

Introduction:

With civil society partners, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) has conducted benchmark democracy surveys in Nicaragua since 2005. These surveys provide valuable information concerning the views of Nicaraguan citizens about the state of democracy in their country.

This report summarizes some of the key findings from the 2009 Nicaragua Democracy Survey, which was conducted in collaboration with the Institute for Development and Democracy (*Instituto para el Desarrollo y la Democracia*, IPADE). Survey data were gathered between March 17 and 26, 2009 from a random sample of 1,200 Nicaraguans. One noteworthy feature of this survey is that respondents were interviewed after the November 2008 municipal elections.¹

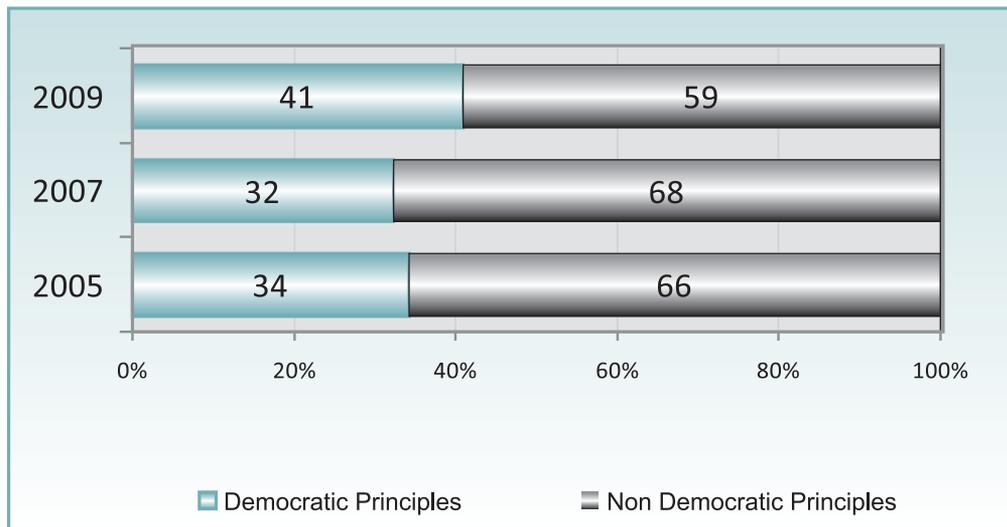
¹For more details on the methodology, please see the technical appendix.

1. Support for Democratic Principles:

Transitions to stable democracy are only possible when citizens support democratic principles. The democracy surveys have tracked support for core democratic values and procedural norms since 2005, and the basic finding is an encouraging one. As Figure 1 shows, public support for democratic values has gradually gained ground.



Figure 1. Support for Procedural Democratic Norms by Year



Source: Nicaragua Democracy Surveys, 2005, 2007 and 2009.

About one-third of Nicaraguans subscribed to democratic values in 2005 (34.2 percent) and 2007 (32.4 percent). Support for these values increased to about two out of five Nicaraguans (40.9 percent) by 2009. Education continues to be the most important predictor of procedural democratic norms.

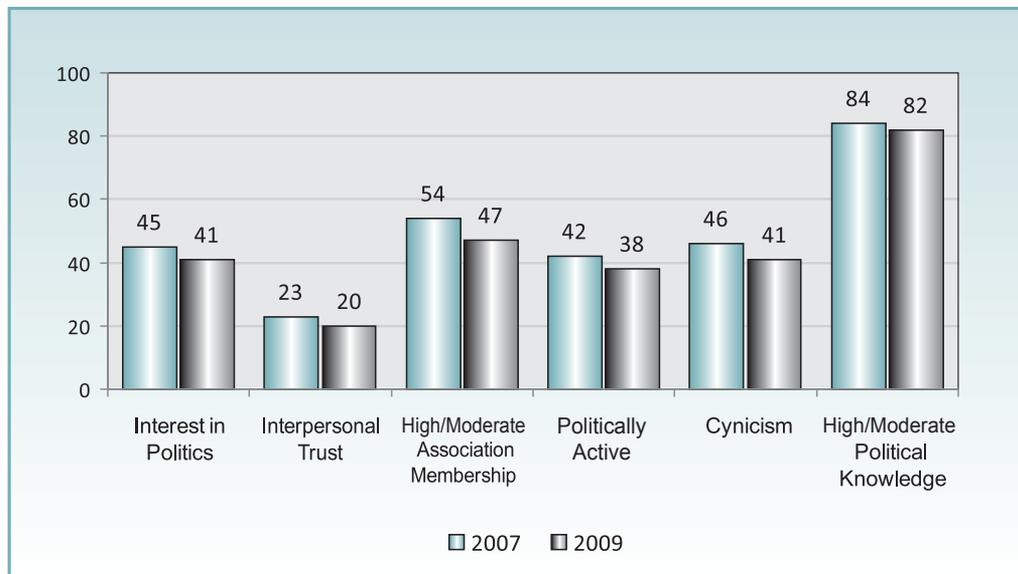
2. Citizen Engagement:

