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Bulletproof Promises: Security Crisis and Bukele's Electoral Rise in El Salvador (2018–2019)[1] [2]

Promesas a prueba de balas: crisis de seguridad y el ascenso electoral de Bukele en El Salvador (2018-2019)

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Abstract: Over the past decade, escalating criminal violence has threatened governance in Latin America and reshaped electoral debates. The question arises: How do security crises influence electoral promises and outcomes during presidential campaigns? This article examines El Salvador's 2019 presidential election, where Nayib Bukele's victory was shaped to the government's failure to combat gangs, the humanitarian emergency driven by gang violence, and prior clandestine agreements. The research combines Yasushi Asako's model of electoral promises with Analytical Narratives, using game theory to formalize candidates' decisions across three chronological stages through payoff matrices and utility functions. The findings suggest that, in Nayib Bukele's case, political ambiguity constitutes a rational decision as a shield. This strategy maximized his identity differentiation and minimizing penalties for programmatic inconsistency, securing a dominant position on the electoral landscape.

Keywords: Security Crises — Presidential Campaigns — Electoral Promises — Political Ambiguity — El Salvador

Resumen: Durante la última década, escaladas de violencia criminal han amenazado la gobernabilidad en Latinoamérica y reordenado el debate electoral. Pero ¿cómo influyen las crisis de seguridad sobre las promesas y resultados electorales durante campañas presidenciales? Este artículo analiza la elección presidencial de 2019 en El Salvador, donde la victoria de Nayib Bukele estuvo marcada por fracaso gubernamental contra las pandillas, la emergencia humanitaria y pactos clandestinos previos. La investigación combina el modelo de promesas electorales de Yasushi Asako con Narrativas Analíticas, formalizando mediante teoría de juegos las decisiones de los candidatos en tres etapas cronológicas, con matrices de pago y funciones de utilidad. Los resultados sugieren que, en el caso de Bukele, la ambigüedad política constituyó una decisión racional: maximizó diferenciación identitaria y redujo costos por inconsistencia programática, otorgándole una posición electoral dominante.

Palabras clave: Crisis de seguridad — Campañas presidenciales — Promesas electorales — Ambigüedad política — El Salvador

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, Latin America has become the global epicenter of homicidal violence due to the density, adaptability, and competitiveness of its criminal ecosystems (UNODC,2023). This trend intensified post-COVID-19 as Violent Non-State Actors (VNSAs) exploited security gaps and economic vulnerabilities to diversify into predatory crimes and strengthen territorial control. This deterioration, compounded by declining state institutional capacity to restore public order, generated severe security crises in historically peaceful countries like Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Chile (Breda, 2025), threatening governance and reshaping electoral debates (Gorokhovskaia & Grothe,2024).

Against this backdrop, we ask: How do security crises influence electoral promises and outcomes during presidential campaigns? To address this, this article analyzes El Salvador's 2019 presidential election as an empirical and theoretical turning point. Nayib Bukele's first-round victory interrupted three decades of bipartisan hegemony between ARENA and the FMLN, dismantling the post-civil war security architecture. As Perelló and Navia (2022) demonstrate, this disruption occurred despite voters perceiving well-defined ideological differences between both traditional parties. Therefore, severe discontent with democracy as a vehicle for public order neutralized the classical left-right programmatic axis.

This finding provides the political-science justification for the game-theoretic model developed. It establishes that the 2019 electoral landscape operated under a profound performance crisis inherited from the Salvador Sánchez Cerén administration (2014–19) rather than classical spatial competition. Consequently, candidate strategies cannot be calculated solely through nominal polling parameters (Pi). By proving that democratic disaffection drove voters, Perelló and Navia (2022) validate why our indexed utility function attaches crucial weight to identity differentiation (βDi) and reputational inconsistency (γCi). Bukele's competitive edge stemmed from weaponizing this performance deficit. Specifically, the strategic failure to combat gangs, the resulting humanitarian emergency, and the disclosure of clandestine agreements between traditional parties and gangs (MS-13 and Barrio 18) constituted exogenous shocks that increased reputational costs for the duopoly, undermined their promises, and disrupted their electoral machinery.

This article examines these strategic dynamics by combining Yasushi Asako's (2021) model of electoral promises with Analytical Narratives (Bates *et al.*,1998). This triangulation couples' game-theoretic rigor with

a reconstruction of the historical context and political constraints. By formalizing interactions through indexed utility functions—weighing vote intention, identity differentiation, and reputational costs—the study uncovers the candidates' underlying rationale.

The article is structured as follows: first, it examines how State–gang dynamics under the outgoing administration generated reputational costs. Then, it chronologically analyzes three campaign stages: positioning under strategic uncertainty (October 2018); validation under fiscal constraints (November–December 2018); and tactical adjustments under complete information (January 2019). Finally, the findings suggest that Bukele's political ambiguity was a rational decision functioning as a shield. This strategy minimized programmatic inconsistency penalties while maximizing identity differentiation returns, securing his dominant position.

2. Theoretical Framework

Over the past decade, Security Studies and Political Science have developed a robust theoretical body of work to understand criminal violence in Latin America. Grillo (2016) identifies the emergence of *criminal warlords* leading armed groups with mafia-like, terrorist, and insurgent characteristics, whose control over illicit markets challenges state authority. Accordingly, scholars highlight the difficulty of characterizing violence associated with these VNSAs due to their hybrid and complex nature, conceptualizing it as a nontraditional armed conflict (Zepeda, 2023; Koonings & Kruijt,2023).

Recent research attributes the rise of VNSAs to three factors: transnational illicit political economies, persistent territorial competition, and state dysfunction (Bergman,2018; Yashar,2018; Vilalta,2020). Fragmented bureaucratic structures enable elites to facilitate criminal governance (Durán-Martínez,2018; Lessing,2021; Feldmann & Luna,2022). Arias (2017) examines VNSA influence on local governments, finding that institutional connections and civic interference permeate public policy design, while Moncada (2021) demonstrates how resilient strategies against extortion in vulnerable communities undermine the rule of law and social cohesion.

This relationship extends into the electoral arena, where these actors undermine legitimacy by co-opting political parties through intimidation and illicit financing (Garay & Salcedo-Albarán,2026). Trejo and Ley

(2020) theorize how democratic transitions, electoral competition, and partisan conflict catalyze territorial disputes among cartels, intensifying subnational violence. Nevertheless, a gap persists concerning the impact of security crises on candidates' campaign promises and electoral outcomes. To address this, Asako (2021) analyzes electoral promises through game theory as strategic decisions under uncertainty. Rather than mere programmatic commitments, the formulation of promises alters actors' incentives and outcomes. From this perspective, promises serve three functions: *commitment device*, *political signal*, and *vague words*.

Table 1

Types of Electoral Promises by Function and Degree of Bindingness

Type of Promise	Campaign Function	Degree of Bindingness
Commitment Device	Restrict future behavior	High/Fully binding
Political Signal	Communicate information about the candidate	Medium/Partially binding
Vague Words	Preserve room for maneuver and attract heterogeneous electorates	Low/Non-binding

Source: Own elaboration based on Asako (2021).

A promise functions as a *commitment device* when it constrains a candidate's future maneuverability, allowing voters to anticipate subsequent decisions due to the political costs of noncompliance. As a *political signal*, it conveys information about a candidate's preferences or positions, reducing uncertainty under imperfect information. Finally, *vague words* avoid restrictive commitments and preserve tactical flexibility when addressing heterogeneous electorates. Thus, political ambiguity—defined as a lottery encompassing multiple policy types—is a rational decision aimed at maximizing electoral support and reducing costs from commitments that may be incompatible across voter groups.

This model explains promises as strategic instruments whose selection responds to competitive incentives and political context. To comprehend the strategic calculus behind this selection, Asako's typology must be integrated with findings on retrospective pledge voting, which uncover the psychological and institutional foundations governing how electorates evaluate promises. Comparative research establishes that promissory representation is driven by a structural asymmetric accountability;

due to a pervasive negativity bias, voters penalize broken pledges with severe electoral sanctions, whereas fulfillment yields marginal rewards (Naurin *et al*.,2019). Individually, this punitive asymmetry is amplified among politically distrustful citizens, as unfulfilled commitments trigger a cognitive confirmation bias validating their pre-existing cynicism toward elites (Matthieß,2022).

