The Opposition Next Door: Voter Learning in Single Party Systems*

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Abstract

How do voters in single party systems learn about opposition parties? Electing opposition parties is risky when governance quality is uncertain, but voters can decrease this uncertainty by observing and learning from neighboring subnational governments' experience with opposition leadership. I examine the effect of exposure to opposition governance in nearby municipalities on support for opposition candidates in municipal elections in 1990s Mexico. Using a close elections regression discontinuity design, I find that municipalities with exogenous exposure to PRD-governed neighbors supported the PRD by 10-13 percentage points more than those without. This effect is specific to the PRD and does not extend to the PAN, an older opposition party with established presence in state and large city governments. These findings provide important

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insight into electoral behavior and information transmission under single party systems by demonstrating how voters acquire political information through geographic proximity.

Word count: 4885

1 Introduction

Democracy requires that incumbents lose elections and leave office (Przeworski 1991), but this requires that voters have acceptable alternative political candidates (Pitkin 2023; Powell 2004). Opposition parties in single party systems face significant valence disadvantages at the polls (Kuriwaki, Horiuchi, and Smith 2025). One such disadvantage is that these parties lack an empirical record of institutional governance and policy implementation. As Downs (1957) argues, "actions already taken are better evidence than those merely promised."

This lack of institutional governance experience means that opposition campaign promises are seen as more risky than the dominant party's proven governance track record. Voting populations that are risk averse, therefore, will ascribe a risk premium to electing opposition candidates because they lack knowledge of how these leaders will act once elected. This makes it more difficult for opposition candidates to gain electoral support, as only populations with low levels of risk aversion will be willing to support them. This behavior is characterized by the adage: "*más vale malo conocido que bueno por conocer*".[1] How, then, can risk-averse voters in single party systems gain enough evidence to comfortably vote for opposition candidates?

In this paper, I argue that exposure to opposition governments elected in nearby sub-national governments gives voters information that makes opposition candidates less risky. Risk averse voters who are interested in opposition parties but unsure of how they will govern once in office can observe nearby elected opposition politicians, giving them more information on the governance style of these parties and therefore

1. The English equivalent is "better the devil you know than the devil you don't," but the literal translation is "better the bad you know than the good you don't."

lowering the risk premium of voting for opposition candidates. I provide evidence of this learning process empirically utilizing a close election regression discontinuity design (RDD) examining how support for the center-left Party of the Democratic Revolution (*Partido de la revolucion democratica*, PRD) increased in municipalities exposed to PRD governance in Mexican municipal elections in the period of 1995-2000.

I choose Mexico during this period for my empirical analysis for four main reasons. First, until very recently Mexico has maintained a political tradition of not allowing incumbent candidates to run for additional terms of office (*sufragio efectivo, no reelección*). Therefore, voters pay more attendtion to party labels than individual candidate characteristics in Mexican politics (Langston 2003; H. A. Larreguy, Marshall, and Snyder 2018). Second, existing scholarship has demonstrated that Mexican voters during the period of the Institutional Revolution Party's (*Partido revolucionario institucional*, PRI) hegemony were quite risk averse in elections with opposition party challengers (Cinta 1999; Morgenstern and Zechmeister 2001; Magaloni 2006; Helmke 2009). Third, this period marks the nascent stage of the PRD in the Mexican political landscape, before it had gained office in governorships or large cities. Finally, major electoral reforms in 1990, 1993, and 1994 leveled the playing field for opposition parties to compete in free and fair elections for the first time in decades. The absence of electoral manipulation is necessary for the validity of the RDD.

The PRD, whose initial leadership splintered from the PRI, largely shared the social policy goals of the PRI while also supporting democratic reforms (Diaz-Cayeros, Magaloni, and Weingast 2003), but the lack of experience highlighted the uncertainty

about how the party would govern (Bruhn 2010; Mossige 2013). Thus, voters in municipal elections who are able to observe the PRD in nearby governments will have more certainty about how the party will govern. The RDD model shows that PRD candidates in municipalities exogenously exposed to PRD governance in near neighbors experience a 10-13% increase in support in the subsequent municipal election. This result weakens when farther neighbors are included, further providing evidence for the spatial component of voter learning.

I contrast this evidence of spatial learning for PRD candidates with candidates from the National Action Party (*Partido de Accion Nacional*, PAN), the other major opposition party in Mexican politics during this period. The PAN is a center-right party whose pro-market economic policy positions were similar to the PRI's during this period (Diaz-Cayeros, Magaloni, and Weingast 2003). However, in contrast to the PRD, the PAN gained office in many states and big cities in the early 1990s. This means that voters nationally were able to observe the actions taken by high-profile PAN governments, and therefore spatial learning should not occur. Consistent with this theoretical prediction, I find no evidence of spatial learning for the PAN.

I provide evidence against alternative explanations for the effect of PRD governance exposure on PRD support. First, I show that the PRI's strategy to reward loyal swing municipalities is not a concern during this period, as the PRI was struggling financially. Additional analysis indicates that the effect is not attributable to the supply of PRD candidates, as the likelihood of PRD candidates running for office remains unaffected by prior exposure to PRD governance. Furthermore, the results do not find evidence to support alternative voter theories. I show suggestive evidence that the effect does not decrease for municipalities with higher levels of exposure to

PRD candidates, which further provides evidence for the mechanism that observing governance is important to reduce voter uncertainty.

These findings provide significant insights into the strategic decision-making processes of voters regarding candidate and party support, suggesting that adopting popular policy positions alone is insufficient for opposition parties among risk-averse populations. Furthermore, the results illuminate the diverse range of information that voters consider when making political decisions, aligning with the existing literature on policy diffusion (Pacheco 2012; Weible 2023). This has important implications for studying electoral accountability, as I show evidence that voters not only evaluate their own elected officials but also scrutinize the actions of parties in other governments. The spatial nature of the effect uncovered here also indicates the presence of spillovers, which has important methodological implications.

