legitimacy are low. The predictions of Lipset’s theory can be summarized in the four-fold Figure 1:

		<i>Effectiveness</i>	
		Low	High
<i>Legitimacy</i>	High	Stability (a)	Stability (b)
	Low	Instability (c)	Stability (d)

Fig. 1. Summary of predictions about stability of democracies

The most interesting predictions here are (1) that high legitimacy provides a ‘reservoir’ of diffuse support⁴ upon which the system can draw when its stability

³ Seymour Martin Lipset, ‘Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy’, *American Political Science Review*, 53 (1959), 69–105.

⁴ David Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* (New York: Wiley, 1965), pp. 273–4.

would otherwise be threatened by dissatisfaction with ineffective performance (cell 'a'); and (2) that effective performance can 'buy' stability in the absence of legitimacy (cell 'd'). These predictions both assume, however, that legitimacy and performance are relatively independent, i.e., that evaluations of performance effectiveness have little consequence for the legitimacy of the regime.

But what if the impact of effectiveness on legitimacy is relatively strong? Then the two inconsistent cells, low effectiveness with high legitimacy (cell 'a') and high effectiveness with low legitimacy (cell 'd'), will be empirically trivial. Any country in cell 'a' would be expected to shift into cell 'c', where effectiveness and legitimacy are both low. In this case, a low level of performance effectiveness would erode legitimacy, causing a shift from regime stability to instability. Conversely, any country in cell 'd' would be expected to shift into cell 'b', where both effectiveness and legitimacy are high. Here, performance effectiveness would operate positively on legitimacy, facilitating a strengthening of attitudes about the regime and thereby reinforcing regime stability.

The question of the relationship between effectiveness and legitimacy has important implications for theories of democratic regime stability. Is legitimacy eroded by negative change in performance evaluations, if not during 'normal' times, then during severe economic crises? Conversely, can positive change in performance evaluations help build legitimacy? Finally, how long do these processes take? Do they happen more or less instantaneously, or is there some delay in the effects on change in legitimacy that are produced by change in effectiveness?

RESEARCH DESIGN

The empirical study of attitudes of individuals relevant to democratic regime stability, initiated a quarter of a century ago by Almond and Verba,⁵ still has little to say about the critical relationship between effectiveness and legitimacy. There are three reasons for this. Firstly, measurement of the concept of regime legitimacy has been deficient. The most frequently used measure of political system support, the 'Trust in Government' scale, suffers from problems of questionable face validity as well as weak construct validity and relatively low reliability.⁶ Secondly, the survey designs have been static instead of dynamic. The most interesting questions raised by the effectiveness–legitimacy theory can be

⁵ Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963).

⁶ On the measurement of Trust in Government, see Arthur H. Miller, 'Political Issues and Trust in Government', *American Political Science Review*, 68 (1974), 951–72. On the controversy surrounding the validity and reliability of the measure, see Jack Citrin, 'Comment: The Political Relevance of Trust in Government', *American Political Science Review*, 68 (1974), 973–88; Arthur H. Miller, 'Rejoinder to "Comment"' by Jack Citrin: Political Discontent or Ritualism?', *American Political Science Review*, 68 (1974), 989–1001; Samuel H. Barnes *et al.*, *Political Action: Mass Participation in Five Western Democracies* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1979); Paul Abramson and Ada Finifter, 'On the Meaning of Political Trust: New Evidence from Items Introduced in 1978', *American Journal of Political Science*, 25 (1981), 297–307; Edward N. Muller, Thomas O. Jukam and Mitchell A. Selig-

addressed decisively only by panel surveys.⁷ Thirdly, the cases selected for investigation have been confined to the advanced industrialized democracies of the North Atlantic region. Although these countries have experienced economic crises during the 1970s due to increases in the cost of petroleum, in the era since the Second World War none has experienced a crisis of the magnitude of the Great Depression. A strong test of the predictions made by the effectiveness–legitimacy theory requires at least one instance of a political system subject to the stress of an extreme performance failure.

In this study we will conduct a comparative causal analysis of effectiveness and legitimacy in Costa Rica, a middle-income developing democracy, and West Germany, a very rich, highly developed democracy. Our measure of regime legitimacy is one that has been repeatedly validated cross-culturally in a series of previous studies.⁸ The survey designs are two-wave panels. One of the cases, Costa Rica, experienced a severe economic crisis during the period spanned by the panel surveys.

Costa Rica: A Critical Test Case

In 1979 the economy of Costa Rica entered what was to become not only its most serious depression in the twentieth century but a depression rivalling on a world scale that of the early 1930s.⁹ As a result of a combination of external factors (oil shocks and the decline in coffee prices) and inept domestic public policy (unprecedented foreign borrowing, overspending and exchange rate mismanagement), thirty years of steady economic growth was halted abruptly. The impact could be seen everywhere: the dollar exchange rate dropped from 8.6 to over 60, inflation rose from 5 per cent to over 100 per cent, unemployment tripled and the per capita foreign debt rose to the second highest in the world.

During the 1980s the economic crisis has continued.¹⁰ The incumbent

son, 'Diffuse Political Support and Antisystem Political Behavior: A Comparative Analysis', *American Journal of Political Science*, 26 (1982), 240–64; and Mitchell A. Seligson, 'On the Measurement of Diffuse Support: Some Evidence from Mexico', *Social Indicators Research*, 12 (1983), 1–24.

⁷ See, for example, Edward N. Muller and Carol Williams, 'Dynamics of Political Support–Alienation', *Comparative Political Studies*, 13 (1980), 33–59.

⁸ See Edward N. Muller, *Aggressive Political Participation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); Edward N. Muller and Thomas O. Jukam, 'On the Meaning of Political Support', *American Political Science Review*, 71 (1977), 1561–95; Muller, Jukam and Seligson, 'Diffuse Political Support and Antisystem Political Behavior'; and Seligson, 'On the Measurement of Diffuse Support: Some Evidence from Mexico'.

⁹ See Mitchell A. Seligson, 'Costa Rica', in Jack W. Hopkins, ed., *Latin American and Caribbean Contemporary Record, Volume 1: 1981–82* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1983); and Mitchell A. Seligson, 'Costa Rica', in Jack W. Hopkins, ed., *Latin American and Caribbean Contemporary Record, Volume 11: 1982–83* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1984).