Mechanistically, while highly centralized executive structures theoretically optimize the perceived capacity of achievement (Thomson *et al*.,2017), a severe security crisis can invert this dynamic, converting incumbent institutional leverage into a reputational liability. Consequently, where specific promises act as liabilities due to institutional distrust and asymmetric punishment, the rational incentive to formulate highly binding commitment devices diminishes (Naurin *et al*.,2019; Matthieß, 2022). Under these constraints, political ambiguity serves as an optimal defensive mechanism, allowing a candidate to signal competence (Matthieß,2020) without providing concrete metrics that inevitably trigger the public's negativity bias.

During security crises, this framework becomes particularly relevant because such crises act as exogenous shocks reconfiguring the options available to candidates and voters. The evolution of a crisis alters both citizens' preferences and the costs of programmatic commitments, changing the incentives to formulate promises with different levels of bindingness. It also transforms voters' perceptions of candidates' ability to fulfill promises, increasing the weight of costs associated with betrayal during the campaign. Thus, security crises constitute an exogenous variable modifying the strategic environment. A candidate's outcome depends on their ability to adapt the bindingness, signaling, and feasibility of proposals to the conditions generated by the crisis.

3. Methodology

To solve the puzzle of the 2019 presidential campaign, this study adopts the Analytical Narratives approach. This inductive-deductive methodology combines dense qualitative reconstruction of historical research and case studies with game-theoretic tools derived from rational choice theory (Mongin,2016). By requiring the explicit specification of a mathematical model, this approach strengthens causal inference by constraining the narrative to the endogenous variables of the game and deriving empirically testable implications. The methodology is applied

across four analytical components, operationalized over three campaign stages (October 2018; November–December 2018; and January 2019).

Institutional delimitation and actor identification

The first step reconstructs the formal and informal institutional rules governing the electoral landscape. It identifies three main players—Nayib Bukele, Carlos Calleja, and Hugo Martínez—and examines their strategic decisions, signaling, political viability, risks, and trade-offs. Their selection is based on three criteria: (1) strategic rationality, as their decisions mutually influenced one another and altered the game's equilibrium; (2) discursive centrality, given their media prominence and electoral promises about the security crisis; and (3) empirical validation, from opinion polls and electoral results.

Methodologically, this investigation treats the 2019 election as a deviant case within comparative politics. A deviant case manifests an anomalous outcome challenging established theoretical expectations—in this instance, spatial voting theories based on stable ideological cleavages. Despite the electorate's continued perception of well-defined programmatic distances between ARENA and the FMLN, the traditional bipartisan system collapsed in the first round (Perelló & Navia,2022). Utilizing an Analytical Narrative approach paired with game theory on a deviant case is highly generative; it shifts the analytical focus toward internal, fine-grained strategic mechanisms—such as linkage replacement and programmatic elasticity—that allowed Bukele to exploit an exogenous security shock and override conventional institutional constraints.

Utility function modeling

Drawing on Asako's model, interactions are formalized through an indexed net utility function for each candidate (i):

$$Ui = \alpha\, Pi + \beta\, Di - \gamma\, Ci.$$

where (Pi) denotes the nominal electoral payoff measured through voting intention in opinion polls; (Di) captures the gains from identity differentiation, namely the candidate's ability to distinguish themselves from traditional postwar left-right political cleavage; and (Ci) represents the

reputational cost associated with programmatic or political inconsistency resulting from exogenous shocks, such as corruption scandals or electoral vetoes imposed by gangs.

Parameter calibration and adjustment

The weighting parameters (α, β, γ) reflects the evolution of contextual constraints throughout the campaign. While α serves as a uniform baseline weight, β rises as the programmatic field becomes saturated and stabilizes when differentiation remains salient, whereas γ rises as public scrutiny, political shocks, and demonstrated inconsistency heighten the salience of reputational costs.

The coefficients β and γ are calibrated on a 0–1 scale to reflect the salience of identity differentiation and reputational inconsistency at each stage. α is fixed at 1.0 as the baseline electoral payoff, while β and γ vary according to changes in the electoral landscape. Calibration follows an ordinal-to-cardinal procedure: each coefficient increases when the factor becomes more electorally consequential relative to the baseline vote payoff. Thus, β and γ are context-sensitive weights rather than statistical estimates.

Di and Ci are coded on a 0–10 scale using anchors and evidence-based ordinal judgments. For Di, 0 indicates no meaningful differentiation from the postwar partisan cleavage, 5 a recognizable but partial departure, and 10 a comprehensive identity rupture. For Ci, 0 indicates no observable reputational inconsistency, 5 moderate exposure from contradictions between proposals and political record, and 10 maximum inconsistency under severe political or criminal shocks. For coding, 0–2 corresponds to minimum, 2.1–4 to low, 4.1–6 to medium, 6.1–9 to high, and 9.1–10 to maximum. Di draws on platforms, debates, candidate statements, and media coverage; Ci draws on polls, party records, and documented political or criminal events. Scores are assigned comparatively across candidates within each stage, capturing intensity and cumulative visibility when evidence converges across multiple relevant sources.

The variable Pi (voting intention) does not constitute the dependent variable. Within a dynamic stage game, (Pi) operates as an exogenous structural constraint parameter over time, representing the nominal political capital with which each actor initiates the strategic interaction. The dependent variables explained by the model are the indexed net

utility (Ui) and the stability of the resulting Nash equilibria[3] under tactical deviations, demonstrating how reputational shocks and identity differentiation expand or contract candidate viability beyond traditional poling frames.

Equilibrium resolution and empirical validation

Since the campaign is modeled as a dynamic stage game, the initial phase is characterized by strategic uncertainty regarding the players' hidden tactical vectors. However, as polling trends and platforms stabilize, the final phases operate under complete information. Within this framework of structural convergence, competitive interactions and incentives for unilateral deviation are resolved through pairwise analytical projections. This technique isolates tactical vectors by assuming that the third player remains fixed at its respective constituent Best Response. The convergence of Best Responses (BR) identifies the stability of the electoral landscape through the computation of Nash equilibria, whose predictions are subsequently validated against aggregate polling averages, such as those reported by the University Institute of Public Opinion (IUDOP).

In adherence to the Analytical Narratives, the mathematical resolution of equilibria serves as a deductive tool for causal clarification rather than standalone empirical evidence. The empirical evidence lies in the documentary triangulation of the presented electoral and polling data; the mathematical model operates as the logical scaffolding providing internal validity, explicitly mapping individual incentives that led to the collapse of the two-party system

To ensure methodological validity, nominal payoff values and reputational shocks are triangulated using multiple sources. Primary sources include government programs, interviews, and presidential debates. Second, public opinion surveys are analyzed to isolate variables such as victimization, government approval, and institutional trust (e.g., LPG Datos). The study also incorporates reports from the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research (HIIK) and the International

[3] This concept is defined as a strategic situation where no player has an incentive to unilaterally change their strategy, given the strategies adopted by the other players. In electoral terms, it implies a configuration where, considering competitors' promises and strategies, no candidate can improve their expected outcome by unilaterally changing their own strategy. See: Nash, 1951.

Crisis Group (ICG) to trace the security crisis. Finally, the analysis is complemented by reports from the Salvadoran Foundation for Economic and Social Development (FUSADES), records from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) on the humanitarian impact of gang violence, and crime statistics from the National Civil Police (PNC). This triangulated approach ensures that each payoff, cost, and incentive modeled corresponds faithfully to the actual decision matrix.