For countries to have effective democracies, citizens not only need to support democratic principles they also need to be engaged.

The evidence shows, however, that Nicaraguans have become less engaged since 2007. Citizens reported being less interested in politics, less trusting, less involved in their communities, and less active in politics. Also, respondents increasingly believe that the government does not care about them.



Figure 2. Engagement by Year

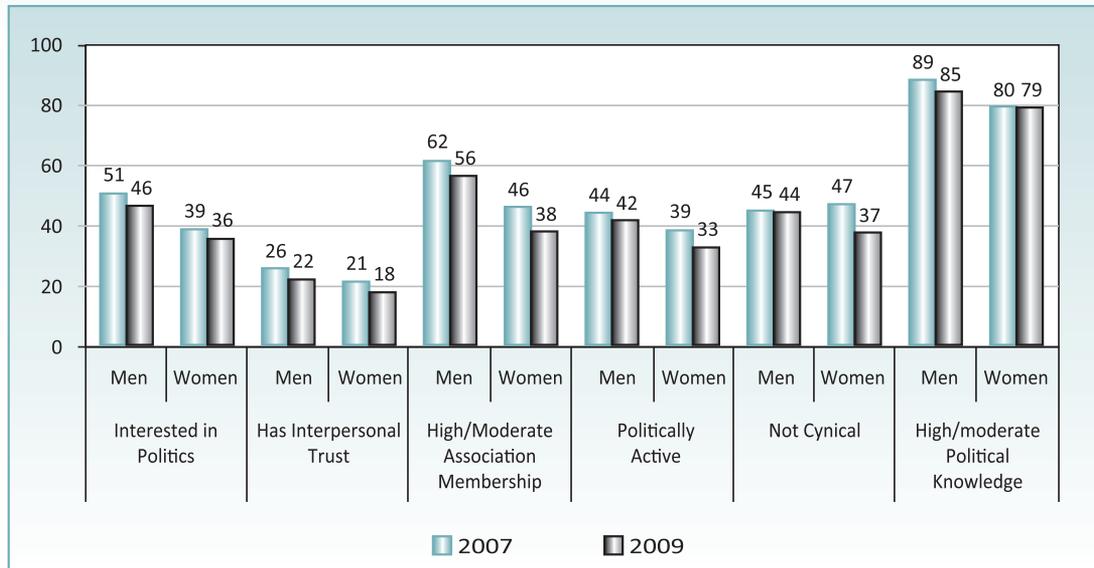


Source: Nicaragua Democracy Surveys, 2007 and 2009.

More discouraging is evidence showing that those who support democratic principles have become more disengaged from political life. Moreover, as Figure 3 shows, women have become significantly less engaged than men; there is a widening gender gap.



Figure 3. Engagement by Gender and by Year



Source: Nicaragua Democracy Surveys, 2007 and 2009.