This paper proceeds as follows. In section 2, I first present a theory of risk aversion and opposition parties in single party systems generally. Then, I connect the theory to the empirical context of Mexican municipal politics in the late 1990s. In section 3, I describe the data I collect for analysis and the RDD model specification. In section 4, I present the results of the RDD models for both the PRD and the PAN. In section 5, I provide evidence against alternative theories that might explain the findings in section 4. Finally, in section 6 I offer a summary of the paper and discuss future avenues for research on voting behavior and spatial learning.

2 Theory

Risk aversion refers to a decision maker's preference for certainty over uncertainty. More technically, a decision maker is considered risk averse if they strictly prefer the expected value of a probability distribution of outcomes over a randomly drawn outcome from the probability distribution. I refer to risk aversion among voters as the tendency to prefer parties with a known track record of governance to those with less experience in government, ceteris paribus. Rational voters making electoral decisions compare not only the campaign positions of candidates, but also the likelihood that they can be trusted to implement what they say they will do (Downs 1957). Following Shepsle (1972), I consider party's positions on an ideological scale not as single points but rather as probability distributions. Thus, risk averse voters will prefer parties with lower variance (uncertainty) over parties with higher variance.

In settings where parties have roughly equal experience in office, voters will have well formed opinions about how each party governs. In other words, uncertainty about parties is much lower, so voters will vote based on campaign promises alone and niether candidate will be seen as "risky." Berinsky (2007) show this to be the case in US presidential elections, which has a robust two-party system where parties roughly alternate between winning the presidency. Using data from 1972-1996, the author shows that voters in US presidential elections do not show signs risk averse behavior.

In single party systems, voters are all but sure of the policies that the dominant party (the party that has exclusively held office for a long period of time) will implement, as they have observed multiple periods in which the dominant party has governed and implemented policy. However, opposition parties have had little to no

experience in office, so the voters are uncertain what policies they will implement once in office. Consequently, opposition parties face significant electoral challenges in risk-averse political environments, where uncertainty about governance substantially undermines their electoral prospects. Even in environments where the population prefers the opposition's policies, if voters are sufficiently risk-averse they will prefer the certainty of the dominant party over the uncertainty of their preferred policy. In other words, voters associate a *risk premium* with voting for an opposition party.

If voters exclusively learn about opposition parties through direct experience (i.e. electing them), then only shifts in voters' policy preferences large enough to overcome the risk premium associated with electing opposition can bring about change. However, in devolved, federal systems of government where parties are elected in sub-national governments, voters are not restricted to observe only the set of elected officials that directly represent their municipality, district, or state. On the contrary, studies show that public opinion reacts to policies enacted by neighboring states. Pacheco (2012) finds that public opinion in states without smoking bans is reactive to policy changes in neighboring states, in a phenomenon the author calls "social contagion." Observing neighboring governments is a risk averse voters who are considering voting for an opposition candidate is observing neighboring governments.

In the context of municipal politics, I argue that citizens pay attention to nearby municipal governments and process this information in their evaluation of political parties. This source of information is especially important for risk averse voters in single party systems, because it reduces uncertainty about how the opposition governs. Consequently, municipal contexts characterized by high concentrations of risk-averse constituents with increased exposure to opposition party leadership will see increased

support of opposition candidates within their electoral district. Importantly, this effect is contingent on the utility of the information. If information about governance is already widely available, the additional insights from neighboring municipalities should have little to no impact.

The intuition for why geographic proximity is a good proxy for information spread is straightforward. People travel to neighboring municipalities for myriad reasons: work, healthcare, shopping, visiting family, or recreation. During time in neighboring municipalities, they may observe initiatives enacted by the municipal government or talk to residents about their municpal president. Geographic proximity has also long been an important aspect of models of migration (Ravenstein 1889; Beine, Docquier, and Özden 2011; Grogger and Hanson 2011; Anderson 2011). Empirical evidence also shows that local news media cover various political leaders and entities (such as municipalities) that reflect the composition of their audience (Snyder and Strömberg 2010). News consumers, therefore, will likely be exposed to information about nearby municipalities, depending on the amount of overlap in news media coverage (newspaper circulation, radio stations, or TV networks) between the municipalities (Roberts 2025). This spillover of coverage should be a function of spatial proximity, especially before the advent of the internet when local media was relatively much more robust.

This theory is similar to work in comparative politics and international relations that provides strong evidence that information about governance spreads spatially. A large body of work on democratization shows evidence that the spread of democracy has a spatial component (Huntington 1991; Pevehouse 2002; Gleditsch and Ward 2006; Brinks and Coppedge 2006; Ahlquist and Wibbels 2012; Houle, Kayser, and Xiang 2016; Goodliffe and Hawkins 2017; Abramson and Montero 2020). There is

also evidence in the American politics literature that elites make policy choices in part based on the policy outcomes of spatially near states or municipalities (Volden 2006; Shipan and Volden 2008; Gilardi 2010; Lee and Bisbee 2024).

2.1 Mexican Democratization and Opposition Parties

Since the end of the Mexican Revolution in the 1920s, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) maintained an electoral authoritarian regime, with its candidates occupying positions at virtually every level of government for decades. While through much of this era the PRI enjoyed popular support because of economic growth and stability, the party also widely engaged in electoral manipulation (Magaloni 2006). This culminated in a highly publicized scandal during the 1988 presidential election, wherein the PRI conspicuously halted the vote-monitoring process as the left-wing candidate, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, was in the lead. The results released later showed PRI candidate Carlos Salinas de Gortari won by an almost 20 percentage point margin, casting widespread doubt on the integrity of the electoral process (*El día en que "se cayó el sistema" y ganó Salinas* 2018).