¹⁰ For details, see Mitchell A. Seligson and Edward N. Muller, 'Democratic Stability and Economic Crisis: Costa Rica, 1978–1983', *International Studies Quarterly*, 31 (1987), 301–26; and Mitchell A. Seligson and Miguel Gómez B., 'Elecciones ordinarias en tiempos extraordinarios: La economía política del voto en Costa Rica', *Anuario de estudios centroamericanos*, 13 (1987), 5–24.

administration of Rodrigo Carazo Odio (leader of the Unidad coalition) was replaced in the 1982 elections by the PLN (Partido Liberación Nacional) led by Luis Alberto Monge, a seasoned politician who had been defeated by Carazo in 1978. Monge was somewhat successful in regaining governmental control over the economy. The rapid decline in the value of the *colón* was halted, and the exchange rate actually improved. Inflation dropped to about 11 per cent annually, and unemployment declined somewhat to 19.9 per cent. But Monge's efforts could not reverse the scale of the crisis, nor could they reduce the pain that Costa Ricans would have to feel as the country began paying for its economic errors of the past. Taxes were raised dramatically, with the levy on income, consumption and sales increasing in the range of 60 to 170 per cent. Compared to 1978, Costa Ricans faced a drop of 29 per cent in their disposable income, depressing private consumption to the level of fifteen years before. Industrial wages dropped to levels similar to those paid in Haiti, the poorest country in all of Latin America, and, according to one report, 71 per cent of all Costa Rican families had incomes below the poverty line of basic food costs.¹¹

Two panel studies were conducted during this time frame. One spanned the period 1978–85, and will be analysed to model the long-term effects of economic crisis, while the other ran from 1983 to 1985, providing information on short-term changes during the latter part of the time period. Both samples were drawn from the metropolitan region of greater San José, the capital of Costa Rica, and its surrounding suburbs and towns. Approximately 80 per cent of the urban population and 40 per cent of the entire population of the nation was covered by this sample. The 1985 sample was designed not only to complete the panel re-interviews, but also to produce its own representative cross-section of metropolitan San José. As funding limited the entire 1985 survey to approximately 500 interviews, it was decided to allocate about one half to a 'fresh' sample of respondents, and the remaining half to re-interviews distributed among the 1978 and 1983 respondents. Approximately one in three of the 201 respondents in 1978 was re-interviewed ($N = 75$), and re-interviews were conducted with approximately one in four of the 501 respondents from 1983 respondents ($N = 119$).¹² These panel respondents, interviewed before and at several points

¹¹ V. H. Céspedes, C. G. Vega, R. Jiménez and E. Lizano, *Costa Rica: Estabilida sin Crecimiento* (San José, Costa Rica: Academia de Centroamerica, 1984). See also Gudmundson, 'Costa Rica', in Jack W. Hopkins, ed., *Latin American and Caribbean Contemporary Record, Volume III: 1983–84* (New York: Homes and Meier, 1985).

¹² The response rates for the panels were affected not only by limited funds but also by the difficulties in locating respondents from the 1978 and 1983 surveys, neither of which were conducted with a panel design in mind. In regard to basic SES and attitudinal characteristics, however, the panel respondents differ little from the cross-section respondents, as the figures in the Appendix Table make clear. The only significant differences are in age, where the 1978–85 panel contains older respondents on average (since younger individuals could not, obviously, have been included in the original interview), and a greater proportion of primary education respondents in the cross-section than in either panel survey. But the equal proportion of university respondents is reassuring, because the generally lower degree of regime and performance support found in the university setting could have distorted the generalizability of the findings reported here. On all other variables, the distribution in the three samples are very similar.

after the onset of the economic crisis, thus constitute a unique real-world data base for investigating the extent to which legitimacy sentiment is subject to long-term and short-term erosion due to dissatisfaction with incumbent performance. These features, we believe, justify the analysis of samples which are small by conventional standards.

West Germany

The Federal Republic of Germany has achieved a superior record of economic performance since its inception in 1949. Nevertheless, in West Germany, as in all of the other advanced democracies, the boom years of the 1950s and 1960s came to an end with the oil shock of 1973–74, which resulted in a recession lasting from 1974 to 1976 that was more severe than anything experienced since the early 1930s. This time, however, as a result of effective management of macro-economic policy levers by the Schmidt administration, West Germany was among the countries least hard-hit by the recession.¹³

During 1974–76 a two-wave panel survey of selected rural, urban and university communities was conducted in the Federal Republic.¹⁴ Panel respondents ($N = 1,310$), who were interviewed in the autumn of 1974 and re-interviewed two years later, are a 49 per cent subset of the total number of respondents (2,662). The sampling sites from which they were drawn had manifested higher than average levels of anti-system political behaviour during the preceding five years.¹⁵ They were chosen in order to enhance the observation of anti-system political behaviour, thereby facilitating statistical testing of hypotheses about determinants of such behaviour. Because levels of regime support are related to anti-system behaviour, the distribution of regime support in the West German panel study is not representative of West Germany as a whole. However, the greater variation of regime support in the panel study is useful for the analysis of the relationship between effectiveness of incumbent performance and the legitimacy of the regime.

The decline of economic performance that occurred in West Germany during the time of the 1974–76 panel survey was much less extreme than that which began in Costa Rica in 1979. This contrast will enable us to investigate the question of whether relationships between performance satisfaction and regime support differ under the conditions of a mild, short-term recession as compared with a severe, long-term depression. In addition, we may compare the results of the West German to the Costa Rican two-year panels to determine whether short-term influences on legitimacy are similar in the two contexts.

¹³ Arnold Heidenheimer, Hugh Hecllo and Carolyn Adams, *Comparative Public Policy* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1983), pp. 126–33.

¹⁴ For full details on the West German sample, see Muller, *Aggressive Political Participation*, pp. 8–9.

¹⁵ Anti-system behaviour in the rural and urban sites entailed voting for political parties of the extreme left or right; in the university sites it entailed civil disobedience and political violence. See Muller, *Aggressive Political Participation*, p. 9.

COSTA RICA: RESULTS

Our analytic strategy will proceed as follows. After outlining the measurement of regime support and incumbent performance satisfaction, we discuss the stability and change in those variables that occurred during the period spanned by each of the panel studies. We shall then attempt to model more precisely the influence on change in regime support, and isolate whether and to what extent short-term or long-term changes in performance satisfaction may have had an impact on regime attitudes.