4. Background

To understand the utility functions and strategies in the presidential campaign, it is imperative to analyze State–gangs dynamics during the outgoing administration. This period incubated the reputational costs and political constraints that shaped the electoral landscape. The security crisis can be articulated in three political stages determined by operational shocks and changes in the public-opinion climate:

1. Breakdown of the truce, legitimacy crisis, and escalation (2014–15)

The Sánchez Cerén's administration began with the breakdown of the truce negotiated under Mauricio Funes (2009–14). Although that agreement reduced the homicides rate by 42%, it undermined FMLN legitimacy, as it was perceived as a concession of authority to MS-13 and Barrio 18[4]. These groups used the armistice to expand territorial control, obtain prison-related benefits, and strengthen organizational capacities (ICG,2017). The situation worsened following the 2014 presidential runoff, where the FMLN defeated ARENA by 0.22%, while subsequent investigations revealed clandestine negotiations by leaders of both parties and gangs to coerce voters in exchange for maintaining truce prerogatives (Robbins,2014;ICG,2020). A post-election survey revealed that 25.9% of voters had been pressured by gangs to favor a particular party (IUDOP,2014,p.14).

Faced with dilemma between restoring authority and avoiding escalation, the government closed communication channels without a contingency plan (Yagoub,2014). By breaking the prison chain of command (*ranfla*), gangs granted greater operational autonomy to local cells, driv-

[4] At the end of the Funes administration, 79,6% of the population stated that the truce reduced crime little or not at all in the country. See: IUDOP, 2014, p. 10.

ing up victimization among households and businesses (FUSADES,2019, p.6). Although the FMLN attempted preventive initiatives such as the National Council for Citizen Security (CNSC), the crisis forced a reactive response through targeted police operations (ICG,2017). This improvisation reflected in public opinion: 61% expressed a negative assessment versus 17% approval of government's security performance (LPGDatos, 2026). Gangs increased attacks to force a resumption of dialogue, raising armed clashes by 93,9% (ICG,2022,p.36), and killings by 57% during the second half of 2014 (Gurney,2015).

The government shifted in 2015 toward direct confrontation against gangs, authorizing lethal force under expanded criteria of self-defense (HIIK,2016,p.116). The Executive created three rapid-response battalions and deployed 11,200 soldiers in policing tasks (Aguilar,2019,p.39). In response, gangs sought to raise the political costs of the offensive through a nationwide public-transport strike, targeted killings of bus drivers, and attacks on buses. This display of force led the Supreme Court to legally classify them as terrorist groups (HIIK,2016,p.116) and facilitated the approval of the Special Contribution for Citizen Security and Coexistence (CESC) to finance the strategy[5]. The escalation brought the year to a historic record: 6,656 homicides (Aguilar,2019,p.76).

The intensified conflict transformed citizens' preferences. With 82% identifying crime as the country's main problem (IUDOP,2016a,p.14) and 68% rejecting government's performance on security (LPGDatos,2026), society prioritized public order over human rights or proportionality (ICG,2017). While deteriorating security, weakened the president, the anti-terrorist narrative catalyzed national cohesion, raising public confidence in the police and military to above 30% and 40%, respectively (IUDOP,2016a,pp. 69–73).

2. Prison lockdown, criminal adaptation, and mutual stalemate (2016–17)

The massacre of eleven farmworkers in San Juan Opico in March 2016 served as a political catalyst that united FMLN and ARENA in parliament, allowing *extraordinary measures* to be swiftly approved in April. This legislation established a prison regime based on total isolation of leaders and signal blocking (ICG,2017).

[5] Legislative Assembly approved the CESC in October 2015, which levied a 5% tax on companies or individuals with incomes exceeding US$500,000, as well as on all telecommunications services. See: ICG,2017,p. 20.

Following implementation, homicides gradually declined (Liemann, 2016). However, this was also due to gang adaptation, as they agreed to limit confrontations to avoid further repression (Martínez,2016). Confinement of gang leadership altered local cells economic flows: deprived of prison revenues, cells gained financial autonomy and increased predatory pressure, reaching a record 2,412 extortion complaints (PNC,2020).

The conflict entered a dynamic of mutual attrition: while the Attorney General's Office targeted MS-13's finances and protected police, gangs killed high-value targets (HIIK,2016,p.116). Tensions emerged regarding human rights and international cooperation. Pressure to sustain statistical results led to abuses and extrajudicial executions documented by the Attorney General's Office (Tabory,2016), generating friction with Washington: the Obama administration discreetly froze up to 50% of military aid, conditioning its release on judicial investigations (Human Rights Watch,2017). In May, the prison regime received 58% support, but 67% believed that it contributed little or nothing to combating gang crime (IUDOP,2016b,p.12). This distrust prevented the decline in homicides from translating into political gains, keeping presidential disapproval at 44% (IUDOP,2016b,p.29). The strategy contained violence, but it decentralized criminal finances, tolerated security force autonomy, and fractured trust with the principal strategic partner.

During 2017, prison isolation led to the emergence of the dissident MS-503[6] faction, fracturing criminal cohesion (Martínez,2017). In response to the lethal armed clashes, cells abandoned cities for rural areas, replacing open warfare with covert coercion: enforced disappearances and internal displacement (King,2016; ICG,2020). Politically, the government hardened its position: when MS-13 proposed dismantlement under UN and Catholic Church mediation, Sánchez Cerén rejected it extending *extraordinary measures* to project an image of firmness (HIIK,2018,p.123; ICG,2017).

Nevertheless, reliance on a repressive approach increased political costs. The confrontation produced a 14% increase in complaints of human-rights violations, reaching 834 cases (FUSADES,2019,pp.16–17). A visit of the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial executions deepened the conflict by pointing to indications of institutional cover-up (Salomon,2018). The Executive characterized the criticism as attacks on

[6] New faction criticized certain practices of the traditional leadership—such as the appropriation of collective resources, maintaining opaque relations with political actors, or indiscriminate attacks on civilians—presenting itself as a vindication of MS-13's founding principles. See: HIIK, 2018, p. 123.

national sovereignty (Aguilar,2019), deepening diplomatic isolation. Although citizens perceiving an increase in crime fell from 62% to 41,5% (FUSADES,2019), the population evaluated the performance pragmatically: in November, opposition to *extraordinary measures* reached 48%, surpassing the 44% supporting them, while disapproval of government's security performance had reached 71% (LPGDatos,2026). The period demonstrated that lower homicides constituted a tactical victory, but neither dismantled criminal groups nor enabled long-term political legitimacy.

3. Strategic trap, humanitarian emergency, and citizen fatigue (2018)

The final year of the administration confronted a strategic trap: 16% reduction in homicides — bringing the annual figure to 3,346 cases, the lowest level since the truce—coexisted with the discovery of 20 clandestine graves in La Paz, dating back to 2016 (HIIK,2019,p.110). This suggests that the statistical decline was partly explained by the systematic concealment of bodies, a tactic that reduced political pressure, obstructed investigations, and maintained territorial control. For the first time, the humanitarian impact became evident when the 3,380 reported disappearances exceeded recorded killings (FUSADES,2019,p.4). Additionally, a binding ruling by the Constitutional Chamber required the state to officially recognize internal displacement caused by criminal violence[7], which affected 246,000 people (IDMC,2019). Rather than strengthening comprehensive policies, part of the budget allocated to the El Salvador Safe Plan (PESS) was redirected toward the military crackdown (FUSADES,2019), consolidating the repressive approach when parliament turned *extraordinary measures* into a permanent regime (Lasusa,2018).

The breakdown of public trust occurred in September following the *Cuscatlán* and *Tsunami* operations, which revealed secret financing networks and electoral transactions between the FMLN, ARENA, and gang leaders, devastating state legitimacy (HIIK,2019,p.110). On the diplomatic front, the State Department denounced critical overcrowding and tuberculosis in prisons. Under Donald Trump, Washington prioritized the fight against crime and supported mass raids, but demanded that prosecutions and extraditions be expedited (CRS,2017,p.13). The U.S.

[7] Public-opinion climate reflected high sensitivity toward this phenomenon: 59,8% agreed with creating a special law to protect people fleeing their homes due to gang violence. See: IUDOP, 2019a, p. 9.

Congress conditioned 25% of economic assistance on progress against corruption and internal displacement (U.S. Congress,2019), forcing the FMLN to negotiate defensively to avoid defunding its security strategy.