In response to the backlash, the PRI was forced to enact substantial electoral reforms in order to ensure a credible electoral process. In 1990, the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE)[2] was established as an independent agency in charge of organizing federal elections in Mexico (*Historia,*). These reforms required that opposition parties be included in the certification of elections. In 1993, 1994, and 1996 more reforms were made to make the agency more autonomous and allow media access to the

2. In 2014, the name was changed to the National Electoral Institute (*Instituto Nacional Electoral*, INE).

electoral verification process (Klesner 1997). While these reforms were only at the federal level, the reforms were adopted by many states for state and local elections as well (Magaloni 2006).

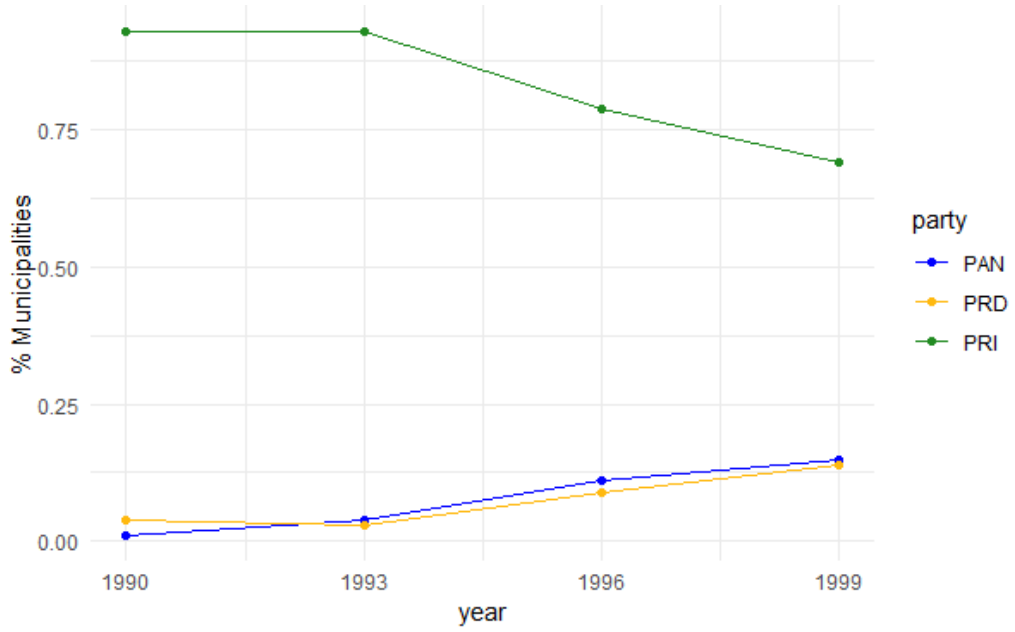
2.2 Mexican Municipalities

Under the 1917 Mexican constitution, states are given the power to divide themselves into administrative divisions called municipalities. Each municipality has a municipal council (*ayuntamiento*) led by a municipal president (*presidente municipal*), who is elected by popular vote in a first-past-the-post electoral system. Municipal elections are held every three years, and all municipal elections within a state are held in the same year. Because of a rotating calendar of state elections, municipal elections are held every year in some subset of states. Note that municipalities are conceptually distinct from cities or townships. Townships or localities (*localidades*) in Mexico are governed by municipalities. The US equivalent of a municipality in the US is a county.

Municipalities in Mexico have substantial powers. This is due to Mexican revolutionary Venustiano Carranza's conception of the "free municipality" (*"el municipio libre"*), which advocated for municipalities being in charge of their own finances, free from intermediary governmental interference between the municipality and the state. As a result, the selection of party candidates for the position of municipal president carries significant implications for voters.

The free and fair elections following the 1990s electoral reforms directly resulted in opposition parties gaining electoral support quickly during this period. However, the PRI still maintained the presidency, majorities in both houses of the legislature, and the vast majority of state and local offices. Figure 3 shows the number of munic-

Figure 1: Party Control of Municipalities, 1990-1999



ipalities with PRI, PAN, and PRD municipal presidents in the 1990s. The number of opposition municipal presidents increases during this period, but the majority of municipal presidents in 1999 were still governed by the PRI.

This continued support of the PRI at the local level is not the result of being popular. After two economic recessions, the PRI had lost credibility on being competent about the economy and lost funds to reward party loyalists (Greene 2007, 2008). (I will address this further in section 5.3.) Additionally opposition parties were seen as more democratic by the Mexican public than the reigning PRI.[3] However, risk aversion in the electorate led many voters to continue to vote for PRI candidates because voters were unsure whether opposition candidates would govern better than

3. According to a 1999 survey from *Reforma* newspaper, 43.2% of respondents considered the PRI to the authoritarian, while almost half as many saw the PAN and PRD as authoritarian (25.4% and 28%, respectively). Source: Greene (2008)

PRI leaders (Buendia 1996; Cinta 1999; Diaz-Cayeros, Magaloni, and Weingast 2003; Magaloni 2006; Helmke 2009).

This makes this period in Mexico a prime case to study the theory presented in section 2. I argue that the ability to observe neighboring municipalities will be important for increasing support of the PRD specifically. The PRD was formed in 1989 as a center-left party from an alliance between PRI leaders who had left the party (like Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador), the Mexican Socialist Party, and "a diverse group of social organizations" (Palma Cabrera 2000). The policy platform of the party was very similar to the traditional social agenda of the PRI, but also advocated democratic reforms (Diaz-Cayeros, Magaloni, and Weingast 2003). However, media campaigns by the PRI painted the PRD as violent, extremist, and disorganized (Bruhn 2010). Voters who could not observe the PRD in government were likely to have real concerns about electing PRD candidates. However, observing the PRD in office would likely lead voters to believe that the PRD governed much like the familiar PRI.

I do not claim that observation of nearby municipalities is the only, or even main, mechanism through which the PRD gained support. Their social policies focused on the poor were popular among rural municipalities with large poor populations. Nor do I argue that risk aversion is the only reason for which voters support the PRI. Rather, I argue that for the subset of voters who are risk averse, the ability to observe PRD governance should lead to higher support among those who support the policy platform of the PRD. Thus, spatial proximity to PRD governance should increase PRD vote share in subsequent elections.

