CHAPTER 5

NEGOTIATING RULE: POLITICAL FRAUD AS INTERACTION

The previous chapter sought to describe and analyze how the networks of rule that produced the Balaguer state in the southwest were created and re-created through forms of interaction. The objective of this chapter is the same, but I shift the empirical focus. I shall examine not how La Descubierta’s leaders and masses gave shape to the public sector, but how they participated in elections. The chapter focuses on the presidential and municipal elections in the 1980s and the early 1990s.

A characteristic of the Balaguer regime was the opposition’s constant allegations of political fraud. These were integral to all election processes while Balaguer wielded power in the country (Cabrera Febrillet 1991; Hartlyn 1994; Espinal 2000). Many take for granted that fraudulent elections are a product of imposition from the top of the state, and not a result of a myriad of grassroots-level exchanges across the country. In sharp contrast to such a perspective, I shall show that a sizeable proportion of the people of La Descubierta not only experienced but also helped produce the country’s fraudulent elections “from below.” The fraud that pervaded the Balaguer state was not only imposed (or contested) but also created and maintained in the everyday life of most of the nation’s communities.

The tough competition for access to the state that existed in the 1980s and the 1990s led to repeated charges, countercharges, and denials of bribery and fraud. In La Descubierta, there were high stakes and much uncertainty for many. There were high stakes for leaders and their followers, related to the difference between a four-year access to and a four-year exclusion from the state’s jobs and services, and they went through much uncertainty about what “in reality” went on in political arenas, about what one’s rivals “really” did in order to succeed in taking
home the four-year victory, and about the validity or fraudulence of thousands of voting cards. People had profound doubts about the fairness of others’ strategies and their own possibilities of establishing the truth about the political games in which they took part. The uncertainty in turn promoted both more fraud and more allegations. In order to be able to substantiate these assertions, I must first present more of the charges and countercharges.

Stories of Elections

The content of the local stories about fraud highlight two points. They show (1) that local participation in elections was a continual activity, a part of the everyday life of the community; and (2) that life in the region was governed by ideas about patronage.

The display of political photos of candidates was an ordinary aspect of the southwestern (urban and rural) landscape. Yet the spread of photos intensified during the last months leading up to elections. La Descubierta’s building structures, for example, were thoroughly politicized. The painted names of Miriam and Balaguer decorated two centrally located walls. And even though I lived in the village in an electoral midterm, photos of Rafaelito’s face were on permanent display on posts and houses. Inside many homes, frequently high up on a wall, the portrait of Balaguer, Bosch, or Peña Gómez was placed. The latter’s portrait also adorned the wall in the mayor’s office in the Town Hall.

Electoral iconography reaffirms patronage. Roland Barthes has written about the spread of photographs of political candidates in contemporary France. Barthes argues that it has a power to transform: “Photography . . . tends to restore the paternalistic nature of elections, whose elitist essence has been disrupted by proportional representation and the rule of parties.” He maintains that the display of political faces “constitutes an anti-intellectual weapon and tends to spirit away ‘politics’ . . . to the advantage of ‘a manner of being,’ a socio-moral status” (Barthes 1989:98).

However, in contemporary Dominican society, the force of electoral photography is less that of transformation than that of confirmation of an already inculcated faith. The names and photos of the political leaders were installed in surroundings that had long been replete with images of saints (Deive [1975] 1988; Davis 1987; Lundius and Lundahl 2000). Individuals’ and households’ relationships to the saints functioned through the idiom of patronage. They were relationships, not to the nation’s president and other leaders, but to God and His spiritual and material helpers.