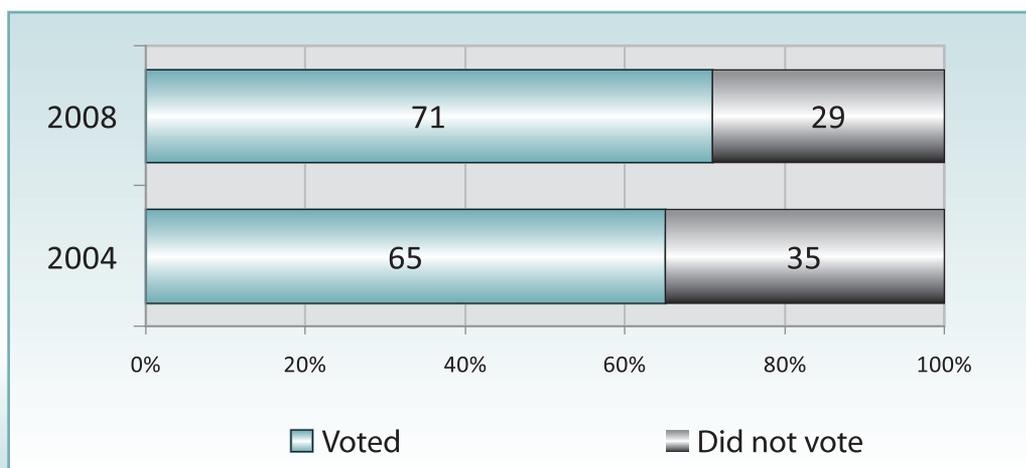
3. Voting and Non-Voting:

Citizen participation in elections is critical to democratic life. Voting is not only a fundamental democratic right it is also one mechanism by which citizens hold their leaders accountable.

As Figure 4 shows, reported voter turnout was somewhat higher in the 2008 municipal elections than in 2004.



Figure 4. Voter Turnout by Election

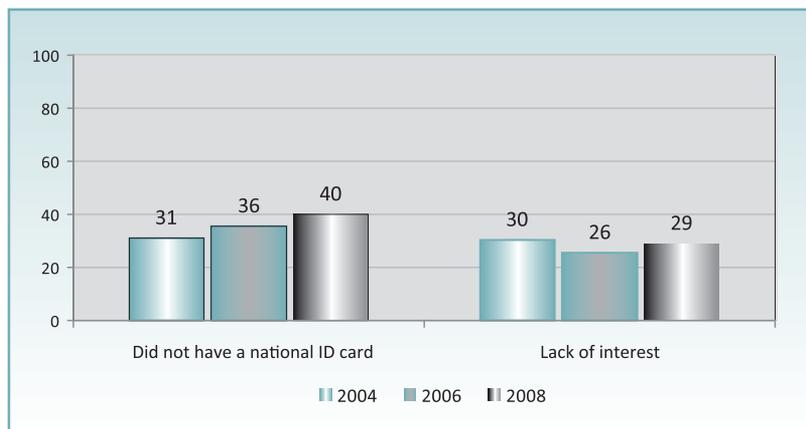


Source: Nicaragua Democracy Surveys, 2005 and 2009.

Voting is not mandatory in Nicaragua, and citizens sometimes decide not to vote for personal reasons, lack of interest, or because they were traveling. That is a personal choice. The troubling finding, however, is that a substantial proportion of eligible citizens are prevented from voting. That is not their choice. These citizens face institutional barriers – such as the lack of a national identification card – that disenfranchise them. As Figures 5, 6 and 7 show approximately three in ten citizens reported in 2005 that they did not vote because they did not have a national identification card. By 2009, that number increased to about four out of ten.



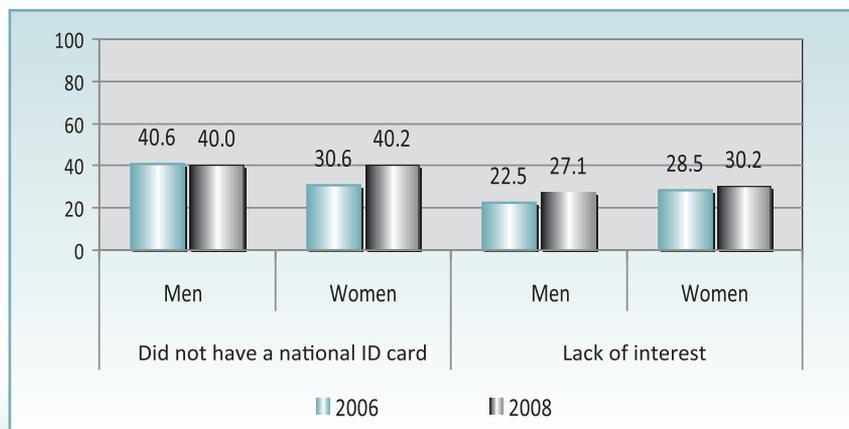
Figure 5. Reasons for Non-Voting in Election by Election