I do not expect spatial proximity to influence support for PAN candidates be-

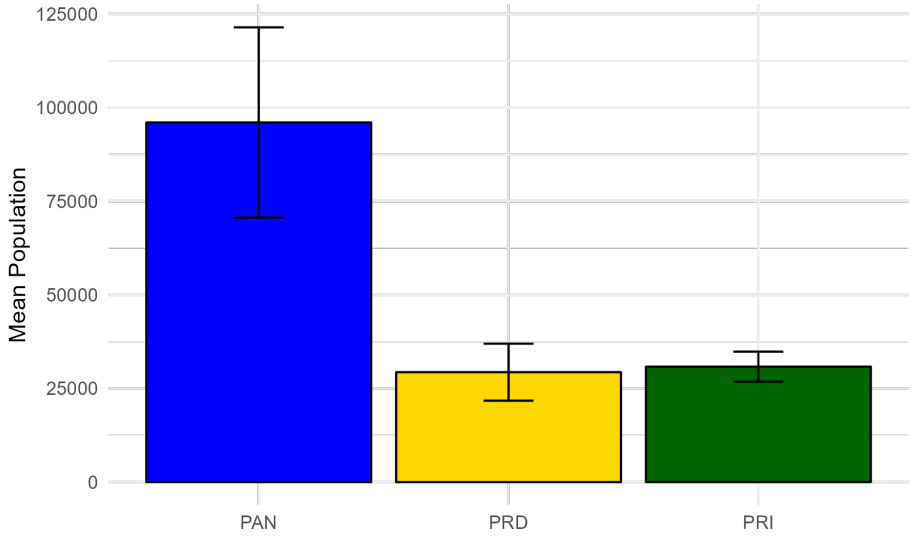
cause the PAN had already taken office in highly visible settings. By 1995, four states were governed by PAN leaders (Baja California, Chihuahua, Gunajauato, and Jalisco). PAN municipal presidents had been elected in large cities (including Tijuana, Monterrey, and Gunajuato) and eleven state capitals. Comparatively, the largest municipality governed by the PRD before 1995 had a population of just over 200,000.[4] To show the difference in municipalities governed by the PRD and the PAN, figure 2 shows the average population and income of municipalities run by each of the three main parties. The graphs indicate that the PAN governed in municipalities that were highly populated and affluent, both factors that would attract nationwide media attention. Therefore, I expect that voters nationally have already formed opinions about how PAN governs, so local observation of neighbors will not change beliefs about the riskiness of electing PAN municipal presidents.

3 Data and Model

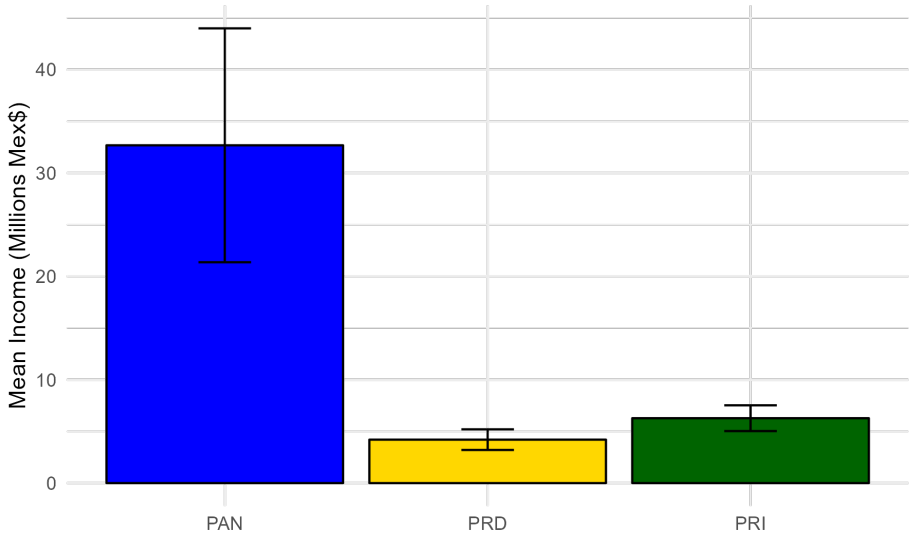
To empirically test my hypothesis, I utilize a close elections regression discontinuity design (RDD). This methodological approach effectively addresses the issue of endogeneity, particularly the challenge posed by spatial correlation. The RDD framework allows for a quasi-experimental comparison between municipalities that narrowly elect an opposition president and those that narrowly do not. With the assumption that municipalities on either side of the electoral threshold are essentially comparable, this design provides a robust estimate of the average treatment effect of opposition party exposure at the discontinuity.

4. The municipality is Cardenas, Tabasco, which had a population of 204,810 in 1995. Data from CIDAC and Mexico 1995 Census Count.

Figure 2: Mean population and income of municipalities by party, pre-1995



(a) Population



(b) Income

To construct the running variable, I use data on municipal elections from CIDAC (*Centro de Investigación para el Desarrollo A.C.*). This data contains all of the votes for every party candidate in municipal elections from 1985-2012. However, I restrict my analysis to elections in the six year period from 1995-2000, so that I only include electoral results after the major electoral reforms in 1994. Because of the three-year cycle of municipal elections, this means that there are two electoral cycles during this period. I call the t period from 1995-1997 and $t+1$ the period from 1998-2000.

