

Elections--the privilege or the compulsion?

Asking citizens of the United States of America to picture life in El Salvador exerts an excess demand on our imaginations; we cannot see ourselves as citizens of a foreign country. But perhaps we can relate to that other society in a single facet of their lives and ours. Perhaps we can compare elections in that country with elections here.

To make the comparison valid we need some background information and need to think about how life in El Salvador differs from life in our own country. In that small nation where an average of 575 inhabitants crowds each of its 8,260 square miles, a civil war is under way. Visualize a mountainous terrain, a country where almost a quarter of its five million people live in four major urban areas, and where the annual income per person averages approximately \$600. Imagine living where there are fewer than 1,000 miles of paved roads in the whole country. That is the setting.

Now consider the election: picture yourself walking many miles to the polls; see yourself standing in line with thousands of other voters who, like you, have come long distances to cast their ballots; discover, after waiting for hours, that your name is not on the voters' list, or that you have waited at the wrong polling place, or that your identity papers are not in order. Imagine being turned away, or told to walk many miles further to stand in another long, long line, or questioned by authorities who are less inclined to believe you than the government's computer print-out.

Perhaps you are among the hundreds of thousands who will be able to vote for the candidate of their choice. You will leave the polls after your finger has been dipped into a jar of indel-

ible ink to signify you voted and to ensure you do not vote more than once. Whether you were able to read or not is of no significance; whether you marked your ballot for or against one of the candidates is immaterial. No one cares whether your ballot is valid or thrown out. The only official concern is that citizens vote.

In fact, so deep is the official concern that votes are cast in the election that the law of the land mandates that every citizen **must** vote in the national election.

Can you imagine living in a country where voting is not only a duty, not only a privilege, but a requirement . . . somewhat akin to filing an income tax return?

We watch on our television screens masses of El Salvadoreans flock to the polls. We may feel those voters have much in common with us; we may believe they wait patiently to cast their ballots because they care (as deeply as many of us do) about the election's outcome. If fate had decreed we were citizens of El Salvador, would we believe voting might make a difference in our own lives? Or might we shrug (as it appeared many citizens of that Central American nation do), or go to the polls because that is required, but feel participation is futile and that nothing ever really changes?

In our country, elections do make a difference; which party leads our nation's administration does affect each of us directly. Government policies regulate the economy, determine tax rates, establish new programs and discontinue obsolete ones. In El Salvador, elections may seem to make little difference... but then again...if elections are ever to be meaningful there, it is necessary to start **somewhere!**