Taken together, this trajectory revealed a decisive paradox: the state increased its coercive capacity, but this expansion did not produce a commensurate recovery in security, legitimacy, or public trust. Tactical effectiveness coexisted with criminal adaptation, humanitarian costs, and growing disaffection with traditional parties. Public discontent reached unprecedented levels. In February, opposition to *extraordinary measures* reached 49%, while 77% believed they did not help combat gangs (IUDOP,2019a). By midyear, negative assessment of government's security performance reached 69% (LPGDatos,2026), coinciding with 67% public disapproval and 71% perceiving the country was heading in the wrong direction (IUDOP,2018,p.41). Persistent victimization—16% of households and 21% of businesses—confirmed that communities remained under criminal siege (FUSADES,2019,p.6). Society understood that neither the truce nor the crackdown had mitigated gang violence, creating political conditions for a decisive leadership during the following electoral cycle.

This breakdown of public trust and the subsequent citizen fatigue must be conceptualized as an accelerated *de-democratization* (Martí & Rodríguez,2024). Persistent predatory governance exercised by MS-13 and Barrio 18, paired with institutional impotence and the disclosure of bipartisan criminal transactions, did not merely erode the legitimacy of the outgoing FMLN administration. Crucially, it reconfigured the evaluative trade-offs of the median voter: the severe crisis of the post-war security architecture catalyzed a pragmatic shift within the electorate, where the restoration of public order was prioritized over the preservation of liberal checks and balances, procedural proportionality, or strict adherence to human rights (Martí & Rodríguez,2024).

Consequently, the strategic landscape at the dawn of the campaign was shaped by latent willingness to accept a trade-off: security in exchange for democracy. By desensitizing voters to the erosion of institutional accountability, the failure of the Sánchez Cerén administration minimized prospective electoral penalties for authoritarian or norm-defying discourses. In game-theoretic framework, this transition underpins the asymmetric calibration of parameters across the upcoming stages. It explains why the reputational costs associated with undermining traditional institutional mechanisms became non-binding or negligible for an outsider positioned against the *establishment*, while simultaneously inflicting maximum penalties on the duopoly.

5. Stage 1 (October 2018): Positioning Game under strategic uncertainty

Electoral Landscape

The presidential campaign was conditioned by the strategic failure of the outgoing government. Between October 28 and 31, a caravan of 2,000 Salvadorans leaving the United States functioned as a political catalyst (ICG,2019), exposing the gangs' territorial control and citizens' disaffection[8]. MS-13 and Barrio 18 maintained an active presence in 94% of municipalities (ICG,2020,p.2). The public perceived the offensive as costly and ineffective: 75,7% stated it failed to wrest territory from gangs, and 75,1% believed it failed to reduce criminal activity (IUDOP,2019a,pp. 33–34). This stalemate generated a polarized climate where 65,5% expressed need to change the ruling party (IUDOP,2019b,p.8). Game-theoretically, this stage is a positioning game under strategic uncertainty. Actors competed under uncertainty regarding both the confrontation's trajectory and voters' preferences, creating incentives for anticipatory moves to shape the agenda.

Strategic Decisions and Signaling

Bukele framed the crisis as a failure of both repression and negotiation, constructing a "third way" focused on territorial control, prevention, and technological modernization while reframing gangs as symptoms of state collapse (ICG,2020,p.4). This evasion of technical scrutiny reflects the foundations of *linkage replacement* (Lujan & Puig Lombardi, 2026). The erosion of the ideologically structured party system allowed Bukele to transition the citizen-candidate relationship from programmatic alignment to personalistic adherence, operationalized through three pillars: fierce anti-establishment rhetoric, deliberate ideological dilution of post-war cleavages, and a centralized infrastructure of digital infrastructure. By anchoring signaling in *affective polarization*[9] under the

[8] IUDOP investigated reasons for migrating: 42,8% of respondents who expressed a desire to leave the country directly cited insecurity and death threats as their main motive, surpassing the economic situation for first time. See: IUDOP, 2019a, p. 2.

[9] Affective polarization is defined as a socio-emotional antagonism between individuals who identify with different political groups, parties, or stances. Unlike ideological polarization, it does not just involve differing in political or ideological opinions, but experiencing intense negative feelings toward members of the opposing group (out-group) and positive feelings toward one's own group (in-group). See: Iyengar *et.al*., 2019.

slogan "There is enough money when no one steals," Bukele portrayed the duopoly as a "corrupt elite." This moral framing allowed him to bypass a detailed policy plan (Editor,2018), evading reputational costs from rejecting both dialogue and military escalation (ICG,2022).

ARENA candidate Calleja focused his platform on professionalizing the PNC, intelligence, and video surveillance (DiariodeHoy,2018). He endorsed the prison regime without proposing mechanisms to mitigate its humanitarian impact or state abuses (FocosTV,2019a). Although attempting to distance himself from *mano dura* policies, he remained dependent on penal isolation and military intervention, generating programmatic redundancy with postwar governments. He sought to project a renewed center-right identity, but framed the crisis through a managerial approach, minimizing its urgency, and disconnecting from the median voter (Editor,2018).

Martínez, the official candidate, proposed continuing the PESS, gradually dismantling the prison regime conditional on the homicide stabilization, investing in social programs, and restricting rehabilitation to gang members without serious offenses (Cruz,2018; Asmann,2019). This position suffered from inconsistency: he characterized the truce as a "mistake," ruling out future negotiations, while defending an administration whose opacity was heavily questioned. He attributed the exodus to geopolitical factors, avoiding internal displacement measures (FocosTV,2018). His signals sought to project predictability and experience against Bukele's "media-driven improvisation," forcing him to defend an approach unsatisfactory to the majority (Editor,2018).

Political Viability

To bypass registration obstacles following his 2017 FMLN expulsion, Bukele used Grand Alliance for National Unity (GANA) party structure while preserving autonomy of *Nuevas Ideas* (ICG,2020,p.4). This duality raised doubts about local government coordination: GANA controlled 10,3% of municipalities (EU,2018,p.4), while most critical areas were held by ARENA or the FMLN. Nevertheless, his modernization agenda was perceived as an innovative solution to the state's technological lag (ICG,2020,p.17), legitimizing executive concentration.

Calleja possessed high institutional viability: his coalition controlled 48% of Congress and 53% of municipalities (EU,2018,p.4), ensuring budgets for surveillance. However, he mistakenly assumed the median

voter operated under institutionalist rationality, causing his platform to be perceived as disconnected (Asmann,2019). The stigma surrounding ARENA's policies as contributing to gang sophistication (ICG,2017), alongside secret pacts investigations (EU,2018,p.16), entailed heavy reputational costs.

Martínez controlled the security apparatus, but his political capital was weakened by March 2018 midterm defeat, which reduced his legislative caucus to 27,38% and left him with 64 municipalities (EU,2018,p.4). The loss of key municipalities prevented local PESS expansion. The reputational cost of the truce meant any preventive initiative was interpreted as collusion or weakness (ICG,2020,p.9).

Risks and Trade-offs

For Bukele, the main risk was operational and institutional vagueness. He concentrated on anti-establishment rhetoric and digital visibility, avoiding detailed budgetary or legal frameworks. His dilemma consisted of sacrificing technical viability to maximize political capital. Moral slogans prevented early erosion from scrutiny among an electorate seeking political responsibility rather than technical manuals.

Calleja's dilemma lay in his strict adherence to ARENA's institutional channels, sacrificing urgency and creating programmatic irrelevance. He relied on legislative seats and municipalities to ensure governability and neutralize Bukele, who lacked mayors.

Martínez's risk was avoiding the FMLN's responsibility while absorbing the reputational cost of its strategic leadership. To maintain internal cohesion, he refrained from proposing a programmatic rupture, limiting his platform to low-payoff reformism. A complete break would demobilize the ideological vote, but modifying the model implicitly acknowledging failure against gangs.

