

Central American University (UCA) www.uca.edu.ni

The Central American University (UCA) was founded in Nicaragua in 1960 as an autonomous educational institution of public service and Christian inspiration. UCA's mission is to form youth who are connected to their social realities and committed to the development of their country. In the field of social investigation on nationwide problems, the work of two groups at UCA's Humanities Faculty that implemented this study stand out - the Department of Social and Religious Sciences and the Institute of Study and Public Opinion Polls.

Ética y Transparencia www.eyt.org.ni

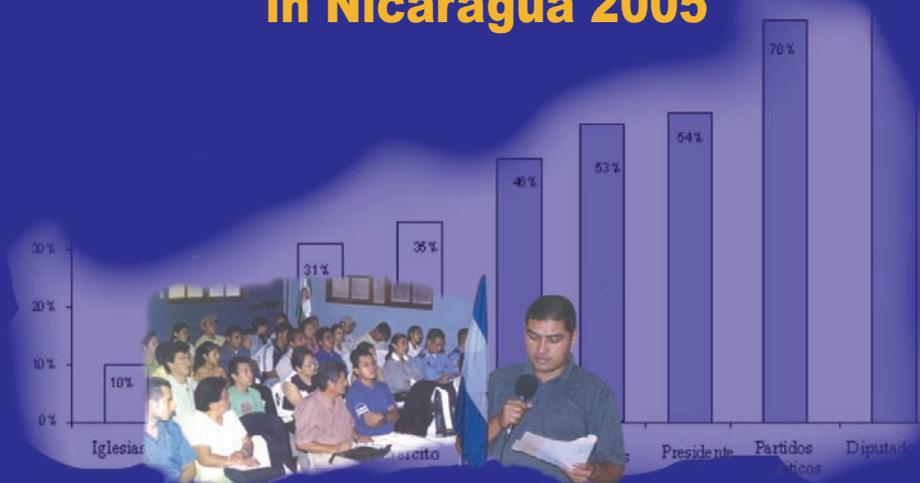
The Civic Group Ethics and Transparency, Transparency International's (TI) National Chapter in Nicaragua, is a nonprofit organization. EyT was founded in 1996 to contribute to building a more democratic and developed Nicaragua by strengthening institutions, ethics and transparency. EyT serves as an umbrella for 20 human rights, civic watchdog and democracy promotion organizations, and relies on a national network of 5,000 volunteers in the entire country. EyT is considered by Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Jimmy Carter as *"one of the best civic groups in the world."*

National Democratic Institute (NDI) www.ndi.org

Founded in 1983, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) is a nonprofit organization based in Washington, D.C. and offices in approximately 55 countries whose mission is to contribute to promote and to strengthen the democracy. NDI works with democrats in every region of the world to build political and civic organizations, safeguard elections, and promote citizen participation, openness and accountability in government. Since 1990, NDI supported various programs in Nicaragua, including strengthening domestic election observation, civic education and political party training initiatives.

Summary of Results

Democracy and Political Culture in Nicaragua 2005



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Introduction

The following is a summary of the results obtained from the research on “Democracy and Political Culture in Nicaragua,” implemented by the Central American University (*Universidad Centroamericana -UCA*), the civic group Ethics and Transparency (*Ética y Transparencia-ET*) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI). The study focuses on such key aspects of the political culture of Nicaraguans as their interest in politics, views about public institutions, citizen participation and opinions regarding elections. We were particularly interested in learning about perceptions and expectations of young people who will be vital to building democracy in the nation during the next decades.

The complex process of strengthening the democratic political system in Nicaragua, both in terms of representation and participation, requires continuous monitoring. And we need to systematically evaluate the performance of political institutions and citizen participation. The results of this study are intended to help political actors, civic organizations and citizens identify the gaps and inconsistencies, as well as the strengths to improve strategic actions toward consolidating democracy in the country.

To understand institutional performance and citizen participation, we must address the political culture that individuals have since this guides their political behaviors and views. Political culture include those attitudes, values, beliefs and representations related to power and politics that are learned in childhood and are reinforced through family, school, church, community and social groups.