Measurement of the Variables

We measured Regime Support through responses to six questions, which, as noted above, have been used extensively in cross-national research. The items are:

To what extent . . .

- (a) do you believe that the courts in Costa Rica guarantee a fair trial?
- (b) do you have respect for the political institutions of Costa Rica?
- (c) do you believe that the basic rights of citizens are well protected under the Costa Rican political system?
- (d) are you proud to live under the Costa Rican political system?
- (e) do you believe that the Costa Rican political system is the best possible system?
- (f) do you believe that one ought to support the Costa Rican political system?

Each question was coded on a seven-point scale, with 0 representing the least favourable response and 6 the most favourable. An overall scale from 0 to 36 was created for each respondent who answered at least three of the six questions ($N = 70$), by multiplying their average response by the total number of items (6). For the 1978–85 panel, the scales show reliabilities (alpha) of 0.83 in 1978 and 0.69 in 1985, while for the 1983–85 panel, reliabilities of 0.76 and 0.80 were obtained.

Specific support for the performance of the incumbent authorities (Performance Satisfaction) was also measured from a summation of six questions, three of which directly relate to economics and three of which concern other aspects of governmental effectiveness. The questions are:

To what extent would you say that the government of President ('Oduber' in 1978, 'Monge' in 1983 and 1985) . . .

- (a) guarantees the security and protection of individuals?
- (b) has a strong and able political leadership?
- (c) controls the problem of the cost of living?
- (d) combats crime?
- (e) helps the needy classes?
- (f) successfully stimulates productive activities?

These scales also range from 0 to 36, and show reliabilities (alpha) of 0.90 in 1978 and 0.88 in the 1978–85 panel, and 0.89 and 0.83 in the 1983–85 study. It should be noted that although the specific President referred to in the 1978–85 panel questions are not the same over time, in both surveys the same political party, the Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN), held power. Thus, the changes in perceptions of incumbent performance which we discuss below are not merely artefacts of the respondent's partisan preference. The same President, Luis Alberto Monge, was in power for both years of the 1983–85 panel.

Stability of Regime Support and Performance Satisfaction

In 1978, both absolutely and in relation to other democracies for which we have data, support for the regime in Costa Rica was quite high. Thus, 91.5 per cent of Costa Ricans from metropolitan San José gave positive responses to the question about the extent to which they were proud to live under their political system, as compared to positive response rates of 88.3 and 70.0 per cent among representative samples of an urban population in the United States (New York City) and the urban Jewish population in Israel, respectively; also, in regard to the question about the extent to which the basic rights of citizens are protected under the political system, 70.2 per cent of the Costa Rican sample gave a positive response, as compared to positive response rates of 68.1 and 67.2 per cent registered by the American and Israeli samples, respectively.¹⁶ The comparatively high regime-support scores in Costa Rica result from a tradition of successful domestic conflict resolution that emerged in the nineteenth century, reinforced by the racial and ethnic homogeneity of Costa Rica's small population. The mean score on the total regime support scale in 1978 was 28.4 out of a possible 36.

Costa Ricans in 1978 were not only very supportive of the regime; they were also fairly satisfied with the performance of the PLN administration of Daniel Oduber. The mean score on Performance Satisfaction was 25.9 out of the maximum 36, with the large majority of respondents registering in the upper third of the performance satisfaction scale. Before the economic crisis, then, the Costa Rican political system was high on both effectiveness and legitimacy.

The panel respondents were also very favourable toward the political system in 1978, registering a mean Regime Support score of 29.4; and they were quite satisfied with the performance of the Oduber government as well, registering a mean Performance Satisfaction score of 27.8. In terms of the percentage distribution of scores, grouped according to levels of support and satisfaction, high scores on Regime Support (in the upper third of the scale, or the range of 25–36) were manifested by 81.4 per cent of panel respondents, and a miniscule 1.4 per cent of them were low (in the lowest third of the scale, 0–12); also, 71.8 per cent of panel respondents were high on Performance Satisfaction, while only 4.2 per cent were low.

¹⁶ See Seligson and Muller, 'Democratic Stability and Economic Crisis: Costa Rica, 1978–1983', pp. 311–13.

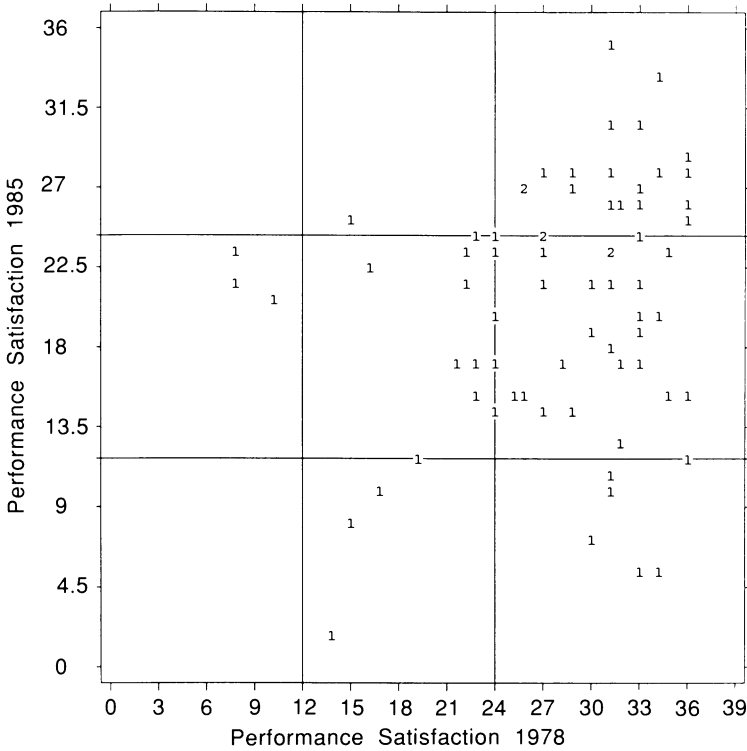


Fig. 2. Plot of Performance Satisfaction, 1985, with Performance Satisfaction, 1978; Costa Rican Panel Study