Source: Nicaragua Democracy Surveys, 2005, 2007 and 2009



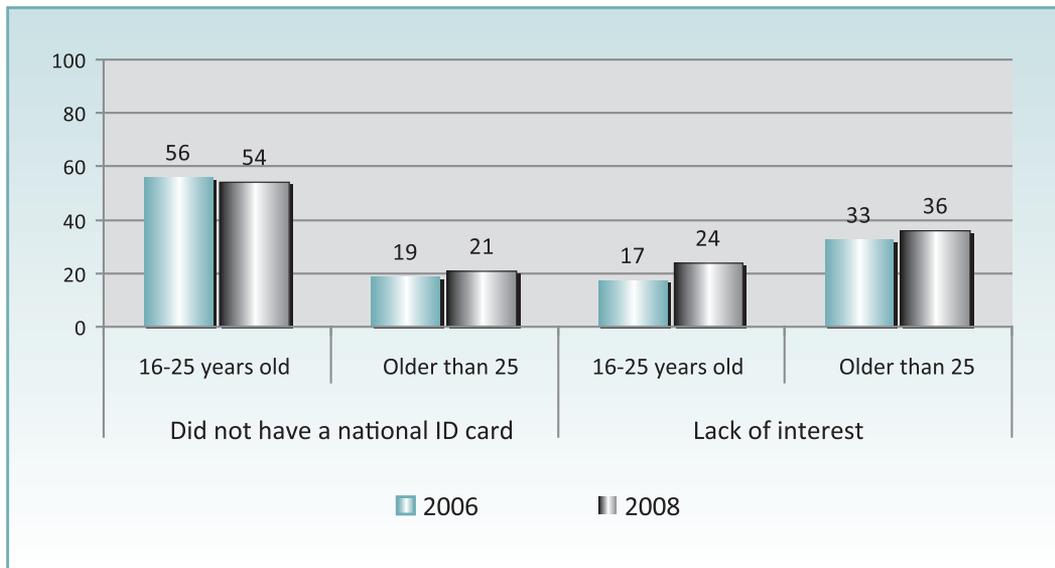
Figure 6. Reasons for Non-Voting in Election by Gender and by Election



Source: Nicaragua Democracy Surveys, 2007 and 2009.



Figure 7. Reasons for Non-Voting in Election by Age and Election



Source: Nicaragua Democracy Surveys, 2007 and 2009 .

While there is no evidence of a gender gap, there is clear evidence of a striking age bias (Figure 7). More than half of citizens under 26 years of age who did not vote said that they could not vote because they lacked a national identification card. The situation is becoming worse. Young people are more than twice as likely as the rest of the population to face this problem. These findings challenge the principle that eligible citizens have an equal practical right to vote.

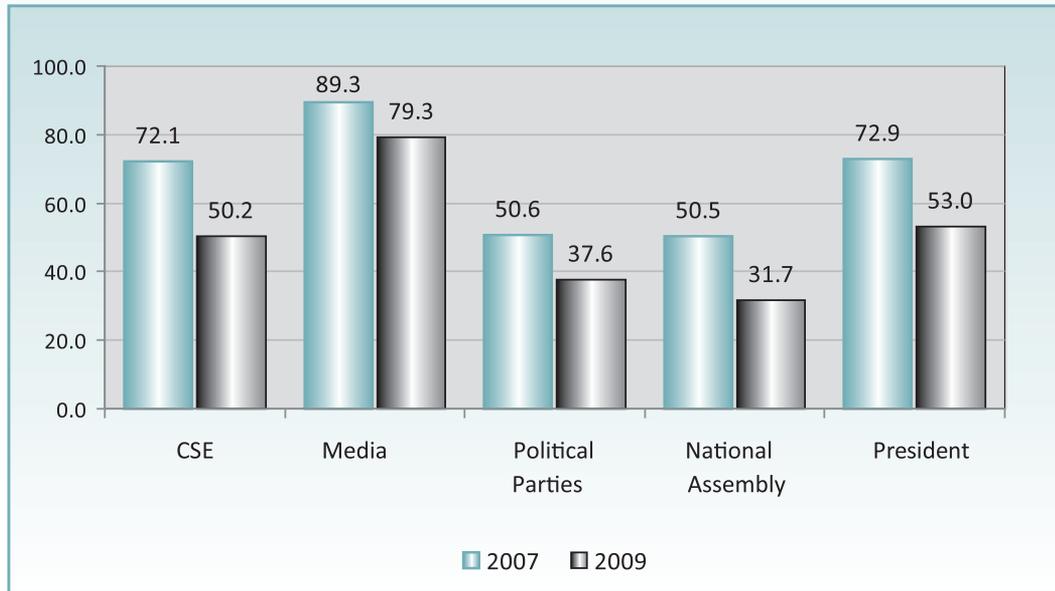
4. Confidence in Institutions:

Democracies function more effectively when citizens support those key institutions that represent, mediate and give strength to the country's social fabric. In most countries, citizen support for their institutions is typically quite stable.

Substantial shifts, however, seem to have taken place in Nicaragua since 2007. The data summarized in Figure 8 capture those shifts. Additional detailed supporting evidence is shown in Figures 9 and 10.



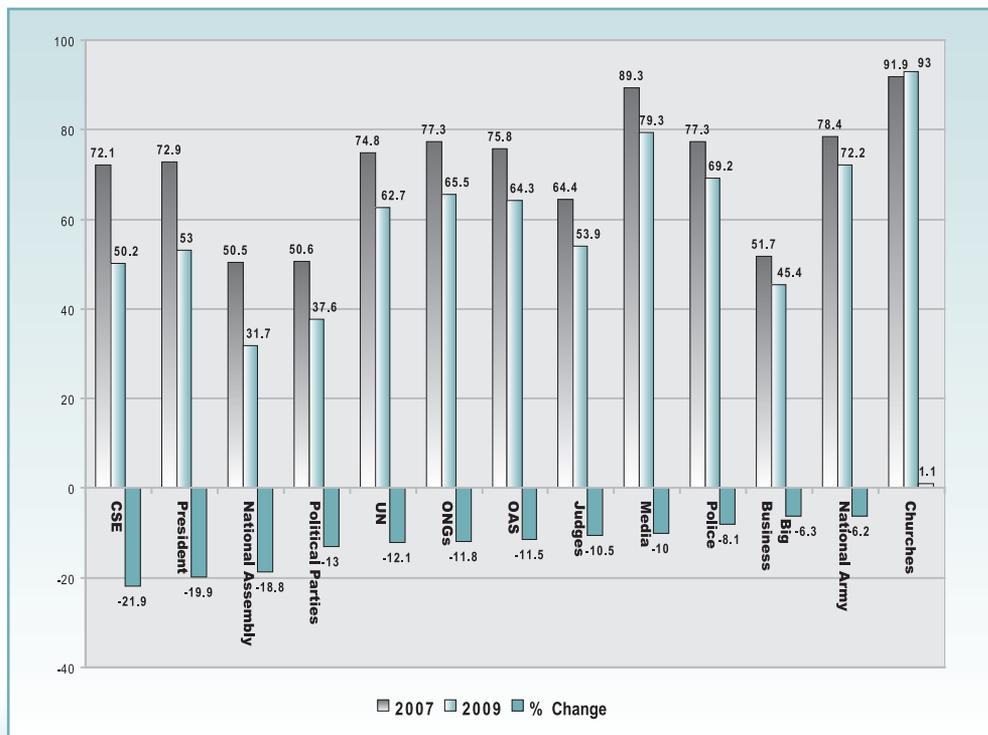
Figure 8. Public Confidence in Political Institutions by Year



Source: Nicaragua Democracy Surveys, 2007 and 2009.