Unquestionably, the political culture is a result of the particular historical context of our country, whose negative elements have been highlighted by many analysts. However, it is not a predetermined destiny. Instead, it is subject to change and renewal by social and political actors. It is in this particular sense that we want to make a modest contribution through this study to have a better understanding of the current political culture in our country and its transformation with an eye toward strengthening citizen participation and democracy.

Dr. Luis Serra
Director, Department of Social Studies, UCA
October 17, 2005

Methodology

Objectives:

The objectives of this study were to:

- Obtain perceptions on political institutions and citizen participation in the country;
- Identify conditions that facilitate or limit citizen participation, especially among youth; and
- Contribute ideas for training programs, citizen awareness, election observation and other related studies.

Sample:

The data were gathered from a randomly selected and national representative sample of 1,299 Nicaraguans over 16 years of age. A boosted sample of 354 young people, between the ages of 16 and 25, were interviewed to further analyze the political culture among youth.

Data Collection:

The data were collected through face-to-face interviews conducted at the respondents' home. In addition, three focus groups were conducted to enrich the information, analysis and results.

Field Work:

The data were collected during the first half of July, 2005 in 39 municipalities representing all of the country's greater regions.

Margin of Error:

The data have a margin of error of ± 2.7 with a 95% level of confidence.

I. PROFILE OF YOUTH INTERVIEWED

The findings of the study show that young people, between the ages of 16 and 25, are different from their older counterparts in some important aspects:

Education: Youth have attained a higher level of schooling than adults by taking advantage of educational opportunities offered over the past decades. For instance, compared to 34% of the adult generation, between the ages of 26 and 44, and 17% of adults over the age of 44, 46% of young people, between the ages of 16 and 25, have completed secondary school.

Citizen Participation: While adults routinely take part in religious activities, young people, between the ages of 16 and 25, occasionally participate in sports, cultural and community development activities and few are involved in political parties or unions. The participation of young people in the 2001 national and 2004 municipal elections has been strongly limited by the fact that 50% lack a citizen identification card.

Employment: The unemployment rate for young people, between the ages of 16 and 25, reaches 60%, which is significantly higher than the 44% rate for adults between 26 and 44 years of age. Not surprisingly, almost half of young respondents (47%) say they want to immigrate *“to secure their future.”*

Income: Poverty is widespread. Some 57% of the sample survives on an income of less than one dollar per day.

National Pride: Young people are less likely to say that they are *“very proud”* to be Nicaraguan. This may reflect widespread despair about the country's socio-economic and political crisis and the scarcity of opportunities, or even the discrimination young people face in the areas of education, employment, health and public services.

II. SATISFACTION WITH DEMOCRACY IN NICARAGUA

To learn about the level of satisfaction with democracy in the country, respondents were asked: *“If we talk about the way democracy is working in our country, how satisfied do you feel about it?”* Nicaraguans are divided: 44% said they were either *“not satisfied”* or *“very dissatisfied”*, 45% are *“somewhat”* or *“very satisfied.”* A similar study carried out in 2004¹ showed that supporters of the governing political party expressed greater satisfaction with the functioning of democracy than Nicaraguans from opposition parties.

Significantly some 11% of the respondents said: *“I think there is no democracy in Nicaragua.”* Perhaps that sector is so radically dissatisfied with functioning of the political system that they do not even accept the term *“democracy”* as a definition. Moreover, a clear majority of Nicaraguans (55%) expressed disappointment with the way the current political system works.

The levels of dissatisfaction with the functioning of the political system vary within different sectors of Nicaraguan society. For example, those with more education are more critical about the performance of the political

system than Nicaraguans with limited access to formal Education. This means that people who are more knowledgeable of their rights, how the political system should function, and have regular access to information about the deficiencies of state institutions and public officials, are less satisfied with the political system. And as we would expect, those who are employed are more likely to be satisfied with democracy than those who are unemployed. According to the study, 51% of the population over the age of 16 is unemployed.

