



# Public evaluations of electoral institutions in Mexico: An analysis of the IFE and TRIFE in the 2006 and 2012 elections



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 4 November 2014

Received in revised form

19 September 2015

Accepted 22 September 2015

Available online 26 September 2015

### Keywords:

Mexico

Public opinion

Election management

Elections

## ABSTRACT

Given the important role of election management in new democracies, this paper explores citizens' opinions of Mexico's key electoral institutions – the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) and the Electoral Tribunal of the Federal Judiciary (TRIFE) – within the context of the 2006 and 2012 Mexican general elections. Using data from the Mexico 2006 Panel Study and the Mexico 2012 Panel Study, we find that key predictors of public opinion of Mexico's key electoral institutions include support for specific presidential candidates and partisan identification, but also perceptions of electoral integrity, the urban–rural divide, and other socio-demographic variables. In particular, this study finds strong support of a “winner's effect” in the context of the 2006 and 2012 Mexican elections. These findings raise important questions regarding citizens' opinions of Mexico's key electoral institutions.

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## 1. Introduction

Effective electoral management and the presence of independent electoral management bodies (EMBs) are considered key variables in facilitating free and fair elections in both established and new democracies (López-Pintor, 2000; Mozaffar and Schedler, 2002; International IDEA, 2002). Recent scholarship on this topic has identified these dynamics in several areas including the role of electoral management bodies in democratic transitions (Elkit and Reynolds, 2002; Pastor, 1999), the impact of effective election management on the quality of elections (Kerr, 2014; Ugues, 2014; James, 2013; Hartlyn et al., 2008), and the relationship between these institutions and general attitudes about democracy (Maldonado and Seligson, 2014; Kerr, 2013). Considering the important relationship between effective electoral management and credible electoral processes as well as the relationship between citizens' views of democratic institutions and system support (Donovan and Bowler, 2004), the current work investigates how citizens evaluate their respective electoral management systems within a particular country and context.

Specifically, this work explores citizens' opinions of Mexico's

key federal electoral management institutions – the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE)<sup>1</sup> and the Electoral Tribunal of the Federal Judiciary (TRIFE)<sup>2</sup> – within the context of the 2006 and 2012 Mexican presidential elections. While both of these contests featured significant controversy surrounding several features of the electoral process, there were, of course, significant differences in how these contests developed and their eventual outcomes, especially the results of the respective presidential elections. In 2006, for instance, the center-right National Action Party (PAN) was for the first time an incumbent governing party whose electoral competition was coming from the left of center Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). In contrast to 2006, however, the 2012 elections featured an emboldened Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) that had recovered from Mexico's alternation against a backdrop of a failing war on drugs that threatened to further polarize the electorate. In spite of these differences, this study finds evidence of consistent patterns in the public's trust of Mexico's key federal electoral institutions – IFE and TRIFE – in both 2006 and 2012.

Using data from the Mexico 2006 Panel Study and the Mexico

<sup>1</sup> In 2014, under reforms to the General Law of Electoral Institutions and Procedures (LGIEP), Mexico introduced the National Electoral Institute (INE), which replaced the IFE with the primary goal of establishing more uniform standards in electoral management practices at the national and subnational level.

<sup>2</sup> The Electoral Tribunal of the Federal Judiciary is also recognized as the TEPJF. Following conventions of popular use, and in the interest of clarity we use TRIFE.

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Nonetheless, as this analysis demonstrates, levels of trust in electoral institutions varied among supporters of different political parties—the “winners” and the “losers” in this election.

Much of Felipe Calderón's *sexenio* was mired in what most observers and analysts would call a failing war on drugs and a near-certain change in power for 2012. Consensus could rather easily be formed around a need for an alternative to a third PAN term in the presidency and in 2011, Mexico state governor Enrique Peña Nieto emerged as the face of a renewed and reinvigorated PRI, ready to lead Mexico once again. Questions were raised about Peña Nieto's personal capacity to govern, and whether the new PRI was really new or, given that the “dinosaurs”—with a penchant for authoritarian rule and a poor record of compromise—heavily influenced much of the party's leadership, whether it would represent a setback for Mexico's developing democracy. Indeed, Peña Nieto's plurality (30.85%) victory over López Obrador (26.95%), PAN candidate Josefina Vázquez Mota (25.39%), and Gabriel Quadri de la Torre of the New Alliance Party (PANAL) (2.29%) was not without controversy. Long protected by biased media coverage of his governorship and presidential candidacy (Corona Armenta, 2012), allegations linking Peña Nieto's campaign and the PRI to the Soriana retail chain in a vote buying scheme (Vegara, 2012) again brought the integrity of electoral management institutions under the public's scrutiny. Thus, the threat of a return to governance under a corrupt, authoritarian-style PRI were another important test for the institutions charged with protecting Mexico's electoral—and democratic—integrity. Indeed, Estévez et al. (2008) provide convincing evidence that the IFE, in its 2006 form, protects or at a minimum is watchful of PAN and PRI partisan interests.