Game-Theoretic Model and Nash Equilibrium

To formalize the strategic interactions in a simultaneous three-player competition, an indexed utility function is modeled for each candidate:

- **$\alpha = 1.0$,** value assigned to the percentage of vote intention.
- **$\beta = 0.5$,** weight of identity differentiation (Di), reflecting the

reward for breaking with the traditional cleavage; medium due to partisan voting inertia.

- **γ = 0.8,** weight of the inconsistency cost (Ci), higher than β because citizen fatigue penalized contradictions and traditional records.

Model Variables (Pi, Di, Ci):

- **Bukele:** Pb = 44.0 (leadership), Db = 8.0 (high, breaking traditional cleavage), Cb = 2.0 (minimum due to vagueness).
- **Calleja:** Pc = 21.5 (second place), Dc = 4.0 (medium, due to managerial approach), Cc = 5.0 (medium, due to party-brand deterioration).
- **Martínez:** Pm = 9.5 (third place), Dm = 2.0 (minimal, due to reformed continuity), Cm = 8.0 (high, due to outgoing government reputational cost).

Net Utility Calculations (Ui):

- **Bukele (Ub):** $(1.0 \times 44.0) + (0.5 \times 8.0) - (0.8 \times 2.0) = 44.0 + 4.0 - 1.6 =$ **46.4**
- **Calleja (Uc):** $(1.0 \times 21.5) + (0.5 \times 4.0) - (0.8 \times 5.0) = 21.5 + 2.0 - 4.0 =$ **19.5**
- **Martínez (Um):** $(1.0 \times 9.5) + (0.5 \times 2.0) - (0.8 \times 8.0) = 9.5 + 1.0 - 6.4 =$ **4.1**

Payoff Matrices

Values correspond strictly to the net utility units calculated by the function. Polling fluctuations of counterfactual scenarios are indexed with weighting coefficients.

Matrix 1

Bukele vs. Calleja

Strategies/ Payoffs	Calleja (Managerial Approach)	Calleja (Operational Intensification)
Bukele (Disruptive Vagueness)	**(46.4, 19.5)** *(Nash)*	(47.9, 18.0)
Bukele (Programmatic Detail)	(41.0, 23.0)	(42.0, 21.0)

Source: Own elaboration based on Redacción UH (2018a).

Interpretation: The *(Disruptive, Managerial)* vector is stable. If Calleja hardened his position, Bukele would frame him as *mano dura*, reducing Calleja's payoff to 18.0. If Bukele providing greater detail, Calleja would gain technical ground (23.0).

Matrix 2
Calleja vs. Martínez

Strategies/ Payoffs	Martínez (Reformed Continuity)	Martínez (Programmatic Break)
Calleja (Managerial Approach)	**(19.5, 4.1)** *(Nash)*	(21.0, 2.6)
Calleja (Repressive Approach)	(18.5, 5.6)	(19.0, 3.6)

Source: Own elaboration based on Redacción UH (2018a).
Interpretation: Martínez was trapped, a rupture would lose FMLN bases, falling to 2.6. If Calleja moved toward *mano dura*, he would revive the repressive stigma, letting Martínez rise to 5.6 by appealing to the left-wing identity vote against ARENA's authoritarian return.

Matrix 3
Bukele vs. Martínez

Strategies/ Payoffs	Martínez (Reformed Continuity)	Martínez (Frontal Attack)
Bukele (Disruptive Vagueness)	**(46.4, 4.1)** *(Nash)*	(49.4, 3.1)
Bukele (Ideological Confrontation)	(43.8, 5.1)	(46.8, 3.6)

Source: Own elaboration based on Redacción UH (2018a).
Interpretation: Bukele's strategy of grouping the FMLN with "the same old ones" neutralized Martínez's attacks while preserving his outsider appeal. Deviating toward *Ideological Confrontation* would have dragged Bukele back into the traditional left-right cleavage lowering his payoff to 43.8 and granting Martínez a modest ideological recovery (5.1). Conversely, a *Frontal Attack* by the ruling party reinforced Bukele's anti-elite narrative (raising his payoff to 49.4) while further eroding the governing party's vote intention (3.1). Thus, *Disruptive Vagueness* remains Bukele's strictly dominant strategy.

During the first stage, the landscape reached a defensive political-electoral Nash Equilibrium; no candidate had incentives to unilaterally deviate. Bukele's Best Response (BR) was to maintain moral abstraction (BRb=Disruptive Vagueness) without assuming scrutiny costs. For Calleja, utility maximization dictated securing the centrist vote (BRc= Managerial Approach) instead of competing with Bukele's disruption.

For Martínez, any movement outside his niche reduced utility due to the γCi (BRm=Reformed Continuity).

The game-theoric formalization reconstructs the strategic mechanism behind Bukele's dominance, driven by the asymmetric coding of identity differentiation (Di). Transforming his campaign into a personalistic challenge against traditional elites insulated his platform from conventional policy requirements. This *linkage replacement* explains why his differentiation coefficient is calibrated at a high value (Db=8.0), capturing a structural rupture from the post-war cleavage and granting him a decisive competitive advantage. Consequently, Bukele's net utility (Ub=46.4) exceeded his nominal vote intention, making him resilient to the migrant-caravan shock by validating his diagnosis of state collapse. Conversely, traditional candidates remained trapped within the old ideological axis, limiting their returns. The programmatic rigidity and managerial focus of Calleja (Dc=4.0) left his utility at 19.5, well below his average vote intention of 21,5%, due to his inability to distance himself from past repression and criminal pacts. Finally, the reformed continuity of Martínez (Dm=2.0) yielded a marginal utility of just 4.1, as the caravan shock and the legacy of the truce triggered an inconsistency cost (γCi) that completely neutralized his electoral appeals.

6. Stage 2 (November–December 2018): Validation and Wear-and-Tear Game

Electoral Landscape

By late 2018, the campaign shifted from abstract statements to operational adjustments constrained by fiscal limits. The political climate was marked by growing dissatisfaction with the ruling party: 59% disapproved of its security performance (LPGDatos,2026). Media outlets characterized Bukele's absence from the Universidad de El Salvador (UES) debate as contempt for democracy and an inability to defend his government plan. *Nuevas Ideas* counterattacked digitally with the hashtags #TheSameOldOnes and #ReturnWhatWasStolen, framing the forum as an elite trap designed to protect Calleja and Martínez after videos of their 2014 pacts went viral, causing a severe reputational shock. Bukele supporters stormed the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE), alleging fraud risk (EU,2019,p.15). Polls raised Bukele's vote intention to 50%, signaling a

potential first-round victory[10]. This validation-and-wear-and-tear phase made platform viability contingent on the narrow fiscal space, forcing candidates to redesign their security proposals.

Strategic Decisions and Signaling

Bukele linked punitive demands to anti-corruption efforts through the International Commission against Impunity in El Salvador (CICIES). This strategy reflects Balutet's (2024) characterization as a populist phenomenon operating through polarizing antagonism and unmediated digital infrastructure. Bypassed traditional accountability forums, Bukele introduced highly visible measures: abolition the CESC, a Military Police Battalion for prisons, and Urban Centers for Well-Being and Opportunities (Cubos) to prevent gang recruitment (ICG,2020,p.11). He argued that eliminating gangs required dismantling state corruption, using recovered funds to modernize intelligence, police, and military (Asmann,2019). His signaling framed his UES debate absence as a deliberate rejection of traditional media, prioritizing decentralized digital broadcasts. Ultimately, the Cubos signaled a prevention approach to international donors, while eliminating the CESC signaled fiscal efficiency to business and middle-class sectors (ICG,2020,p.14).

Calleja reoriented his platform toward operational decentralization through the Smart Shield (*Escudo Inteligente*) project, based on police technification, local committees, a reduction of the CESC, and youth employment (LPG,2018). He sought to project legal predictability and technical rigor through international consultants (TribunaTV,2018). His design was inconsistent, however, because it depended on optimistic growth while omitting the fiscal deficit (Reyes,2018).