Furthermore, the study found that the majority of Nicaraguans (69%) think that political power is concentrated in too few hands. A substantial majority (83%) of Nicaraguans believe there should be a referendum on constitutional reforms to strengthen democracy. Despite these challenges, most Nicaraguans believe that democracy is the best system of government (82%).

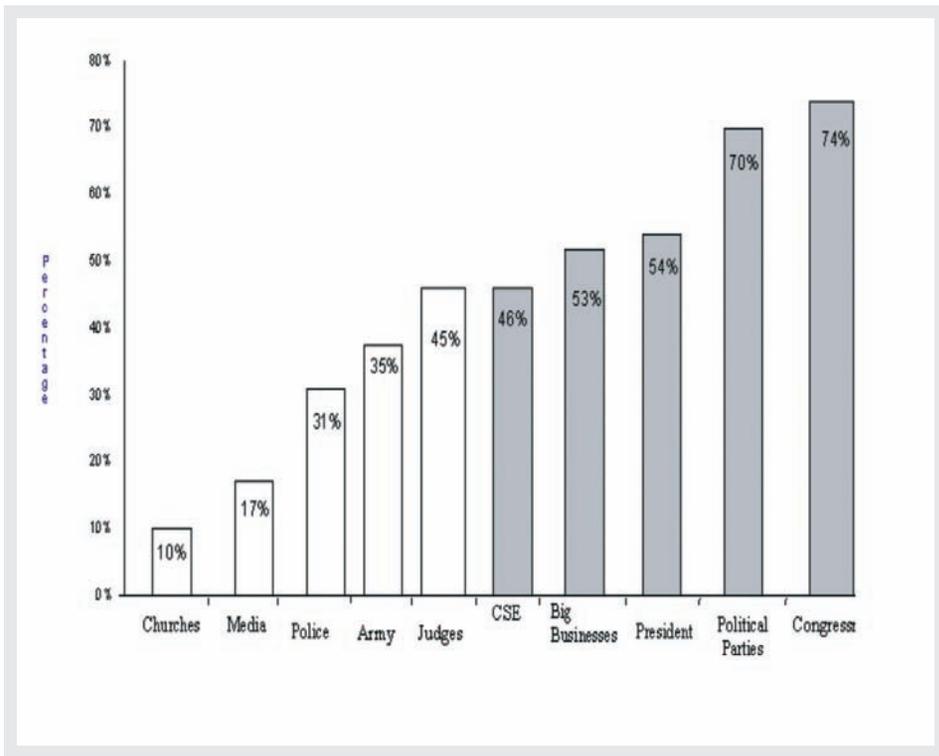
¹ Seligson M., Serra L., López R.P. “Political Culture and Democracy in Nicaragua 2004,” Managua, UCA.

III. CONFIDENCE IN POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

Satisfaction with democracy in Nicaragua is related to confidence in political institutions. The study included questions designed to measure confidence in social, religious, economic and political institutions in Nicaragua as an indicator of legitimacy and support for the current political system.

The findings are clear: most Nicaraguans have little confidence in their political institutions (see Figure 1). More than two thirds of the respondents (74%) indicated that they have “no confidence at all” in congressmen; 70% expressed “no confidence” in political parties; and more than half of the respondents (54%) said they have “no confidence” in the President or in big businesses (53%).

Levels of Citizen Confidence in Public Institutions
Figure 1



By contrast, Nicaraguans (both men and women) expressed more trust in civic institutions. 65% said they had “complete” or “a lot of” confidence in churches, 32% in the media, and 28% in non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Levels of public confidence in these institutions are about the same as those expressed for other international organizations, such as 31% for the United Nations (UN) and 32% for the Organization of American States (OAS).