Not surprisingly, the severe economic crisis that began in 1979 appeared to have taken its toll among Costa Ricans. By 1983, only 52 per cent remained highly satisfied with the performance of incumbents, and this figure dropped to 29 per cent in both 1985 panel samples. The decline in satisfaction with incumbent performance was mainly from high to intermediate, which rose from 24 per cent in 1978 to 44 per cent in 1983 and 53 per cent in the 1985 follow-up to the short-term study, 56 per cent in the long-term 1985 follow-up. The proportion of those low on satisfaction also rose, to 10 per cent in 1983 and 18 per cent in one 1985 sample, 14 per cent in the other. Scatterplots of the change in Performance Satisfaction over the long and short terms are shown in Figures 2 and 3. The 1978–85 relationship is shown in Figure 2, while Figure 3 shows the relationship for 1978 and 1985. The solid lines in the plots demarcate low, medium and high levels of Performance Satisfaction. The correlation between these variables is +0.19 in 1978–85, and +0.33 in 1983–85. The lack of stronger correlation in the 1978–85 sample is principally a result of the fact that, as expected, many initially satisfied respondents in both panels declined in satisfaction over time, resulting in a relatively large clustering of cases in the middle and lower right-hand sectors of the graph. Altogether, 80 per cent of the respondents in the 1978 panel regis-

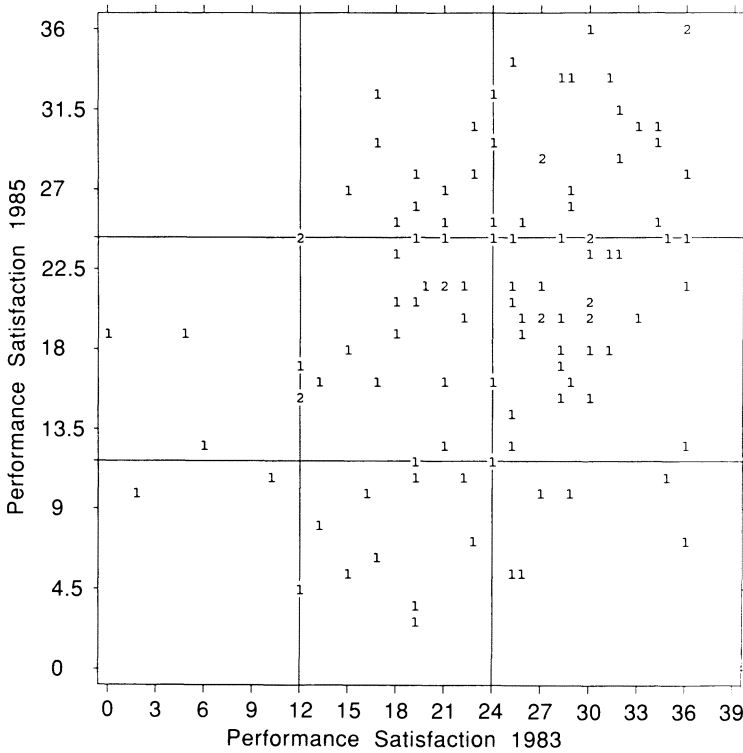


Fig. 3. Plot of Performance Satisfaction, 1985, with Performance Satisfaction, 1983; Costa Rican Panel Study

tered declines by 1985, and 38 per cent declined more than 10 points on the 36-point scale. In the 1983–85 plot, there is more stability, but still a large number of initially high-score respondents who decline over time, and a substantial number of initially medium-score respondents who decline as well. In this sample, 59 per cent showed some decline over time, while 25 per cent declined more than 10 points. It should be noted as well, however, that decline in Performance Satisfaction was not unanimous. Substantial numbers of individuals increased on this measure in both samples, and the pattern of increases and decreases also contributed to the low stabilities of Performance Satisfaction over time.

The important question is: what happened to support for the regime over the periods examined above? If there is a strong relationship between regime support and performance, one would expect the patterns seen in Figures 2 and 3 to be similar for regime support. This did not occur, however.

Figure 4 shows the change in Regime Support between 1978 and 1985 and Figure 5 the change in Regime Support between 1983 and 1985. In both plots, one can immediately see the large cluster of cases in the upper right-hand corner, indicating a substantial number of respondents who remained in the upper third

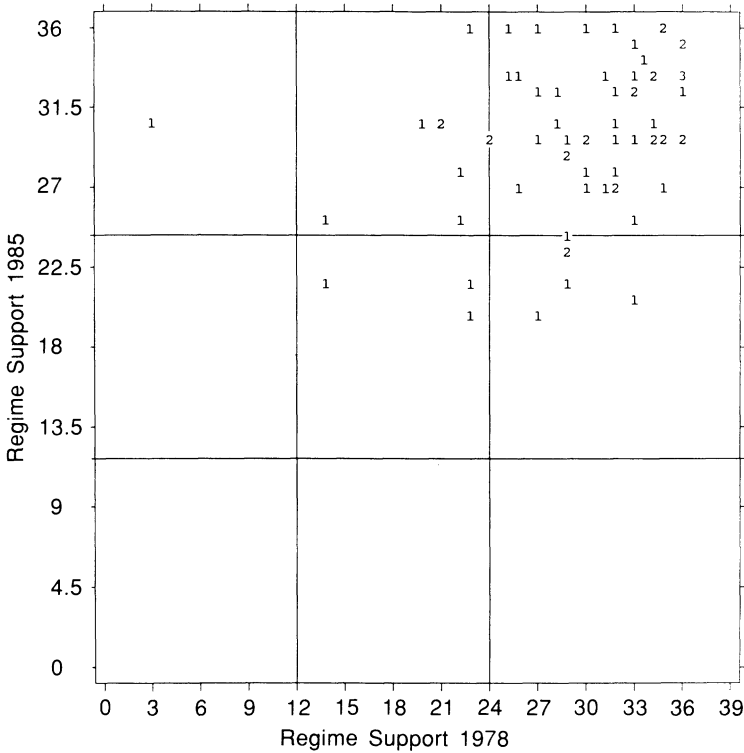


Fig. 4. Plot of Regime Support, 1985, with Regime Support, 1978; Costa Rican Panel Study

of the scale – the ‘high’ region of regime support. Almost three quarters (74 per cent) of the 1978–85 panel respondents maintained a high level of support for the regime, while almost 80 per cent remained at this level in the shorter 1983–85 interval. Another 4 per cent remained at the ‘medium’ level of support over the long-term, and 3 per cent over the 1983–85 period. Not a single panel respondent in either sample was consistently low on support for the regime. Indeed, the one respondent in each of the panel surveys who manifested a low level of support had shifted to the high range by 1985, while no respondents declined from high to low during either interval.