Martínez shifted toward a technical approach based on financial intelligence targeting extortion (FocosTV,2018). He used specialized language to justify civilian de-escalation against previous repressive approaches (TribunaTV,2018). However, his proposal was contradictory: he criticized military intervention while proposing an increase in the CESC. As his vote intention declined, he promised to reinforce penal isolation, creating tension between prevention and containment (Arismendi,2018).

[10] Salvadoran electoral system requires 50% + 1 of the votes to win in the first round; otherwise, a ballotage takes place. See:EU, 2019, p. 8.

Political Viability

Bukele's viability increased as he unified order, prison control, and the fight against impunity. Although he avoided major fiscal reforms and implementing CICIES required ratification by an opposition-controlled Congress (FocosTV,2019b), he shifted the basis of viability from institutional capacity toward political will, consolidating himself as the only genuine rupture option (Editor,2018). Unifying security and integrity through CICIES operated as an identity differentiator, with 91% support (IUDOP,2019b,p.21).

Despite ARENA's municipal control, Calleja's Smart Shield lacked a regular budget. He assumed that restoring order and reducing taxes would generate a *peace dividend* (Avelar,2019). By overlooking the narrow fiscal space, he depended on negotiating new sovereign debt with the FMLN. His project resonated with business elites, but popular sectors perceived him as incapable of curbing extortion (Editor,2018).

Martínez's viability deteriorated due to the FMLN's government record: expanding social investment depended on increasing the CESC, an unpopular tax among middle-class and business groups bearing high fiscal costs for an ineffective policy (ElMundo,2018). Trapped within the hard-core vote, he proposed no financial alternatives for the middle class. His shift toward financial audits underestimated the urgency: the population demanded military deployment, not forensic accounting.

Risks and Trade-offs

By presenting CICIES and the Cubos as panaceas, Bukele increased future implementation costs. He sacrificed institutional transition viability to maximize public expectations. Assuming his political capital would overcome congressional resistance, he shifted violent gang conflict toward a potential governance crisis if funding or CICIES were blocked in Congress[11] where GANA held only 11,9% of seats and he lacked a legislative caucus (EU,2018,p.4).

[11] This risk materialized on February 9, 2020, when faced with a legislative deadlock to approve a US$109 million loan from the Central American Bank for Economic Integration to fund Phase 3 of the Territorial Control Plan (police and military technification); Bukele stormed the Legislative Assembly with the army during an extraordinary session, issuing a one-week ultimatum for its approval. See: ICG, 2020, p. 12.

Calleja's Smart Shield conditioned modernization on growth driven by tax reductions, evading the chronic fiscal deficit and undermining acceptability in critical urban areas. Martínez fell into an unsustainable incongruity: reinforcing strict prison isolation while promoting financial intelligence and social reintegration. Moreover, increasing the CESC eliminated his capacity to compete for the political center, entrenching him within his organizational base.

Game-Theoretic Model and Nash Equilibrium

As the campaign progressed, the coefficients changed in response to public scrutiny and programmatic saturation in the media agenda:

- **$\alpha = 1.0$:** weight assigned to nominal vote intention at the end of December.
- **$\beta = 0.7$:** identity differentiation (Di) increases due the need to distinguish oneself before the debate.
- **$\gamma = 0.9$:** inconsistency cost (Ci) increases because scrutiny penalized programmatic contradictions.

Model Variables (Pi, Di, Ci):

- **Bukele:** Pb = 49.0 (close to an absolute majority), Db = 9.0 (high due to the anti-corruption–security pairing), Cb = 1.5 (minimum, as his absence was absorbed by an anti-system framing).
- **Calleja:** Pc = 20.0 (nominal decline), Dc = 3.5 (minimal due to assimilation into the traditional approach), Cc = 6.0 (increasing due to disconnection from extortion).
- **Martínez:** Pm = 11.0 (marginal growth), Dm = 1.0 (minimal due to fiscal continuity), Cm = 9.5 (maximum due to defending the CESC while advocating civilian de-escalation).

Net Utility Calculations (Ui):

- **Bukele (Ub):** $(1.0 \times 49.0) + (0.7 \times 9.0) - (0.9 \times 1.5) = 49.0 + 6.30 - 1.35 =$ **$53.95 \approx 54.0$**
- **Calleja (Uc):** $(1.0 \times 20.0) + (0.7 \times 3.5) - (0.9 \times 6.0) = 20.0 + 2.45 - 5.40 =$ **$17.05 \approx 17.0$**
- **Martínez (Um):** $(1.0 \times 11.0) + (0.7 \times 1.0) - (0.9 \times 9.5) = 11.0 + 0.70 - 8.55 =$ **$3.15 \approx 3.2$**

Note: Following standard statistical rounding to one decimal place (round-half-to-even), exact utility values are rounded to 54.0, 17.0, and 3.2 in the payoff matrices.

Payoff Matrices

Values correspond to net utility units. Polling fluctuations of the counterfactual scenarios are formally indexed with the weighting coefficients of each stage.

Matrix 1
Bukele vs. Calleja

Strategies/ Payoffs	Calleja (Smart Shield)	Calleja (Traditional Hardening)
Bukele (CICIES-Cubos Fusion)	**(54.0, 17.0)** *(Nash)*	(55.9, 15.0)
Bukele (UES Debate)	(49.9, 19.0)	(51.4, 16.5)

Source: Own elaboration based on Redacción UH (2018b).
Interpretation: The *(Fusion, Smart Shield)* vector is stable. If Calleja hardened his approach, Bukele would activate frames associated with corruption, reducing Calleja's payoff to 15.0. If Bukele attended the debate, he would lose his anti-system differentiation advantage, letting Calleja regain technical ground (19.0).

Matrix 2
Calleja vs. Martínez

Strategies/ Payoffs	Martínez (Financial Shift/CESC)	Martínez (Programmatic Break)
Calleja (Smart Shield)	**(17.0, 3.2)** *(Nash)*	(19.5, 1.1)
Calleja (Flexibilization/Prevention)	(16.0, 4.6)	(18.0, 2.1)

Source: Own elaboration based on Redacción UH (2018b).
Interpretation: Martínez was cornered; a complete programmatic rupture would destroy FMLN cohesion, reducing his payoff to 1.1. Conversely, if Calleja softened his proposal toward purely preventive approaches, he would open an operational flank that the ruling party could exploit, raising its payoff to 4.6.

Matrix 3

Bukele vs. Martínez

Strategies/ Payoffs	Martínez (Financial Shift/CESC)	Martínez (Criminal Prosecution)
Bukele (CICIES-Cubos Fusion)	**(54.0, 3.2)** *(Nash)*	(55.4, 1.6)
Bukele (Fiscal Detail)	(50.9, 4.1)	(51.9, 3.1)

Source: Own elaboration based on Redacción UH (2018b).
Interpretation: Linking security to anti-corruption efforts neutralized technical attacks from the ruling party. If Martínez resorted to criminal prosecution, he would strengthen Bukele's thesis regarding the FMLN's strategic failure, precipitating the left-wing payoff to 1.6.

The electoral landscape is modeled as an aggressive political-electoral Nash Equilibrium, illustrating the structural absence of incentives for unilateral deviation. The computed net utility (54.0) showing how the expansion of the (Db) variable outpaced Bukele's nominal vote share. Consequently, the model deduces that Bukele's Best Response (BRb) to the duopoly was to reject the traditional debate format (BRb=CICIES–Cubos Fusion). For Calleja and Martínez, deviating from their restrictive strategies would trigger severe penalties through the γCi coefficient, locking them into diminishing returns.