Public confidence in representative institutions and the political environment is linked to citizen views about the honesty of politicians and government responsiveness to public demands. When asked about these issues, an overwhelming number of respondents (90%) agreed that “politicians are ready to lie to get elected” and 75% think that “the government does not care much about ordinary people.” But Nicaraguans do not support some of the political arrangements in place. 75% of respondents believe that the *pacto* between the Sandinista National Liberation Front (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* - FSLN) and the Liberal Constitutionalist Party (*Partido Liberal Constitucionalista* - PLC) is not good for democracy in Nicaragua. Respondents with this opinion included members of the FSLN and PLC, indicating a gap between members at the grassroots and the leadership of the two parties.

IV. INTEREST IN POLITICS, KNOWLEDGE AND MASS MEDIA

a) Interest in Politics

All democracies work better if citizens take an interest in participating in political life, stay informed, express their opinions freely, elect their authorities and have influence on public policies that respond to their needs. Even so, politics is usually a low priority for people worldwide. Priorities lie in on other aspects of their lives, such as family, work, education, religion and leisure.

The study included a standard question used to measure levels of political interest: “How interested are you in politics?” The majority of respondents (58%) said they have “no interest” in politics; 26% said they were “somewhat interested;” 9% of Nicaraguans reject politics. Only 7% of Nicaraguans said they had a “high interest” in politics.

That means that a third of the respondents expressed they were “somewhat” or “very” interested in politics. Comparative findings suggest that Nicaraguans are somewhat less interested in politics than their counterparts in the Dominican Republic (46%), Peru (48%) and Uruguay (37%), but they are more interested in politics than those in Argentina (18%), Chile (25%), Colombia (29%), El Salvador (15%) or Venezuela (24%).

Levels of Interest in Politics by socio-demographic features

Figure 2

	Very interested	Somewhat interested	Not interested	Rejects it	N
Political Interest	7.2%	26.6	57.8	8.7	1269
Age*					
16-25	7.1%	33.3	51.9	7.8	451
>26	7.2%	22.4	66.1	9.3	818
Education***					
None	5.7%	23.9	59.1	11.3	159
Elementary	6.4%	21.8	63.9	8.0	440
Secondary	6.1%	30.7	55.4	7.8	446
>Secondary	12.7%	28.6	48.8	9.9	213
Residence					
Urban	7.5%	27.4	57.2	7.9	759
Rural	6.7%	24.5	58.8	10.0	510
Employment					
Employed	7.9%	26.6	57.5	8.1	621
Unemployed	6.5%	26.0	58.2	9.3	646
Income					
<\$1000	7.3%	25.2	58.2	9.3	452
\$1001-3000	6.9%	27.5	58.0	7.6	476
>\$3000	10.0%	27.9	53.7	8.5	201
Sex*					
Male	9.5%	28.4	53.0	9.1	662
Female	4.6%	23.9	63.1	8.4	607

Notice that young people have a greater interest in politics than older generations: 52% of young people, between the ages of 16 and 25, said they are “not interested” in politics, compared to 61% of people over the age of 25. Likewise, we find a similar gap in the column that reflects those who are “somewhat interested.”²

In addition to the generational gap, there is a significant educational gap. Interest in politics is higher among those men and women with higher educational levels (41%) and lower among the least educated (30%). There is also a gender factor: women expressed less interest (53%) in politics than men (63%). This can be attributed to the traditional role assigned to women in the domestic setting and to limited access to political candidacies and public positions.

The widespread lack of interest in politics among citizens (58%) is linked to the view that identifies “politics” with actions by “political parties.” The low level of interest is a result of the generalized distrust in these political organizations and their representatives. Among the reasons for this lack of confidence, the respondents mentioned “unfulfilled promises regarding social benefits once they are elected.” Politicians are perceived as being anxious for power and enrichment, reflected in their high salaries, corrupt and

unresponsive to people's needs.³ This is a high level of disinterest in comparison with other countries and is manifested in limited participation during electoral processes and in other spaces available for citizen participation, such as municipal council meetings.

b) Knowledge about Politics

What about political knowledge among Nicaraguans? Respondents were asked if they could recall the name of their Mayor, the President of the Republic of Nicaragua and the President of the United States. About half of the respondents (48%) answered all three questions correctly. Three percent did not answer any correctly. Most respondents (78%) were able to identify their Mayor, although, surprisingly, 22% could not. Almost everyone (91%) knows the current President of Nicaragua and to a lesser degree (59%), the current President of the United States.