The pattern that we see in the figures is one of much stability in support of the regime. While there was some fluctuation in support scores over time in both samples, it generally took place within the restricted range of the upper third of the scale. Consequently, although there was decline in regime support, it was certainly not of a regime-threatening magnitude. In addition, many respondents increased their support for the regime during these periods, not only among those already high on support, but those in the intermediate range as well. Interestingly, of the fourteen respondents who were in the 13–24 range on regime support in 1983, only three remained at the medium level, while the rest registered high scores in 1985.

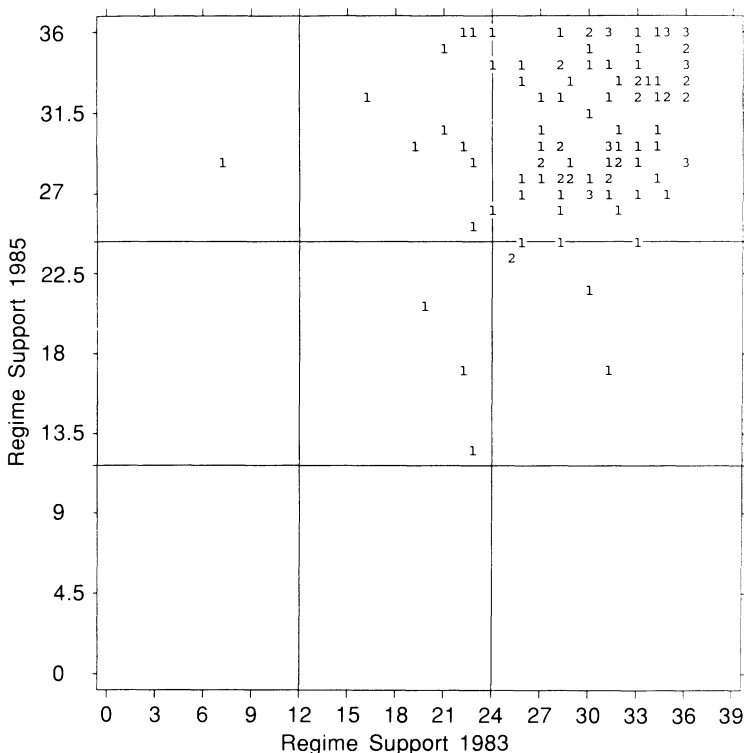


Fig. 5. Plot of Regime Support, 1985, with Regime Support, 1983: Costa Rican Panel Study

Taken together, these two figures indicate that while performance satisfaction at the individual level declined for most individuals during the economic crisis, regime support remained at high levels, and even increased for many who were not already highly supportive. The appropriate conclusion from analysis of the change which occurred in Performance Satisfaction and Regime Support is that the former was volatile while the latter was much less so. The economic crisis and performance dissatisfaction that resulted thus represented little danger for the stability of the regime.

The Effect of Change in Satisfaction on Change in Regime Support

Up to this point our analysis has focused on stability and change in support for the regime and satisfaction with incumbent performance separately. Because the plots of the changes in Regime Support were so dissimilar to the changes in Performance Satisfaction, we conclude that the overall sharp decline in performance during the late 1970s and early 1980s did not result in a legitimacy crisis, which helps account for the macro-level stability of Costa Rica during the economic downturn. However, little has been said about the precise effects of performance satisfaction on regime support; i.e. how changes in performance

may have affected changes in regime support over either the seven-year or two-year panels. It cannot be concluded from the above results that *no* relationship exists between these variables – only that the large drop in satisfaction with incumbent performance did not correspond with an equally large, system-threatening drop in support for the regime. It may be, however, that those respondents who did decline in regime support also registered the sharpest drops in performance satisfaction. It may also be true that the somewhat anomalous *increase* registered in regime support may have been concentrated among those whose performance ratings also increased. In short, we have not yet taken full advantage of the panel data to delineate the precise effects that performance satisfaction or dissatisfaction may have on regime support.

What we wish to determine is the effect of the *change* in performance satisfaction on *change* in regime support in both the long and short terms, and panel data is ideally suited to this task. We may begin simply by correlating the two change scores in both panels and noting their statistically indistinguishable 0.36 and 0.33 values in the 1978–85 and 1983–85 studies.¹⁷ Thus there is some covariation between the two measures. However, a more precise specification of the relationship between the change scores includes other influences on changes in regime support, and takes the following form:¹⁸

$$\begin{aligned} \text{CHANGE IN REGIME} = & a + b_1 * T_1 \text{ REGIME} + b_2 * T_1 \text{ PERFORMANCE} \\ & + b_3 * \text{CHANGE IN PERFORMANCE} + b_4 \text{ EDUCATION} \\ & + b_5 \text{ AGE} + b_6 \text{ IDEOLOGY} + b_7 \text{ CLASS} + U \end{aligned}$$

where CHANGE IN REGIME is an individual's change in regime support in the given survey, T_1 REGIME is the initial score on Regime Support, T_1 PERFORMANCE is the initial score on Performance Satisfaction, CHANGE IN PERFORMANCE is the change in Performance Satisfaction, U is an error term and education, ideology, age and class are control variables. This model takes into account several different sources of change in Regime Support, in addition to changes in Performance Satisfaction. It includes initial scores on Regime Support to control for the 'regression to the mean' effect commonly seen in longitudinal data, and because

¹⁷ Seligson and Gomez, 'Elecciones ordinarias en tiempos extraordinarios: la economia politica del voto en Costa Rica'.