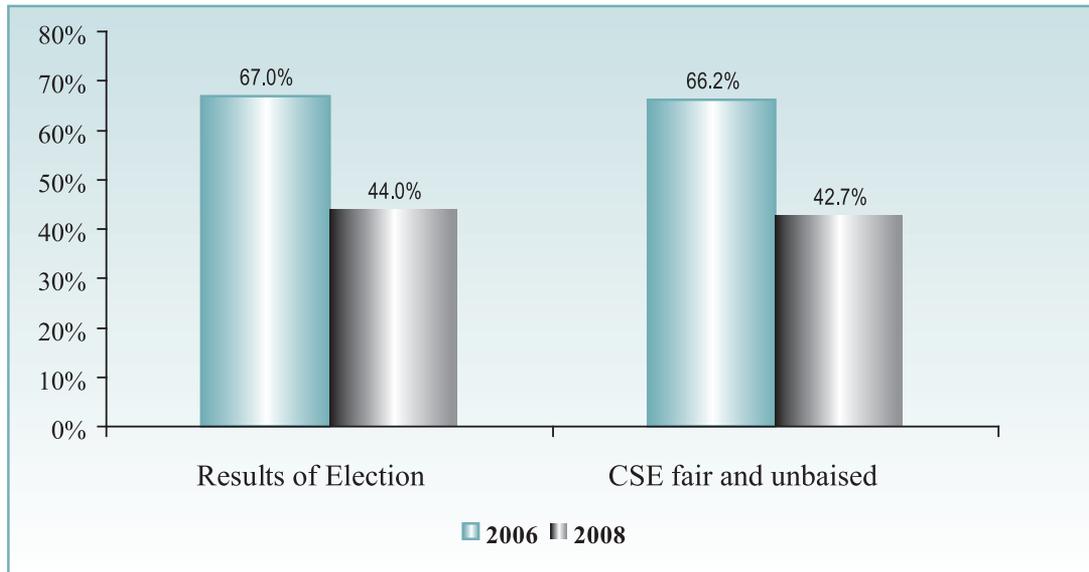
Figure 9. Confidence in Institutions, 2007 and 2009 Comparison



Source: Nicaragua Democracy Surveys, 2007 and 2009.



Figure 10. Percent “Completely” and “Somewhat” Trust Electoral Institutions



Source: Nicaragua Democracy Surveys, 2007 and 2009.

First, there has been a sharp drop in public confidence in key representative institutions, particularly those institutions that mediate the electoral process. As Table 6 shows, the Churches are the only institutions, in fact, that did not experience a decline in confidence between 2007 and 2009.

Second, the steepest declines in public confidence were experienced by the Supreme Election Commission, the President, the National Assembly and Political Parties. Indeed, the National Assembly and Political Parties have the lowest levels of confidence of all institutions considered.

A detailed analysis of these results shows that, between 2007 and 2009, confidence in these key institutions fell by about the same amount in every segment of society. The decline in public confidence is both clear and broad.

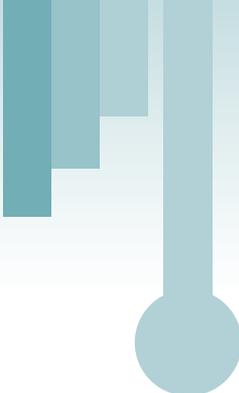
Conclusions:

Significant changes have taken place in Nicaragua in a relatively short period of time. The encouraging news is that citizen support for democratic principles is increasing.

However, there are several discouraging findings when it comes to how Nicaraguans evaluate and participate in their political process. Clearly, citizens became more disengaged between 2007 and 2009. In addition, those citizens holding democratic values became more disengaged than those not subscribing to these principles.

Second, a substantial portion of eligible citizens are prevented from voting because they lack national identification cards. The young are disproportionately disenfranchised from voting as a result of this growing problem. Third, citizen confidence in key institutions has declined remarkably.

These findings suggest that the challenges are first, to re-engage those citizens who have become disengaged and who cannot engage due to institutional barriers. A second, but equally important, challenge is to restore public confidence in institutions that are vital to the legitimacy of the state.



Technical Appendix

The 2009 Nicaragua Democracy Survey was conducted between March 17 and 26, 2009. The methodology and content of the 2009 survey was deliberately designed to match the 2005 and 2007 surveys, based on measurement and comparison of indicators applied in more than 80 countries worldwide. The data collection was supervised by IPADE and the results are generalizable with a margin of error of +/- 3 percent. The survey sample comprises 1,200 individuals from the general population (men and women older than 16 years). Respondents were randomly selected. The sample was representative and proportionately distributed by area of residence and stratified by domains of interest: Managua, urban administrative centers, the remainder of urban areas in the country, rural municipalities and deep rural municipalities, in accordance with data from the Population Census of 2005 taken by the National Institute for Development and Information (INIDE). A stratified and bietapic sampling method was used in a two-stage random selection: the primary units (census segments) were selected during the first stage and secondary units (housing) during the second stage, with one interview per household. Interviews were conducted face-to-face.