² One theory is that young men and women who have experienced many political deceptions like older generations with the political projects of the 80s and the structural adjustment period of the 90s have a higher desire for change. This is the kind of positive attitude needed to promote democratization, transparency and efficiency within the state and political parties.

³ Focus groups conducted by the UCA, August 13, 2005.

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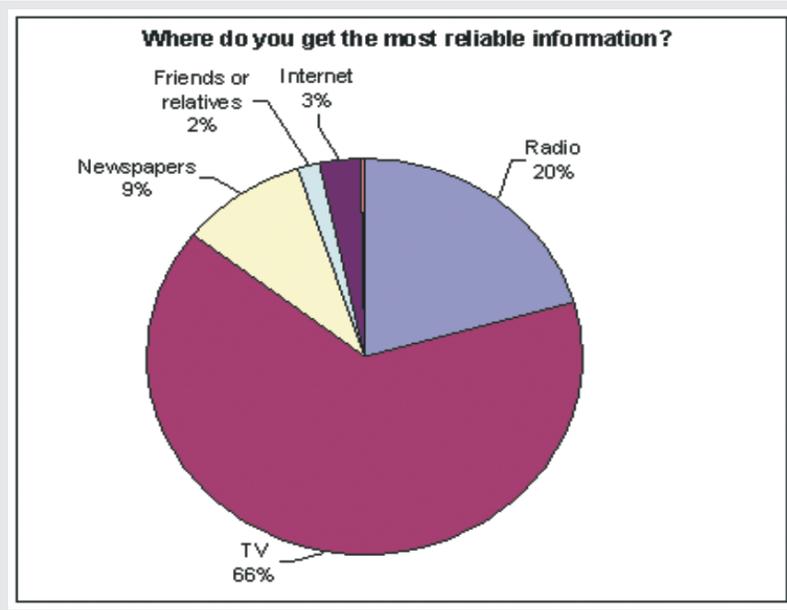
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c) Use of the Media

Most Nicaraguan (66%) see television as the most reliable source of daily information. Radio (20%) ranks second, and with less frequency newspapers, the Internet, and relatives or friends. There are rural-urban differences: in the countryside, access to electrical power is less frequent, therefore the use of television is reduced and radio is more commonly used (with the advantage that receivers are run on batteries) as the most reliable source of information.

This shows us the great expansion of radio stations in the country in terms of coverage and variety of channels over the last few years. It also indicates the reliability attributed to images and capacity to attract audiences from different sectors. This fact presents a great responsibility for television news programs regarding balanced and substantiated information about relevant everyday events.

Figure 3



When respondents were asked to name the mass media source or the news program that they think does not tell the truth, the study found two extremes: those who trust in all the forms of mass media (31%) and those who do not rely on any of them (22%). Lastly, there is a minimal level of distrust with respect to certain media outlets and news programs. That is, a third of the population has total confidence in the media regardless of its type, which seems to demonstrate a low level of critical and analytical capacity in relation to the media and news programs, and a complacency that facilitates a biased view of reality, as well as behavioral manipulation. On the extreme end, one out of every five respondents does not trust any mass media source. Therefore, they live uninformed and are subject to manipulation by leaders or political groups with power.

