

Are Non-Partisan Technocrats the Best Party Watchdogs Money Can Buy? Mexico’s Federal Electoral Institute (IFE)

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Abstract

Mexico’s *Instituto Federal Electoral* (IFE) is often trumpeted as an exemplary of an Electoral Management Body. Indeed, IFE is credited with the flawless oversight of Mexico’s protracted transition to democracy. The common view is that IFE’s institutional design—which empowers a corps of committed, technically-proficient, non-partisan Councilors to decide on all electoral matters—is the reason behind its success. We suggest, instead, that Councilors behave as ‘party watchdogs’, faithfully representing the interests of the political parties that sponsored them to IFE’s Council. If anything, IFE succeeded precisely because it channeled partisan dissent within its quarters. Evidence in favor of the party-sponsorship hypothesis comes from inspection of the political ideologies of IFE Councilors, which are inferred from their voting behavior between 1996 and 2005.

1 Why would non-partisan technocrats toe the party line?

We analyze IFE’s appointment rules within a principal-agent framework. From this perspective, IFE Councilors are agents of legislative parties. Parties in the enacting coalition delegate to their appointees ample authority to regulate federal elections. Parties strive to limit *agency loss* and *avoid conflict within the enacting coalition* through the following expedients:

- 1. Rules of nomination:** Councilors are appointed by a two-thirds vote in Congress. By informal agreement, each party in the enacting coalition appoints a share of Councilors proportional to its seat share in Congress. Nominees can be vetoed by any other party in the coalition.
- 2. Signaling devices:** Parties have mechanisms to make their preferences on some new issue completely transparent to Councilors. These mechanisms include positioning in committees and Council debates, private communications of all sorts, and threats of impeachment against their own nominees.
- 3. Party capture:** Parties can offer future plum jobs and golden parachutes to their Council nominees to elicit pro-sponsor voting behavior. An examination of Councilors’ post-IFE careers suggests that a vast majority continues to enjoy party sponsorship of their political careers.

2 Testable implications

If parties manage to sponsor ideologically-affine Councilors, we would at the very least expect Councilor’s voting behavior to yield blocs similar to the ones we find in Congress: PRD Councilors on the Left, PAN Councilors on the Right, and PRI Councilors in between.

3 Data

We present an analysis of two Councils-General in the period 1996-2005. Because two Councilors left IFE in 2000, we broke down the first Council. We thus have three partially-overlapping sets of nine Councilors each.

We estimate ideal points for twenty individuals (seven of them served from 1996 to 2003). A substantial proportion of votes in the Council General are unanimous, which means that they convey no information about the ideological preferences of Councilors. Only a bit less than half the votes in these Councils can be usefully analyzed (53% were dropped from analysis).

- **Woldenberg I** (1996-2000), 244 usable votes
- **Woldenberg II** (2000-2003), 315 usable votes
- **Ugalde** (2003-2005), 45 usable votes

4 Methods

We resort to MCMC Bayesian methods that are ideally suited to solve the “small committee problem” (????).

5 Results

In general, our results support the *party sponsorship hypothesis*: Despite some overlap, the inferred ideological positions of IFE Councilors are reminiscent of the ideological locations of political parties in Congress. Naturally, uncertainty about the location of ideal points increases with the number of quasi-consensual votes and with the paucity of usable roll-calls.