Bukele consolidated his advantage by unifying security with anti-corruption efforts, neutralizing press attacks. Within our game-theoretic framework, Balutet's (2024) conceptualization mathematically justifies maintaining Bukele's inconsistency cost at an exceptionally low level (Cb=1.5), even amid media scrutiny and collusion accusations. Because his followers internalized official debates as structured 'elite traps' designed to protect traditional interests, the negative externalities of his absence were neutralized and transformed into validations of his anti-establishment identity, framing proposal viability as pure political will. Consequently, the exponential return of his identity differentiation variable—calibrated at its peak (Db=9.0) due to the cross-cutting CICIES-Cubos pairing—was insulated from conventional political wear, generating mathematical conditions for a first-round victory. This shield explains how Bukele achieved a dominant net utility (Ub=54.0) in the aggressive Nash equilibrium of this phase. Conversely, this dynamic locked the traditional candidates into a cycle of diminishing returns; their adherence to

conventional debates only heightened their exposure to a rising inconsistency parameter ($\gamma=0.9$). Under these constraints, despite a marginal increase in vote intention (11,0%), Martínez's utility collapsed to 3.2 as the unpopular CESC and civilian de-escalation commitments undermined his perceived governing capacity. Finally, Calleja's "Smart Shield" project failed to operate as an identity-differentiation vector ($Dc=3.5$) because, by depending on economic growth from a potential peace dividend, it was assimilated by the median voter as a conventional, post-war approach.

7. Stage 3 (January 2019): Tactical Adjustment Game

Electoral Landscape

The final stage stabilized around terminal equilibria under complete information regarding electoral prospects. The strategic environment was conditioned by a dual criminal shock. First, a dramatic resurgence of gang violence resulted in 61 homicides over a 72-hour period in mid-January, consolidating the perception of strategic failure (ICG,2019). Media coverage amplified the impact of this escalation, increasing the political salience of security. Polls reflected an adverse public-opinion climate for the outgoing government: 52% disapproved of the prison regime (IUDOP,2019b) and 63% disapproved of its security performance (LPGDatos,2026). Second, gangs, feeling betrayed by the duopoly, imposed a territorial veto, restricting electoral mobilization (EU,2019,pp.16–17). Simultaneously, affective polarization reached its peak: Bukele positioned himself as the frontrunner by presenting his government plan; his effective vote intention exceeded an absolute majority in mock-ballot simulations (Sonneland,2019). Among his voters, 72% cited his ability to combat crime (IUDOP,2019b,p.19), while 84% expressed distrust in the TSE, validating the *Nuevas Ideas* fraud-risk framing (IUDOP,2019b,p.12). The duopoly sought to force a runoff, stripping their designs of technical content to present competing visions of state power through institutional resistance (Gonzalez,2019).

Strategic Decisions and Signaling

Bukele radicalized his platform after presenting the Cuscatlán Plan, prioritizing a comprehensive fight against gangs, international audits,

assistance for internally displaced persons, and executive autonomy for military territorial recovery. His signaling implemented massive counterprogramming against the official debate organized by the Salvadoran Association of Broadcasters (ASDER), simultaneously launching his program on YouTube to offer a new security pact (Bukele,2019).

Calleja adjusted his platform toward a special budgetary fund for PNC technification, international intelligence-sharing, and geopolitical alignment with the United States. His signaling activated strategic vote among urban middle and upper classes by framing the choice around fear of institutional uncertainty and defending the rule of law against Bukele's project (TribunaTV,2019; Avelar,2019).

Martínez shifted toward ideological resistance, abandoning continuity with the outgoing government. His design proposed shelters for forced displacement victims and a democratic PNC doctrine. Relinquishing competition over the security agenda, his signaling concentrated on class-based contrast messages attacking Calleja's business background and Bukele's advertising-oriented profile, appealing to revolutionary symbolism to contain demobilization (TribunaTV,2019; Estrada,2019).

Political Viability

Bukele reached his peak, acquiring an aura of inevitability by setting the agenda and consolidating legitimacy to build a new governance model without traditional elites (IUDOP,2019b). His final strategy operated through territorial disintermediation, circumventing the veto through digital penetration[12]. The social acceptability of the *Cuscatlán Plan* legitimized centralized command and intensive militarization as new political norm demanded by the electorate in response to security crisis.

Calleja's viability collapsed as he lost control of his municipal structures, which were forced to pay tolls to gangs to hold rallies, demonstrating an inability to protect activists in historic strongholds such as Santa Ana, Ahuachapán, and La Libertad, and confirming subordination to criminal territorial dynamics (EU,2019,p.35). The acceptability of his

[12] Although gangs publicly maintained the boycott against traditional parties, subsequent investigations revealed secret pacts with Bukele's team, indicating that emissaries handed them thousands of dollars in exchange for allowing Nuevas Ideas activists into controlled areas to mobilize the vote. The secrecy responded to a strategic calculation, as an explicit endorsement would have damaged Bukele's reputation, given that he built his electoral platform on the rejection of the duopoly's corruption. See: ICG, 2022, pp. 7-8.

liberal approach eroded among popular sectors, where technical-legalistic discourse was perceived as incapable of restoring territorial control (Asmann,2019; Gonzalez,2019).

Martínez's viability was reduced to the former guerrilla movement's historical floor due to territorial blockades in strongholds such as San Miguel (EU,2019,p.35). His preventive paradigm and humanitarian shift faced widespread rejection from a population fatigued by the conflict, which interpreted the lack of explicit budgetary allocations for shelters (FocosTV,2019c) as merely an identity-based tactic. This shattered his organizational base—which historically depended on territorial access in these strongholds to validate the FMLN's public policies—and was compounded by state abuses under the outgoing administration, whose reports of extrajudicial executions and disappearances eroded trust (Asmann,2019; Gonzalez,2019).

Risks and Trade-offs

To manage the risk of fracturing his heterogeneous base over the negative externalities of intensive militarization or data privacy. Bukele launched his program two weeks before the election. This evasion of programmatic specificities aligns with Meléndez-Sánchez's (2026) analysis, demonstrating that Bukele operates as a highly pragmatic and flexible populist. The calculated ambiguity of his program cross-cut political boundaries, capturing a disgruntled electorate from disappointed left-wing bases to law-and-order conservative factions. Digital outreach neutralized implementation questions while avoiding unnecessary reputational costs. Moreover, high electoral abstention projected[13] from the criminal veto ultimately benefited him, maximizing affective polarization through digital mobilization.

Calleja assumed the risk of ignoring the humanitarian impact in his closing platform. By structuring a platform rigidly committed to liberal institutionalism and public administration constraints, he prioritized technical rigor and corporate support at the expense of acceptance among people displaced by gang violence, triggering the fragmentation of his electoral coalition as his inability to compete with Bukele's refoundational project became evident.

[13] The abstention rate during the presidential election reached 48,1%. See: EU, 2019, p. 35.

In Martínez's case, the risk was the definitive dissolution of the FMLN's electoral base. By prioritizing the cohesion of the ideological and historical vote without offering effective mitigation of the collateral damage associated with the military crackdown, he sacrificed the cross-cutting appeal of his platform. This defensive design sealed the party's collapse and encouraged the subsequent implementation of the centralized approach proposed by Bukele.

Game-Theoretic Model and Nash Equilibrium

At the conclusion of the game, the distribution of electoral prospects stabilized as voters internalized expectations:

- **$\alpha = 1.0$:** weight assigned to nominal vote intention in mid of January.
- **$\beta = 0.7$:** bonus for identity differentiation in a saturated environment.
- **$\gamma = 1.0$:** maximum value assigned to programmatic inconsistency and the criminal veto.

Model Variables (Pi, Di, Ci):

- **Bukele:** Pb = 55.0 (exceeding absolute majority), Db = 10 (maximum due to the *Cuscatlán Plan*), Cb = 1.0 (minimum, operational void neutralized digitally).
- **Calleja:** Pc = 24.5 (slight rebound due to strategic voting), Dc = 4.0 (minimal due to institutional adherence), Cc = 7.0 (high due to ignoring the humanitarian impact and criminal veto).
- **Martínez:** Pm = 13.5 (stagnation), Dm = 1.5 (low due to ideological identity), Cm = 10 (maximum due to the improvised humanitarian shift and the criminal veto).