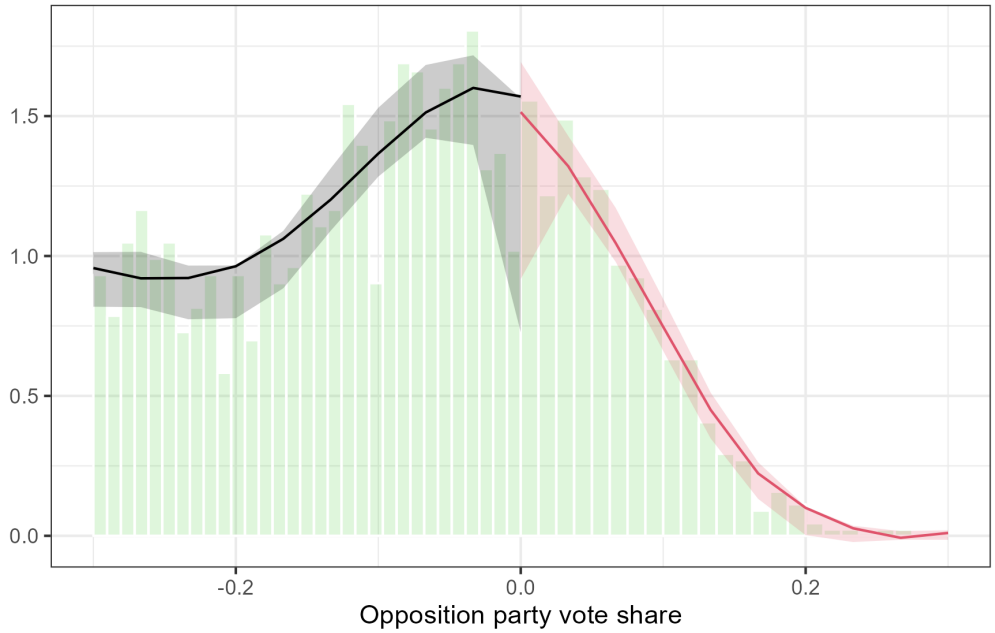
The running variable is constructed as

$$Z_i = \frac{Opposition_{i,t}}{Winner_{i,t} + SecondPlace_{i,t}} - 0.5$$

where $Opposition_{i,t}$ is the vote share of the opposition party specified in the model (either PRD or PAN) in municipality i at election t. $Winner_{i,t} + SecondPlace_{i,t}$ is the sum of the top two vote getting parties. I subtract by 0.5 so that $Z_i = 0$ is the threshold, meaning that when $Z_i > 0$ the opposition party wins the municipal election.

A problem with the validity of the RDD arises if we have reason to believe that municipal elections can be manipulated across the threshold. I specifically select the period from 1995-2000 because this is after the major electoral reforms of 1990, 1993, and 1994 were implemented, minimizing the risk of electoral manipulation by the unchecked power of the PRI. Additionally, I conduct a manipulation test using the local polynomial density estimator proposed by Cattaneo, Jansson, and Ma (2020). As figure 3 shows, I find no evidence of manipulation across the threshold (p-value = 0.59). In the Appendix (Tables 1 and 2), I also check for discontinuities in various covariates to test if the continuity assumption holds (Cuesta and Imai 2016). Thank-

Figure 3: Manipulation Test of Running Variable, p = 0.59



fully, I find evidence that virtually all of the covariates that theoretically should not be affected by treated are not discontinuous at the threshold.

The treatment measured by the RDD is exposure to opposition governments in neighboring municipalities. I name the municipalities i used in the running variable "treatment status" municipalities because they are the units I use to measure exposure to opposition governance in "outcome municipalities" $j \neq i$. I define V_i (the set of neighbors, or *[V]ecinos*) as the set of i's neighboring municipalities j. The size of V_i depends on the number of municipalities n included in the model, i.e. $\forall i, |V_i| = n$. To illustrate, if municipality A's nearest neighbor is B and $n = 1$, then $V_i = \{B\}$.

I run RDD models for the PRD and the PAN separately. In order to capture the effect of exposure to opposition party governance, I restrict the set of treatment status

municipalities i to municipalities that have not elected the model-specified party prior to 1995, the beginning of the period I examine. I restrict the outcome municipalities j in the following three ways. First, I include only municipalities j that are in the same state as municipality i. This keeps the electoral calendar constant, as all municipalities in the same state will have municipal elections in the same year. Second, I exclude municipalities j that have successfully elected an opposition candidate prior to 1998. This is necessary to test the theory presented in section 2, namely that the information from neighboring municipalities should only be informative for municipalities that have not yet elected the opposition partry. Third, j must have an opposition candidate of the model-specified party in the electoral period $t+1$. This is because opposition parties in municipalities without PRD candidates will have zero votes in the data, but this is not necessarily indicative of the underlying support for the party. In Appendix Table 3, I show the probability opposition party candidates run in $t+1$ is not affected by the electoral outcome in t, providing evidence that the omission of these municipalities does not bias treatment estimates.

The main specification for PRD and PAN RDD models focuses only on the nearest neighbor j of treatment status municipality i. Formally, this model can be written as

$$y_j = \alpha + \tau D_i + \gamma Z_i + \beta_1 Year_{i,j} + \beta_2 State_{i,j} + B_3 Distance_{i,j} + \epsilon \tag{1}$$

In this model, y_j is the weighted difference of opposition vote shares in t and $t+1$ in nearest neighbor outcome municipality j. D_i is the treatment status variable, indicating whether an opposition candidate won in municipality i ($D_i = 1$) or not ($D_i = 0$). $Year_{i,j}$ controls for nation-wide trends in opposition support. $State_{i,j}$ accounts for state-specific variation in opposition support, as well as any state specific

variation in electoral processes that might add noise to the data. $Distance_{i,j}$ controls for the distance between the municipal seats of municipalities i and j. The data on the location (latitude and longitude) of municipal seats is from INEGI. Distance is calculated using the Haversine formula, which takes the distance between two points "as the crow flies" while accounting for a spherical earth. Including distance between municipalities as a control is important because the distance between nearest neighbors as specified in this model can vary substantially.