¹⁸ It can be shown, with some very simple algebraic manipulations, that the following model reduces to the static score model where Regime Support in 1985 is a function of Regime Support in the previous survey, Performance Satisfaction in 1985 and Performance Satisfaction in the previous survey, and the control variables. See Ronald Kessler and David Greenberg, *Linear Panel Analysis* (New York: Academic Press, 1981), pp. 7–12. Kessler and Greenberg note (p. 11) that 'linear difference equations (those involving change in X as dependent variable) and equations involving only static scores (X_1 and X_2) are mathematically equivalent and can readily be transformed into one another'. Analysis of static scores is quite common with panel data (cf., e.g., Gregory Markus, *Analyzing Panel Data* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1980); and Steven E. Finkel, 'The Effects of Participation on Political Efficacy and Political Support: Evidence From a West German Panel', *Journal of Politics*, 49 (1987), 441–64), but in this case, we use the change score transformations because our theoretical interest is in describing *change* in regime support as a function of *change* in performance satisfaction during the economic crisis.

the Regime Support scale is 'bounded': change among those who are initially very low can only be positive, and change among those who are initially very high can only be negative. We thus expect a negative coefficient for this variable. Change in Regime Support may also be caused by initial values of Performance Satisfaction, indicating that evaluations of incumbent performance at one point in time influence subsequent changes in regime orientations. Age and education (measured in years), ideology (1 to 8 indicating 'left' or 'right' self-identification), and class (1 = upper, 2 = middle, 3 = working) are also included as controls, and to determine whether change in regime support was concentrated among certain sub-groups in the Costa Rican population.

Table 1 shows the results of this model as equation 1.1 for the 1978–85 panel and equation 1.2 for the 1983–85 sample.¹⁹ As can be seen, both equations show a large portion of explained variation in the Regime Support Change score, yet the lion's share of the explanation is due to initial levels of regime support. The very strong negative effect of initial levels of support on change means that initial differences between individuals in 1978 and 1983 declined by 1985; this is due to natural regression effects as well as to the larger increases registered in Regime Support among those who were initially in the 'medium' range, as seen in Figures 4 and 5.²⁰ These changes, it must be noted, occurred *independently* of changes in, or initial levels of, Performance Satisfaction.

Changes in Performance Satisfaction, however, did exert a significant impact on Changes in Regime Support in both samples. While most effects in panel models tend to diminish over time, the severity of the economic crisis in the late 1970s caused the effect of Performance Satisfaction on Regime Support to be even greater over the seven-year panel ($b = 0.20$) than over the two-year period ($b = 0.10$). This indicates that short-term fluctuations in performance are less likely than long-term changes to spill over on to regime support. Evidently, the changes must be large enough, and persist for a long period of time before they can have an impact on fundamental regime attitudes. It must be noted, however, that the magnitude of the effect in both surveys was relatively small; an individual must have changed 5 points on the performance scale in 1978–85 to have changed 1 point on the Regime Support scale, and must have changed 10 points (almost one-quarter of the entire scale) on performance from 1983 to 1985 to have changed 1 point on Regime Support during that period. Clearly, regime support is influenced to some degree by performance satisfaction, but, in accord with the findings from Figures 4 and 5, not to such an extent as to result in massive increases or decreases in legitimacy.

¹⁹ Because of the relatively small number of cases in the panel surveys, we used mean substitution for missing values, which saved seven cases for the 1978–85 analysis and five for the 1983–85 sample.

²⁰ By 'natural' regression effects, we mean the tendency of initially high scores on a variable to decline over time, and tendency of initially low scores on a variable to increase. One reason this pattern occurs is that initially extreme scores are caused in part by a very large positive or negative error term. When the variable is measured at another point in time, there is a high likelihood that the error term will be smaller; hence extreme scores tend to become less extreme over time. Regression to the mean can also result from measurement error and the effects of omitted variables which are captured in the error term. See Markus, *Analyzing Panel Data*, pp. 45–8.

TABLE 1 *Regime Support Regressions in Costa Rica†*

	Change in Regime Support			
	1978–85 (1.1)	1983–85 (1.2)	1978–85 (1.3)	1983–85 (1.4)
Initial Regime Support	–0.87** (0.08) <i>–0.83</i>	–0.76** (0.09) <i>–0.68</i>	–0.85** (0.09) <i>–0.81</i>	–0.74** (0.09) <i>–0.67</i>
Initial Performance Satisfaction	0.20** (0.09) <i>0.22</i>	0.06 (0.07) <i>0.08</i>	0.23* (0.10) <i>0.25</i>	0.08* (0.07) <i>0.11</i>
Change in Performance Satisfaction	0.20** (0.07) <i>0.28</i>	0.10** (0.05) <i>0.17</i>	—	—
Positive Change in Performance Satisfaction	—	—	0.35* (0.20) <i>0.17</i>	0.29** (0.12) <i>0.21</i>
Negative Change in Performance Satisfaction	—	—	0.18** (0.07) <i>0.19</i>	0.03 (0.07) <i>0.03</i>
Education	–0.09 (0.26) <i>–0.03</i>	–0.15** (0.06) <i>–0.19</i>	–0.09 (0.26) <i>–0.03</i>	–0.14** (0.06) <i>–0.18</i>
Age	0.05 (0.04) <i>0.10</i>	0.02 (0.03) <i>0.05</i>	0.05 (0.04) <i>0.10</i>	0.02 (0.03) <i>0.06</i>
Ideology	0.56* (0.32) <i>0.12</i>	0.02 (0.35) <i>0.01</i>	0.56* (0.32) <i>0.12</i>	–0.05 (0.35) <i>–0.01</i>
Class‡	—	1.60* (0.89) <i>0.14</i>	—	1.58** (0.88) <i>0.14</i>
Intercept	16.6	20.3	15.3	18.8
Adj. R-squared	0.64	0.50	0.64	0.51
N	(75)	(113)	(75)	(113)

† Standard error in parentheses; standardized betas italicized.

* $p < 0.10$ ** $p < 0.05$

‡ Not measured in 1978–85 panel study.

The effects of the other control variables are also weak in comparison to the effect of initial levels of Regime Support, yet they do reveal some interesting patterns of change over time. For the long-term panel, Ideology appears to be a marginal predictor of change, in that right-wing respondents show the largest increases, while left-wing respondents the sharpest declines. In addition, initial levels of satisfaction significantly affected changes in Regime Support in this study. This indicates that, controlling for initial levels of Regime Support, the higher the individual was on Performance Satisfaction, the greater the change in Regime Support over time. For the short-term panel, Class shows a marginally significant effect, indicating that working-class respondents registered somewhat larger increases in support than respondents from middle-class or upper-class backgrounds. The significant negative effect for Education also means that the most highly educated registered the largest *decreases* in support, which, given the radicalizing impact that university education has on many Latin Americans, is a not unexpected finding.