Net Utility Calculations (Ui):

- **Bukele (Ub):** $(1.0 \times 55.0) + (0.7 \times 10) - (1.0 \times 1.0) = 55.0 + 7.0 - 1.0 =$ **61.0**
- **Calleja (Uc):** $(1.0 \times 24.5) + (0.7 \times 4.0) - (1.0 \times 7.0) = 24.5 + 2.8 - 7.0 =$ **20.3**
- **Martínez (Um):** $(1.0 \times 13.5) + (0.7 \times 1.5) - (1.0 \times 10) = 13.5 + 1.05 - 10 =$ **4.5**

Payoff Matrices

Values correspond to net utility units calculated by the function. Polling fluctuations of the counterfactual scenarios are indexed with the weighting coefficients of each stage to guarantee mathematical consistency in the resolution of the equilibria

Matrix 1
Bukele vs. Calleja

Strategies/ Payoffs	Calleja (Special Fund)	Calleja (Punitive Shift)
Bukele (Radicalization)	**(61.0, 20.3)** *(Nash)*	(63.0, 17.8)
Bukele (ASDER Debate)	(55.5, 22.3)	(57.0, 19.8)

Source: Own elaboration based on Sonneland (2019).
Interpretation: The *(Radicalization, Special Fund)* vector is the terminal equilibrium. If Calleja adopted a sudden punitive shift, Bukele would absorb the independent vote, raising his payoff to 63.0. If Bukele attended the ASDER debate, he would validate traditional channels, letting Calleja to rebound to 22.3.

Matrix 2
Calleja vs. Martínez

Strategies/ Payoffs	Martínez (Identity-Based Resistance)	Martínez (Preventive Opening)
Calleja (Special Fund)	**(20.3, 4.5)** *(Nash)*	(21.8, 2.5)
Calleja (Fiscal Flexibilization)	(18.8, 5.0)	(19.8, 4.0)

Source: Own elaboration based on Sonneland (2019).
Interpretation: The territorial blockade fixed this equilibrium. If Martínez attempted a preventive opening, lack of funding for shelters destroyed his credibility, reducing his payoff to 2.5. If Calleja softened his fiscal position, he would alienate corporate sectors, losing his only electoral niche (18.8).

Matrix 3

Bukele vs. Martínez

Strategies/ Payoffs	Martínez (Identity-Based Resistance)	Martínez (Military Escalation)
Bukele (Cuscatlán Plan)	**(61.0, 4.5)** *(Nash)*	(62.5, 3.0)
Bukele (ASDER Debate)	(57.0, 5.0)	(59.0, 3.5)

Source: Own elaboration based on Sonneland (2019).
Interpretation: The *Cuscatlán Plan* presentation nullified the ruling party. If Martínez supported military escalation, allegations of extrajudicial executions would destroy base trust, driving him to 3.0 and transferring votes to Bukele.

At the close of the campaign, the electoral landscape is formalized as an equilibrium of institutional resistance and vertical disruption under complete information. For Bukele, keeping the operational, legal, and fiscal dimensions vague managed coalition fragmentation risks. As Meléndez-Sánchez (2026) observes, this programmatic elasticity laid the groundwork for his subsequent ideological alignment with transnational far-right networks during his presidency. In our terminal game-theoretic equilibrium, strategic fluidity allowed Bukele's identity differentiation to reach maximum value (Db=10). His digital counterprogramming against the ASDER debate projected an inevitable refoundation while minimizing vulnerability to the maximum inconsistency penalty (γ=1.0). Programmatic elasticity operated as a rational mechanism to secure a first-round absolute majority (Pb=55.0), shielding his final utility (Ub=61.0) from the territorial blockades paralyzing the rigid duopoly. Conversely, deviating activated fatal penalties through γCi, leaving traditional parties with no room to maneuver amid collapsing political viability. For Calleja, a last-minute punitive shift would be inconsistent; his stable strategy mobilized strategic voting based on fear of Bukele. For Martínez, defending the PESS or proposing military escalation would eliminate his hard-core vote, leaving resistance as his only option to preserve his legislative caucus.

The criminal veto neutralized the duopoly's machinery and invalidated programmatic debate, translating Bukele's terminal utility into total dominance on February 3, 2019, resolving the presidential election in the first round with 53,1% of the vote, driven by digital mobilization that neutralized the veto. Calleja suffered fragmentation, relegating him

to second place with 31,7% of the vote; his technical rigidity isolated him among upper-class voters, while his inability to protect mayors from the veto confirmed that ARENA was subordinate to gangs (Gonzalez,2019). Finally, Martínez sealed the FMLN's debacle at 14,4%; his humanitarian shift was rejected by a population fatigued by ineffective combat, and defeats in strongholds like San Miguel reflected this electoral punishment, with the party losing nearly 75% of its 2014 votes (EU,2019,p. 34).

8. Conclusions

The 2019 presidential campaign closed the postwar political cycle, exposing the duopoly's disconnect from the security crisis. The analytical narrative demonstrates that Bukele's victory resulted from a trajectory of total strategic dominance. Modeling through indexed utility functions maps how political constraints, exogenous shocks, and reputational costs generated rational incentives, moving from a positioning game under strategic uncertainty toward a terminal disruptive equilibrium. The trajectory of each candidate's returns captures the structural asymmetry of the competition:

Nayib Bukele experienced continuous exponential gains, moving from 46.4 to 54.0 and consolidating a ceiling of 61.0. The key variable in his victory was identity differentiation (Db), which increased from 8.0 to 10. By coupling security with the anti-corruption (CICIES) and refoundation (*Cuscatlán Plan*) dimensions, he neutralized operational weaknesses. Avoiding traditional debates was optimal: his inconsistency penalty (Cb) remained low (1.0–2.0), as his electoral base absorbed programmatic vagueness within a rejection of the postwar order.

Carlos Calleja displayed stagnation and diminishing returns, fluctuating from 19.5 to 17.0, with a marginal final rebound 20.3 driven by niche strategic voting. His programmatic design (*Smart Shield*) was constrained by a low differentiation coefficient (Dc = 3.5-4.0), being perceived as a bureaucratic extension of the *status quo*. Additionally, the rising inconsistency weight (γCi)—driven by secret pacts with gangs in 2014 and by his failure to address the humanitarian impact of gang violence—functioned as a reputational cost that nullified the territorial viability of his mayoral networks.

Hugo Martínez reflected the ruling party's decline, remaining trapped in a marginal zone (4.5). His sudden shift toward financial intelligence and humanitarian protection underestimated the urgency felt by

a population fatigued by the conflict. He suffered the most severe penalty for political inconsistency (Cm), which increased from 8.0 to 10 due to the contradiction of financing his program through an unpopular tax (CESC) while bearing the burden of the outgoing government's strategic failure and the reputational cost of the truce.

The evolution of the electoral landscape demonstrates, following Asako's model, that the consolidation of competitive advantage was based on the profitability of *vague words*. Political ambiguity, expressed through high-impact slogans with limited operational content, was a rational decision functioning as a shield. By elevating identity over political viability, Bukele emptied public deliberation of technical criteria through a catalogue of desirable objectives—territorial control, prevention, and institutional modernization—while reducing the cost of future betrayal through a non-binding platform. This altered accountability dynamics, consolidating a heterogeneous electoral base and preserving room for maneuver to implement measures previously ruled out—such as an alleged agreement with gangs to stabilize homicide rates, the breakdown of which gave way to the current state of exception—ultimately enabling him to convert his political capital into an absolute legislative majority in the 2021 midterm elections.

The long-term political consequences of this strategic asymmetry validate Asako's warnings regarding the downstream costs of non-binding platforms, finding expression in Wolf's (2024) characterization of the post-2019 scenario as a transition toward an *electoral authoritarianism*. The absolute legislative and executive concentration achieved by *Nuevas Ideas* allowed the administration to dismantle democratic checks and balances, co-opt the judiciary, and implement a permanent state of exception alongside controversial financial policies like Bitcoin. This analytical narrative demonstrates that the foundations of this electoral autocracy were laid during the 2019 campaign. Once the post-war cleavage was broken, tactical flexibility enabled the executive to subvert the institutional architecture from within, substituting democratic deliberation with a centralized security pact. El Salvador thus offers a crucial lesson for comparative politics: under severe citizen fatigue and security crises, choosing disruptive vagueness over technical rigor can secure decisive electoral dominance and create fertile conditions for an enduring electoral authoritarian regime.

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