Additional specifications include multiple outcome municipalities in the outcome as a weighted average. These models are specified as

$$\overline{Y}_{V_i} = \alpha + \tau D_i + \gamma Z_i + \beta_1 Year_{i,j} + \beta_2 State_{i,j} + B_3 \overline{Distance_{i,j}} + \epsilon \tag{2}$$

The model above is almost identical to (1), except for two changes. First, the outcome $\overline{Y}_{V_i}$ is now the average of the change in vote share weighted by the distance between each municipality $j \in V_i$. Second, $\overline{Distance_{i,j}}$ is the average distance between i and j for all $j \in V_i$.

For all models, my theory predicts that the treatment effect τ will be heterogeneous depending on the opposition party modeled. For the PRD, I expect exposure to governance in near neighbors to reduce uncertainty about the PRD and therefore increase PRD support. For the PAN, I do not expect exposure to PAN municipal governments to have any effect on the support for PAN candidates. Therefore, I expect $\tau > 0$ for the PRD and $\tau = 0$ for the PAN.

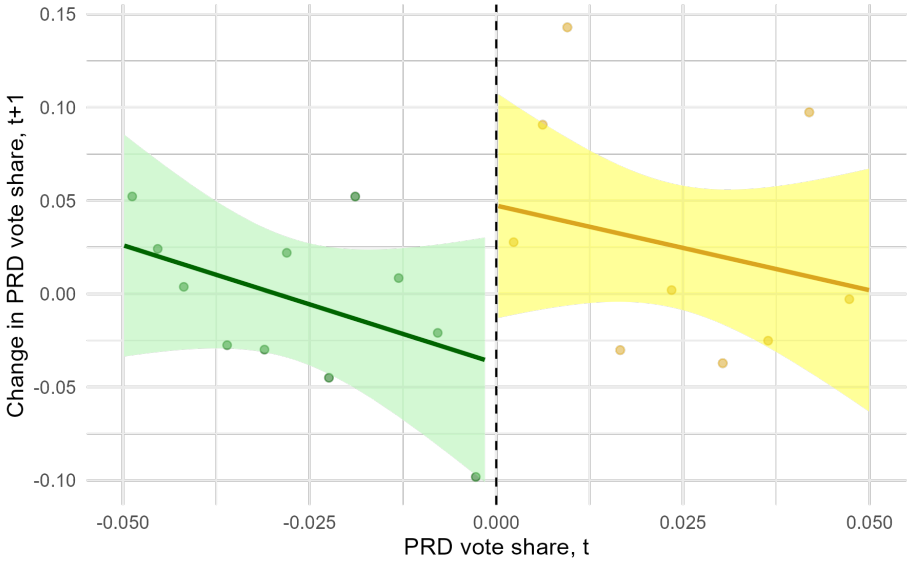
4 Results

I first show the RDD graphically. Figure 4 show how linear trend differ at the threshold 0, i.e. where the opposition party receives the exact same amount of votes as the PRI. The x-axis shows the running variable, meaning the opposition vote share in the treatment status municipality. The y-axis shows the change in opposition vote share from t to $t+1$. Colored lines indicate the linear trends of the data to the left and right of the threshold, and shaded regions show 90% confidence intervals. Dots represent the averages of changes in party vote share, binned into twenty bins by percentile. Note that neither the linear estimates nor the points include controls. In line with the theory, Figure 4a shows evidence that exposure to PRD governance does increase PRD support in neighboring municipalities, while Figure 4b shows no evidence of a discontinuity for PAN exposure.

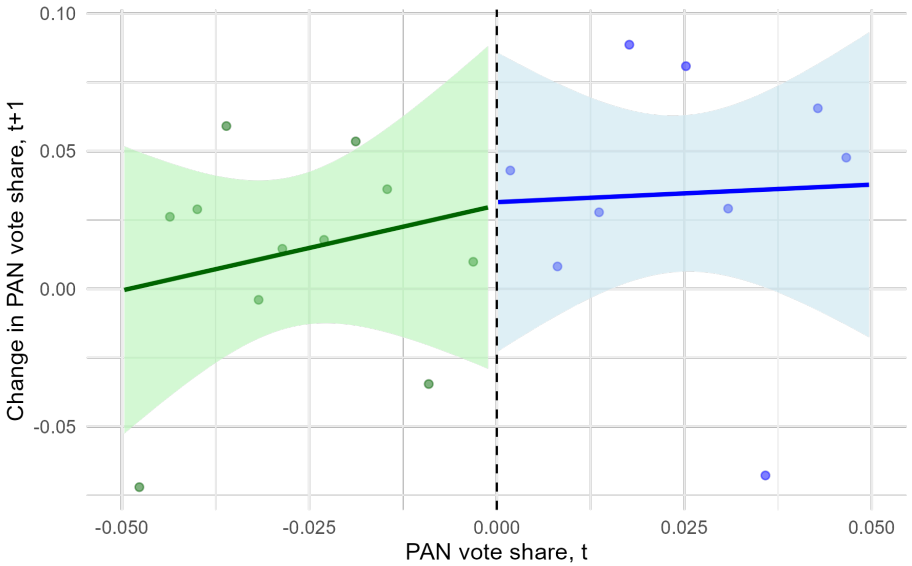
Next, I move to the robust RDD estimates. I first present the nearest neighbor estimates in Table 1. All models show bias-corrected point estimates calculated using triangular kernels with robust bias-corrected confidence intervals using the method described by Calonico, Cattaneo, and Farrell (2020). Columns 1-3 present PRD models, and columns 4-6 present PAN models. Columns 1 and 4 show models without controls, whereas the other columns include controls for the year of the election, state of municipalities, and distance between nearest neighbors. Finally, columns 1, 2, 4, and 5 calculate optimal bandwidths that minimize coverage error rate (CER-optimal), while columns 3 and 6 use MSE-optimal bandwidths (Calonico, Cattaneo, and Farrell 2020).