The Asymmetric Effects of Change

The data in Table 1 indicate that changes in performance satisfaction do have some impact on changes in regime support. Our theoretical concerns, however, necessitate further investigation into what types of change matter; that is, did increases and decreases in performance satisfaction have similar effects on regime support? One would have expected negative changes to have the more important effects on Regime Support during the economic crisis, yet from the data in Figures 4 and 5, it appears that the larger changes in Regime Support were in the positive direction, and this may have been caused by increases in satisfaction with incumbent performance.

We created two separate variables, one representing the extent of positive change in performance evaluations and one representing the extent of negative change across each of the two time periods.²¹ We re-estimated the models, substituting Positive Change in Performance Satisfaction and Negative Change in Performance Satisfaction for the overall change measure, and obtained the results in equation 1.3 for the 1978–85 sample and 1.4 for the 1983–85 sample.

In both periods, the somewhat unexpected finding is that greater effects are seen for *positive* rather than negative changes in performance evaluations. The difference is much greater in the short-term panel, where negative changes in evaluations have no impact on regime support whatsoever. In the long-term

²¹ If an individual increased in Performance Satisfaction, then the positive change variable equalled the amount of change; otherwise, the positive change variable was 0. If an individual decreased in Performance Satisfaction, then the negative change variable equalled the amount of change; otherwise, the negative change variable was 0. Thus, the positive signs for the coefficients for the Positive Change variables in Tables 1 and 2 indicate that as individuals become more positive in performance satisfaction, they become *more* favourable towards the regime. The positive signs for the coefficients for the Negative Change variables indicate that as individuals evaluate incumbents more negatively, they become *less* favourable towards the regime.

panel, positive change has a greater impact than negative change, although both effects are statistically significant. These findings confirm first that regime support is very resistant to weakening, as it declines only in response to long-term drops in performance satisfaction. They also suggest that regime support may increase through positive changes in incumbent performance in both the long and short term. Although most respondents in both samples declined in their perception of incumbent performance satisfaction, some individuals did show increases, and these models indicate that regime support among those respondents was strengthened as a result. While previous research suggests that individuals are more likely to attend to negative than positive information about incumbent performance, the results here indicate that the opposite may be true about regime support: positive changes in performance satisfaction in Costa Rica are more likely than negative changes to influence regime attitudes.²²

WEST GERMANY: RESULTS

The West German context, as noted above, provides interesting comparisons to Costa Rica. West Germany experienced only a mild shock as a result of the oil crisis of the 1973–74 period, not the full-blown crisis seen in Costa Rica during the latter part of the 1970s and early 1980s. In this sense, we can compare the changes in regime support which may result from a milder economic setback with those from a more severe depression. The survey design in West Germany is a two-year panel, enabling us to compare the short-term influences on regime support in West Germany with the 1983–85 results in Costa Rica. There are, then, ample opportunities to test whether the results found in both panels in Costa Rica are generalizable, or whether they are limited because of the severity of the economic crisis or for other, country-specific or idiosyncratic, reasons.

Measurement of the Variables

The variables in West Germany were measured with similar regime support and performance items as in Costa Rica. Indeed, the design of the Costa Rican surveys was closely modelled on the West German study. However, only three of the regime support items which constitute the scale in Costa Rica were included in the earlier West German study. We constructed the regime support measure, then, from those three items:

- (a) I have great respect and affection for the political institutions in the Federal Republic.
- (b) I find it very alarming that the basic rights of citizens are so little respected in our political system.

²² On negativity in political evaluations, see Richard Lau, 'Negativity Effects in Political Behavior', *American Journal of Political Science*, 29 (1985), 119–38; and Samuel Kernell, 'Presidential Popularity and Negative Voting', *American Political Science Review*, 71 (1977), 44–66.

- (c) The courts in the Federal Republic guarantee everyone a fair trial regardless of whether they are rich or poor, educated or uneducated.

The scales are somewhat less reliable than the six-item regime support scales in Costa Rica, but are in the acceptable range of 0.70 in 1974 and 0.63 in 1976. We multiplied the resultant index by two to ensure comparability of the scales in the two countries.

Incumbent performance was also measured by six items, again with as many questions as possible similar to the Costa Rican study. The questions ask the respondent to 'give a grade between 1 and 5' to the present government according to how well it has:

- (a) provided care for the old, weak and needy;
- (b) worked for economic stability;
- (c) guaranteed the national defence;
- (d) provided strong and active political leadership;
- (e) protected the free market economy;
- (f) worked for law and order in the country.

The reliabilities of this 25-point scale are extremely high, with an alpha of 0.81 in 1974 and 0.85 in 1976.

Stability and Causal Effects

Of initial interest are the changes in means for each of these variables over time. As in Costa Rica, Regime Support in West Germany increased very slightly among panel respondents, from 19.4 in 1974 to 20.7 in 1976. This is somewhat surprising, given the attempt of the survey's sampling procedures to locate anti-regime sentiment, yet even among this rather unrepresentative group, the economic downturn did not serve to increase alienation from the system as a whole. The absence of aggregate change in incumbent evaluations observed in the panel is even more striking. The panel rated the performance of the Social Democratic government under Helmut Schmidt slightly higher in 1976 (20.39 out of a possible 25) than the Wili Brandt SPD government in 1974 (18.45), suggesting that although there was an economic decline, aggregate perceptions of government competence remained very high. These ratings show that, at least for this sample, the economic downturn did not result in more negative performance ratings for the West German incumbents. This confirms the widely-held view that objective economic conditions do not automatically translate into a loss of incumbent support.²³ But did either the increases or decreases in incumbent performance produce change in regime support?

Identical models to those in Costa Rica were estimated with the West German

²³ See Michael Lewis-Beck, 'Comparative Economic Voting: Britain, France, Germany, Italy', *American Journal of Political Science*, 30 (1986), 315-46; and Manfred Kuechler, 'A Trend Analysis of System Support in West Germany', paper presented at the Annual Meetings of the Southern Political Science Association, Atlanta, Georgia, November 1986.