From this understanding of Mexico's institutions of electoral governance and the potential threats to democratic integrity in 2006 and 2012, comes our contention of a relationship between public support for democratic institutions and support for democracy. Before further developing this argument we explore competing explanations.

### 3. Competing explanations

An underlying theme of this study is that citizens' attitudes toward democratic institutions play an important role in explaining system support for democracy (Donovan and Bowler, 2004). Given the importance of these attitudes, this study explores public evaluations of the key electoral institutions in Mexico – the Federal Electoral Institute and the Electoral Tribunal of the Federal Judiciary. In so doing, this work argues that greater levels of political competition have increased the stakes of electoral contests in Mexico (Klesner, 2007, 2005; Lawson, 2007a, b). Nonetheless, lower levels of institutionalization have resulted in lower levels of support for democratic institutions and specific features of the Mexican political system (Estrada and Poiré, 2007; Schedler, 2007; Medina Vidal et al., 2010). As such, our overarching expectation is that political competition should have a significant impact on public evaluations of Mexico's key electoral institutions. We explore this expectation in the context of the “winner's effect,” but also citizens' belief in democracy, and perceptions of electoral integrity to identify key predictors of public opinion of Mexico's IFE and TRIFE.

#### 3.1. Political competition and the winner's effect

Popular confidence in electoral processes plays an important role in shaping how winners and losers respond to electoral outcomes (Anderson et al., 2005), but also how citizens view democracy and democratic institutions. Indeed, scholars have identified these dynamics at work in both established and newer

democracies with respect to citizens' satisfaction with democracy (Singh et al., 2012; Curini et al., 2011; Blais and Gélinau, 2007; Anderson and Guillory, 1997), political support for democracy (Singh et al., 2011; Bowler and Donovan, 2002), institutional trust (Moehler, 2009; Anderson and LoTempio, 2002; Holmberg, 1999), legitimization of elected leaders (Craig et al., 2006), political participation (Nadeau and Blais, 1993), and general attitudes about government (Anderson and Tverdova, 2001; Banducci and Karp, 2003). The evidence suggests, then, that winning and losing has a significant impact in shaping important attitudes for the health and stability of modern democracy.

More specific to Latin America, scholars have identified the impact of winning and losing on perceptions of election quality and trust in elections, as well as perceptions of electoral management bodies. For example, in their study of turnout in Latin America, Carreras and İrepoğlu (2013) suggest that an important relationship exists between political losers and perceptions of electoral fairness (610). Moreover, Hellinger (2011) suggests that political losers sometimes exploit possible cases of electoral irregularities to discredit political winners and electoral processes, but also to shore up support amongst their supporters (442–445). More recently, Maldonado and Seligson (2014) argue that “being a winner or loser in an election seems to be a fundamental predictor of trust in elections” and that “in Latin American countries, winners exhibit higher levels of trust in elections than do losers” (243). Hence, there is evidence that the winner's effect is also a reality of Latin American politics.

These findings coincide with other work on elections and election management in Latin America. In his analysis of election management in Mexico, Ugues (2010) finds that winning and losing has an important impact on public evaluations of Mexico's IFE. Indeed, Ugues finds that support for the winning candidate (Felipe Calderón Hinojosa) and winning political party (PAN) in the 2006 presidential election were significantly correlated with higher levels of support for the IFE, whereas support for the runner-up in this contest (Andrés Manuel López Obrador) and corresponding party (PRD) were significantly correlated with lower levels of support for the IFE. Similarly, in his analysis of Central America<sup>7</sup>, Ugues (2013) finds that while the previous performance of EMBs is an important predictor of citizens' trust in their respective EMB, so is support for the political party currently in power. In Central America, much like Mexico, whether a person's preferred political party is in power also has a significant impact on public evaluations of their respective EMB.

Based on recent work concerning political competition and the “winner's effect” in regards to elections and election management, we expect these dynamics to have a significant impact on public evaluations of Mexico's IFE and TRIFE. Specifically:

**H1a:** Citizens who identify with the winning political party in the presidential election are more likely to support the Federal Electoral Institute.

**H1b:** Citizens who identify with the winning political party in the presidential election are more likely to support the Electoral Tribunal of the Federal Judiciary.

**H2a:** Citizens who identify with the winning candidate in the presidential election are more likely to support the Federal Electoral Institute.

**H2b:** Citizens who identify with the winning candidate in the presidential election are more likely to support the Electoral Tribunal of the Federal Judiciary.

<sup>7</sup> These cases include El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua.

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