The PRD models (columns 1-3) uniformly show that exposure to PRD governance leads to large increases in PRD support, showing a 10-13 percentage point (p.p.)

Figure 4: Linear Trends on Both Sides of Cutoff



(a) PRD



(b) PAN

increase in vote share for PRD, depending on the model specification. The point estimates for PRD models with controls are statistically significant. On the other hand, PAN models show that the effect of exposure to PAN governance is small in all models (0.1 - 1.3 p.p.) and not statistically significant. Models with controls and coverage-error rate optimal bandwidths (columns 2 and 5) are preferred for two reasons. First, there are good theoretical reasons for why including controls reduces noise, as discussed in section 4. Second, Magalhães et al. (2025) find that CER-optimal bandwidth selection perform better when "approximating the curvature of the CEF is more challenging." Considering this, in the preffered model specifications PRD candidates experience a 13 p.p. boost in vote share when their municipality is exposed to PRD governance in their nearest neighbor, while PAN candidates see essentially no change in support.

Table 1: Nearest Neighbor Results

Dep. Variable:	Outcome Municipality Change in Party Vote Share					
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Coefficient	0.103	0.131	0.126	0.013	0.005	0.001
	(0.169)	(0.047)	(0.043)	(0.802)	(0.893)	(0.983)
Party	PRD	PRD	PRD	PAN	PAN	PAN
Controls?	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
BW Type	CER	CER	MSE	CER	CER	MSE
Bandwidth	0.049	0.049	0.07	0.059	0.087	0.126
Effective N	159	159	238	282	395	523

Robust p-values reported in parentheses
Controls: year, state, distance between nearest neighbors

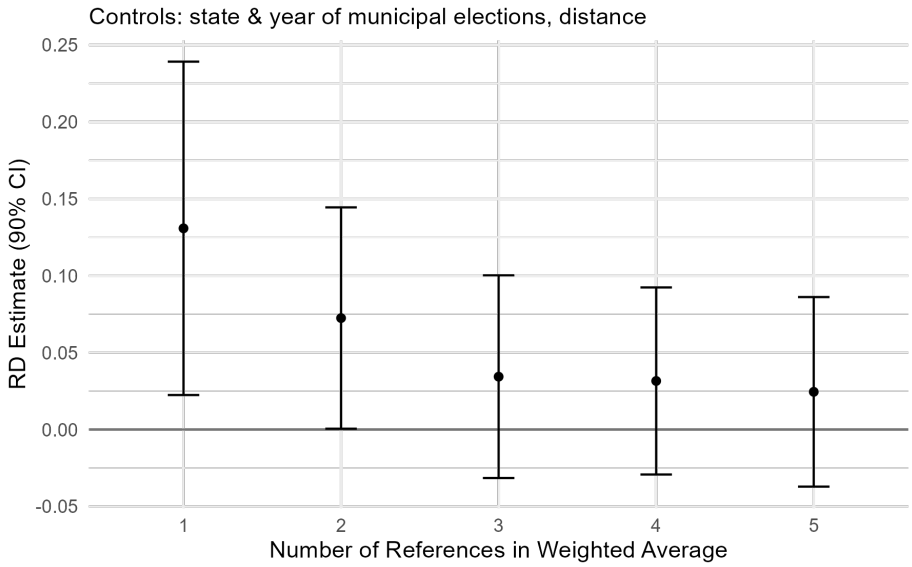
Next, I look at how these effects change when I include more municipalities in the

outcome. If the exposure of municipalities to PRD governance is a function of spatial distance, we should expect the effect to get smaller when more municipalities are added. This is because municipalities that are farther away from the treatment status municipality will be less able to observe PRD governance. On the other hand, for the PAN we should expect estimates to remain close to zero when adding municipalities to the outcome average. Figure 5 shows the CER-optimal robust estimates for PRD and PAN governance exposure for specifications including 1-5 municipalities in the outcome average.

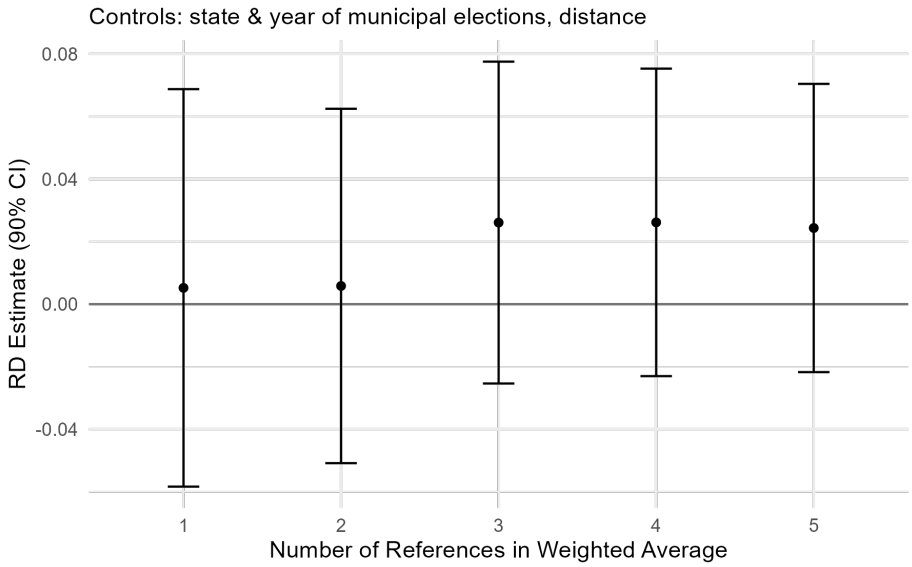
Figure 5a does indeed show a decrease in the effect of exposure to PRD governance as more municipalities are included in the outcome. This is intuitive because most citizens are unlikely to pay attention to multiple municipalities simultaneously, instead focusing on the municipalities that are geographically closest. Additionally, Figure 5b shows the null effect for the PAN holds when additional municipalities are added to the average.