TABLE 2 *Regime Support Regressions in West Germany*†

	Change in Regime Support, 1974–76	
	(2.1)	(2.2)
Initial Regime Support	–0.72** (0.39) <i>–0.62</i>	–0.72** (0.39) <i>–0.62</i>
Initial Performance Satisfaction	0.17* (0.09) <i>0.08</i>	0.17* (0.09) <i>0.08</i>
Change in Performance Satisfaction	0.31** (0.07) <i>0.19</i>	—
Positive Change in Performance Satisfaction	—	0.28** (0.10) <i>0.12</i>
Negative Change in Performance Satisfaction	—	0.35** (0.12) <i>0.10</i>
Education	0.008 (0.10) <i>0.01</i>	0.003 (0.10) <i>0.01</i>
Age	0.05** (0.02) <i>0.10</i>	0.05** (0.02) <i>0.10</i>
Ideology	0.27* (0.15) <i>0.06</i>	0.27* (0.15) <i>0.06</i>
Class	0.04 (0.62) <i>0.00</i>	0.05 (0.62) <i>0.00</i>
Intercept	9.0	9.2
Adj. R-squared	0.40	0.39
N	(632)	(632)

† Standard error in parentheses; standardized betas italicized.

* $p < 0.10$ ** $p < 0.05$

data to determine more precisely the impact of performance evaluation on regime attitudes. The form of the equation is identical to the Costa Rican analysis except that the relevant variables are measured in 1974 and 1976, instead of the years spanned in the Costa Rican surveys. Equation 2.1 in Table 2 shows the results of the general model predicting change in regime support.

The results, except for the demographic and ideology variables, are very similar to the short-term Costa Rican panel. The largest effect on Change in Regime Support is, again, initial levels of that variable, followed by Change in Performance Satisfaction. Although the scales are not directly comparable, both the unstandardized and standardized effect ($\beta = 0.19$) of Change in Performance Satisfaction are congruent with the results from Costa Rica. This suggests that there may be a very general impact of change in evaluations of incumbent performance on regime support, differing slightly according to the time lag involved and the economic and political context. However, although the effects are all statistically significant, they are not large enough in magnitude in either country to have had a profound substantive impact on the legitimacy of the regime.

We next investigated the possibility of differential effects of positive and negative change. The results, from equation 2.2, show that in West Germany, both positive change ($b = 0.28$) and negative change ($b = 0.35$) in performance evaluations had a statistically significant impact on changes in regime support, and both were of approximately equal magnitude. This pattern differs slightly from the patterns seen in Costa Rica. While in both countries positive changes in performance satisfaction spilled on to regime orientations, only in West Germany did negative short-term performance evaluations cause a decline in regime support. The differences between the countries probably reflect the different sampling strategies in the two countries which resulted in many more individuals with negative regime attitudes being included in the West German study. Moreover, in West Germany, as in Costa Rica, the effects of changes in performance satisfaction on regime support were small in substantive magnitude. There were perceptible adjustments of regime attitudes as a response to both positive and negative changes in performance satisfaction in both countries, but the effects were certainly not of sufficient magnitude to have significant macro-level implications for overall regime stability.

CONCLUSION

We find no evidence that changes in the evaluation of incumbent performance caused major changes in regime support in either Costa Rica or West Germany over either the short or the longer time periods investigated here. However, the two variables were not completely independent. Change in performance evaluation did exert some impact on change in attitude towards the regime in both countries, controlling for a wide range of other variables; yet the macro-level implications for the stability of the regime were minimal, as most of the changes were slight in magnitude and most change took place only at the upper portions of the regime-support scale.

These results have important implications for theories of the determinants of democratic regime stability. Although Costa Rica in the late 1970s experienced an extremely severe economic crisis, and although West Germany slid into economic recession in 1973–74, there was no aggregate erosion of the very high levels of legitimacy in either country. In Costa Rica, the economic crisis had a substantial negative impact on evaluations of the effectiveness of incumbent performance, but in West Germany no such general decline occurred. In neither case, however, did evaluations of incumbent performance influence overall system attitudes to such an extent as to call the legitimacy of the regime into question for large numbers of citizens. This strongly suggests that if democracies enter economic downturns with initially high levels of regime support, as both Costa Rica and West Germany did in the 1970s, they will be able to withstand even severe, prolonged economic performance crises.

Our findings suggest, therefore, that in democracies that have achieved a high level of legitimacy there are limits to the potential effects of economic outcomes on political support. While a substantial body of recent literature has documented the importance of economic conditions on elections and incumbent popularity,²⁴ our results show that evaluations of incumbent performance during economic downturns or crises by no means automatically translates into general regime orientations. To the extent that there is a 'spill-over' effect, it is imperfect, generally weak, and, at least in Costa Rica, asymmetric, with regime support being more receptive to positive than to negative change in performance satisfaction.²⁵

Thus, the existence of high levels of legitimacy acts as a barrier protecting the political system against the potentially deleterious effects of failures in economic performance. We may speculate that in the absence of legitimacy, performance failures may lead to regime instability under conditions of protracted crises. But we infer from the results of this study that lack of legitimacy, rather than performance dissatisfaction, is the key determinant of the breakdown of democratic political systems.

²⁴ See Lewis-Beck, 'Comparative Economic Voting: Britain, France, Germany, Italy'; Kristen Monroe, ed., *The Political Process and Economic Change* (New York: Agathon Press, 1983); and the many references cited in those works.

²⁵ The slight positive effect of change in performance evaluation on change in regime support in both West Germany and Costa Rica supports theoretical speculation about the role of effectiveness as a source of legitimacy sentiment. See David Conradt, 'Changing German Political Culture', in Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, eds, *The Civic Culture Revisited* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1980); and James M. Malloy and Mitchell A. Seligson, *Authoritarians and Democrats: Regime Transition in Latin America* (Pittsburgh, Penn.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987).

APPENDIX TABLE *Characteristics of Cross-Section and Panel Respondents in Costa Rica*

	1985 Cross-section	1983–85 panel	1978–85 panel
<i>Sex</i>			
Male	44%	43%	43%
Female	56	57	56
<i>Class</i>			
Middle	45	46	—
Working	55	54	
<i>Education</i>			
Primary	40	49	47
Secondary	41	33	32
University	19	17	21
<i>Age</i>			
Under 30	44	44	23
30–50	38	37	47
50 +	18	19	30
<i>Ideology</i>			
Mean on 1–8 scale	5.97	6.22	5.95
<i>Regime Support</i>			
1985	30.1	30.5	29.9
<i>Performance Satisfaction</i>			
1985	20.1	20.3	20.5