V. CONFIDENCE AND PARTICIPATION IN ELECTIONS

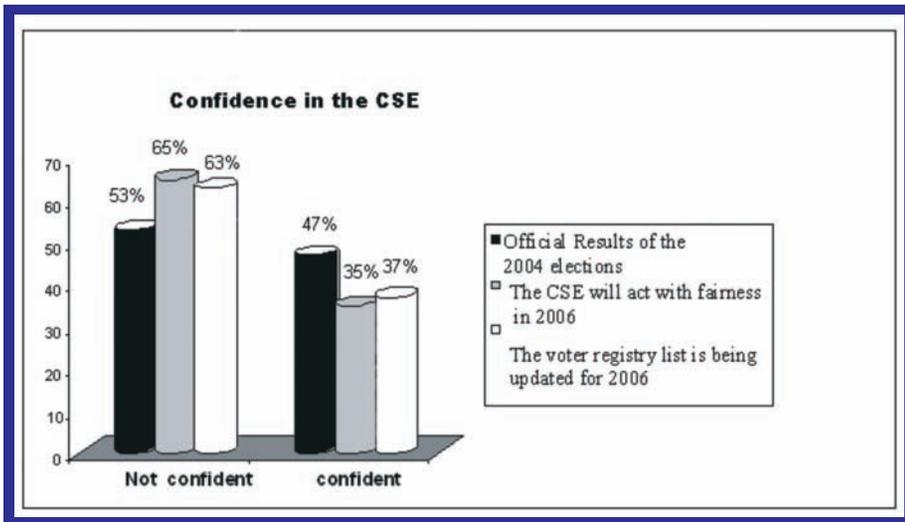
a) Confidence in Electoral Institutions

Elections are essential to the democratic process. Elections provide opportunities for citizens to express their political will within the options provided by political parties and candidates running for office. In all democracies, the performance of the institutions charged with administering elections influences citizen participation in the polls. But citizens must have confidence in the ability of their electoral institutions to conduct efficient, fair and transparent electoral processes.

The results of this study are troubling: almost half of the respondents (46%) have “no confidence at all” in the Supreme Electoral Council (*Consejo Supremo Electoral - CSE*) (see Figure 4); a majority of them (53%) do not trust the official results presented for the municipal elections in 2004; almost two thirds (65%) think that the voter registry list for the upcoming elections has not been updated. And (62%) outright do not trust that the CSE “*will perform in an unbiased and fair manner*” for the 2006 presidential elections

This lack of confidence in the CSE and political parties helps to explain why citizens call for the participation of observers to verify the fairness and validity of the upcoming elections. The survey shows that 77% of respondents think that the presence of international observers is “*very necessary*”; 67% think that nonpartisan national election observers are equally needed.

Levels of Confidence in the Supreme Electoral Council
Figure 4



Given these findings, it comes as no surprise to discover that Nicaraguans are not very enthusiastic about the prospects of having early elections. More than two-thirds of the respondents (68%) oppose the idea of holding legislative and presidential elections before 2006. On the other hand, there is substantial support (75%) for the idea that political parties hold internal elections to select their candidates for the 2006 elections. Support for this idea is uniform across party lines: 78% of those who voted for the PLC and 79% for FSLN support internal elections. The implication of this finding is intriguing.

b) Barriers to Voting

Low levels of voter turnout is a concern in a number of countries. Analysts investigating this matter provide two kinds of explanations for this problem: one refers to institutional conditions, such as electoral law, mandatory or optional voting, the voting process and identification; the other refers to motivational factors surrounding citizen participation, including interest in politics, confidence in electoral institutions and poverty or sickness.

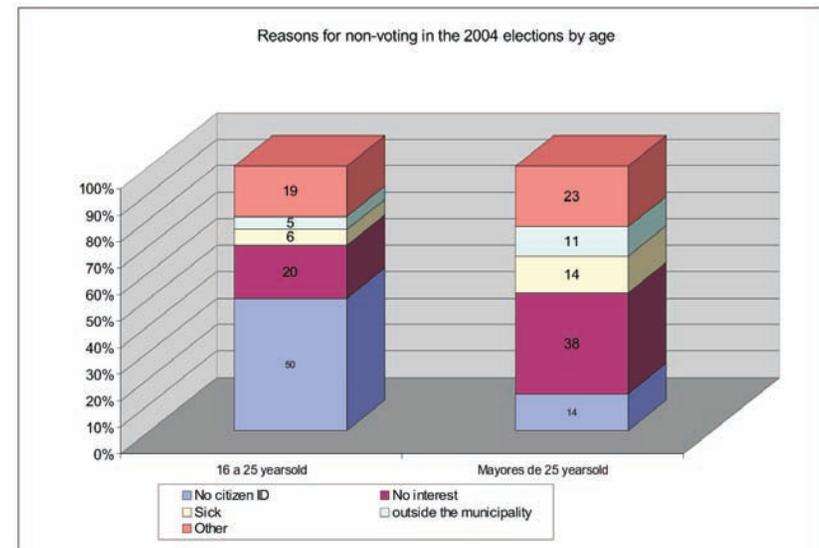
Despite the low level of interest in politics, dissatisfaction and lack of confidence in nicaraguan institutions, 64% of respondents said they voted in the municipal elections in November 2004, leaving 36% who did not.⁴ A detailed analysis of the study results produces a surprising finding:

age is the single most powerful predictor of non-voting. Young people, between the ages of 16 and 25, are significantly less likely to vote (44%) than are those over 25 years of age (30%).

The results point to the presence of a significant institutional barrier: one out of every three respondents (33%) said they did not vote because they did not have a citizen identification card. The second most frequently mentioned reason is motivational: some 29% of the respondents said they did not vote because “they were not interested.” Other less frequently mentioned reasons were that they were “away from their municipality” on election-day or “sick.”

There is a striking difference between the reasons offered by young people and adults for not voting. As Figure 5 shows, half of all voters under 25 years of age said that the main reason they did not vote was because they “did not have a citizen identification card.” One out of six of those over the age of 25 offered the same reason for not voting.

Reasons for non-voting in the 2004 elections by age
Figure 5



⁴ The proportion of respondents who recalled that they voted is higher than the official voter turnout (56%). In survey research, these discrepancies are common; people sometimes tell interviewers that they voted when they did not to save face. Note, though, that the reverse is hardly ever true. Consequently, we can be confident that the 36% reporting they did not vote in 2004 really did not.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

- For youth and adults, the most urgent issue affecting Nicaragua is unemployment and poverty, followed by political instability, citizen insecurity and a lack of public services. Undoubtedly, this situation influences the perception held by half of Nicaragua's youth that "it is better to leave for another country to ensure your future."
- We found a split between the people who are satisfied with the performance of democracy in Nicaragua and those who are not. However, most people do not trust politicians, state institutions, or high ranking government officials. As for political parties, citizens propose transparent internal elections to select candidates for 2006 elections in order to increase public confidence in key political institutions.
- Against the backdrop of political apathy, young people express more interest in the country's politics than adults, although their participation in the 2001 and 2004 elections was limited by the fact they did not have citizen identification cards. It is recommended that the CSE focus on providing a solution to this institutional barrier, which denies half of Nicaraguan young people, between the ages of 16 and 25, their right to vote.
- It is troubling to note the high level of citizen distrust in electoral institutions and organizational preparedness for the national elections of 2006. Respondents called for electoral observers to guarantee the validity and transparency of the process. The need to reform the electoral law and CSE performance, to establish an equal playing field, was also discussed in the focus groups.
- The study shows a correlation between distrust in the CSE and in political parties. For many citizens, it is clear that the CSE is made up of partisan interests, derived from the electoral reforms of 2000, instituted by the pacto between the PLC and the FSLN, which restricted the participation of other parties in electoral processes and thus reinforced control by these majority parties.

- The majority of the population uses television and radio almost every day as their main source of political information and they show an acceptable level of political knowledge. However, the study found a low level of critical and analytical capacity to ascertain messages, which could facilitate a biased view of reality and manipulated behavior. It is recommended that the media provide more balanced and accurate information so that citizens can know and exercise their rights based on informed criteria.
- To strengthen citizen participation, Nicaraguan youth believe that it is necessary to promote moral values and opportunities for participation through the family, school and the media by respecting the rights of children, adolescents and youth to express their opinions and consulting them on public policies defined by the government, political parties and civic organizations.