Taken together, these findings provide strong evidence that Mexican voters in municipal elections do update based on informative exposure to PRD party governance. These results (positive effect for PRD, null effect for PAN) are robust to many alternative specifications. Appendix Figure 1 shows that the results are not sensitive to the polynomial order selected for the RDD estimator. The results also remain consistent for differing bandwidth selection methods (see Appendix Figure 2).

Figure 5: RD Estimates by Number of Neighbors Included



(a) PRD



(b) PAN

5 Alternative Explanations

I provide evidence against alternative explanations for the observed effects described in the previous section.

5.1 Supply Side Explanations

The data I use for my estimates include only outcome municipalities in which the specified opposition party runs a candidate, mitigating concerns about exposure to opposition governance influencing candidate entry. However, it could be the case that higher quality political hopefuls were attracted to run as PRD candidates when they can observe PRD candidates winning in nearby municipalities. While detailed data on the characteristics of municipal presidential candidates is unavailable, the political context suggests that this was not a significant factor.

First, due to Mexico's no-reelection laws, individual candidate characteristics were less critical to voters compared to party labels. Empirical evidence shows that voters in Mexico hold parties accountable for good or poor performance, not individual candidates (Langston 2003; H. A. Larreguy, Marshall, and Snyder 2018; H. Larreguy, Marshall, and Snyder 2020; Roberts 2025). Therefore, it is unlikely that candidate quality independent of party perceptions matters much in Mexican municipal elections. Second, while exposure to PRD governance increases support for the PRD at the polls, it does not enhance the probability of a PRD victory (see Appendix Table 4). Consequently, truly ambitious political hopefuls during this period would still have the best chances of winning office by running as a PRI candidate.

5.2 Alternative Voter Explanations

There may be other voter-focused explanations for the observed effect. One alternative explanation is that exposure to PRD governance signals to voters that the PRD is a stronger opposition party electorally than the PAN, thereby attracting votes from former PAN supporters. However, Appendix Table 5 demonstrates that this is not the case: exposure to PRD governance does not reduce the vote share for PAN candidates. Consequently, the increase in votes for the PRD must be originating from former PRI supporters. The policy platforms of the center-left PRD and the center-right PAN are seemingly sufficiently distinct that shared support for democracy alone is insufficient to sway voters from one party to the other.

Another alternative voter-focused explanation is that the increase in support for the PRD is simply the result of voters "joining the bandwagon" as the PRD gains popularity within the state. This explanation draws on Schuessler (2000)'s theory of expressive voting. However, this hypothesis is disproven by the finding that while section 4 shows that PRD candidates gain support in municipalities' exposed to PRD governance, they are *not* more likely to actually elect PRD municipal presidents in the subsequent election (see Appendix Table 4).

One final voter-focused explanation is that general exposure to the PRD leads to increased support for the party, with exposure to PRD governance being merely one example of this phenomenon. If this were the case, we would expect other forms of exposure to the PRD to similarly reduce voter uncertainty about the party and therefore increase support. To test this hypothesis, I run the RD model in three different subsets of municipalities categorized by the frequency of PRD candidates running in the outcome municipality's past elections. If exposure to candidates is

the same as exposure to governance, we would expect to see the effect be smaller in subsets of the data where municipalities have already had PRD candidates in many past elections. Instead, we observe the opposite: the discontinuity increases as municipalities have been exposed to PRD candidates more frequently. Caution is warranted in interpreting these results, as sub-setting the data in this manner significantly reduces the number of observations around the cutoff. However, the fact that the estimate does not decrease with increased exposure to PRD candidates provides suggestive evidence that exposure to PRD governance, not candidacy, is the mechanism driving the observed effect.

5.3 PRI Reward and Punishment Regime

It is well documented that the PRI was notorious for rewarding swing states and municipalities that retained PRI leadership with increased federal transfers and social spending (Diaz-Cayeros, Magaloni, and Weingast 2003). Consequently, there may be concerns that the estimate from the RDD (Regression Discontinuity Design) is influenced by districts that narrowly retain PRI leadership being rewarded, thereby convincing nearby districts to retain the PRI as well. However, there are three pieces of evidence that counter this concern.

First, economic crises prior to 1995, most notably the 1994 peso crisis, left the country significantly weakened financially. This left the PRI without sufficient funds to properly reward swing municipalities (Greene 2007). Second, the increasing internationalization of the Mexican economy during this period meant that federal transfers were becoming less significant for finances in many municipalities. Third, if the concern were valid, we would expect the within-municipality estimate of electing a

PRD municipal president to be similar to the results observed in Section 4. However, Appendix Table 6 shows that the effect of electing a PRD candidate in election t has no discernible impact on the change in party vote share in the subsequent election.

6 Conclusion

In this paper, I propose a theory that risk averse voters in single party systems can lower uncertainty about opposition parties by observing how they govern in geographically near sub-national governments. I argue that this learning should only change behavior if general evidence of opposition governance is not widely available.

I test the theory by examining how voters in Mexican municipal elections react to exogenous exposure to PRD governance. Using a close elections RDD, I show that municipalities exposed to PRD governance in near neighbors increase vote share for the PRD by 13 percentage points. Alternatively, I observe no effect for PAN candidates due to voters already possessing information about PAN governance from high-profile municipalities and states that had previously elected PAN governments.

My findings highlight the diverse range of information that voters consider when making political decisions, building on existing literature on policy diffusion in the US (Pacheco 2012; Weible 2023) and electoral accountability in Mexico (H. A. Larreguy, Marshall, and Snyder 2018; Arias et al. 2022). Future research can expand on how voters learn from observing other governments in federal systems in 2 ways. First, more research should be done to understand the mechanism for how information about parties spreads spatially. Potential mechanisms could include reporting from local news networks, inter-entity migration, or commuting patterns. Second, more

research can be done to examine directly how voters evaluate the risk of electing opposition parties in single party systems.

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