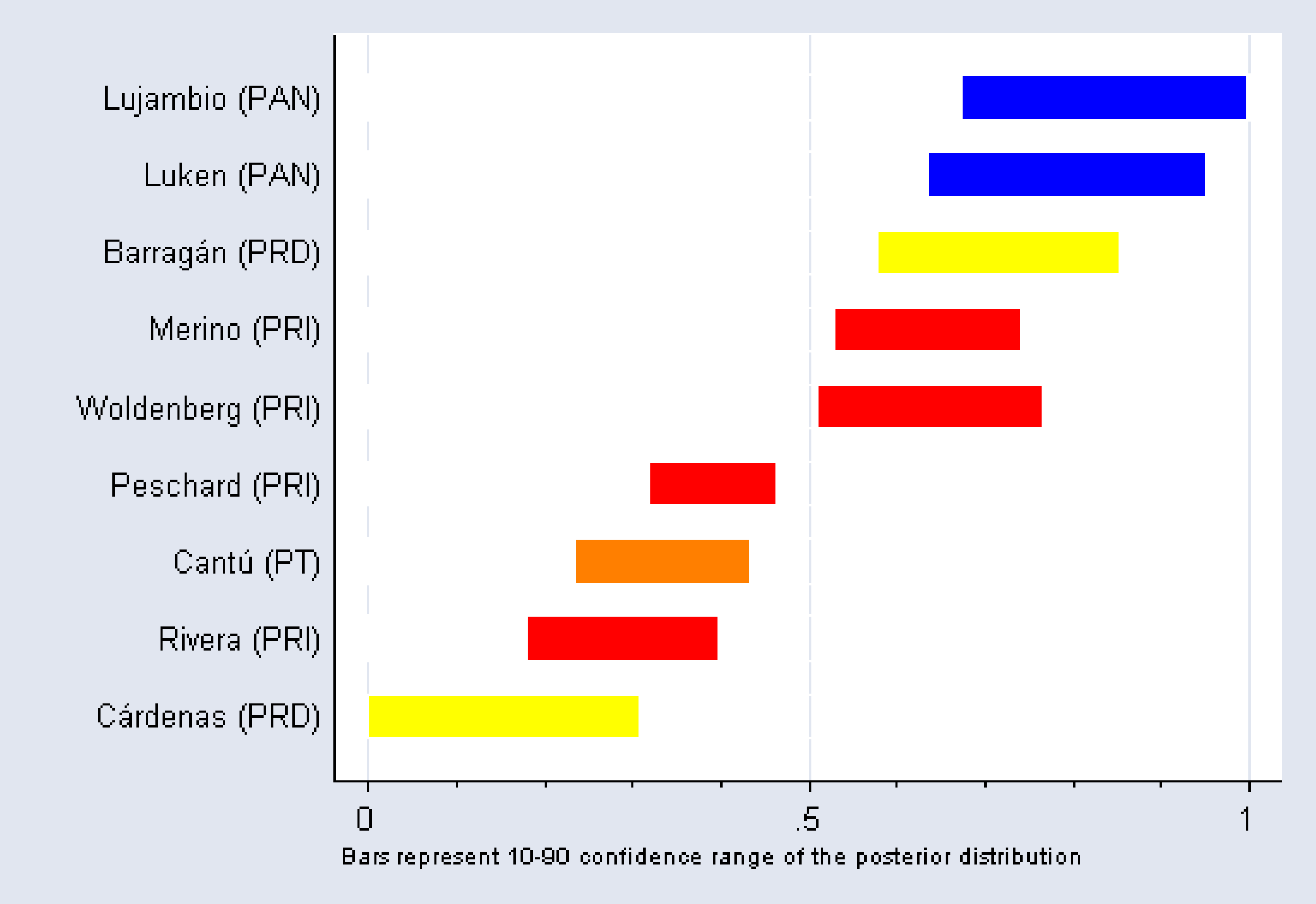


Figure 1. Non-partisan technocrats align on the one-dimensional ideological space precisely as their partisan sponsors would want them in Woldenberg’s second Council (2000-2003). Barragán may yet incur the wrath of his partisan sponsor!

TABLE 1. Ideological positions of Councilors in Woldenberg I and Ugalde								
Councilor	Sponsor	Mean	SD	Votes	Councilor	Sponsor	Mean	SD
Woldenberg 1996-2000				Ugalde 2003-2005				
Cárdenas	PRD	−1.79	0.44		Gómez Alcántar	PVEM	−1.08	0.55
Cantú	PT	0.42	0.20		Morales	PAN	−0.52	0.40
Zebadúa	PRD	0.73	0.21		Andrade	PRI	−0.33	0.35
Lujambio	PAN	0.90	0.25		López Flores	PRI	−0.10	0.26
Molinar	PAN	1.09	0.26		Latapí	PRI	0.94	0.37
Merino	PRI	1.95	0.45		Ugalde	PRI	0.95	0.45
Woldenberg	PRI	2.15	0.53		Albo	PAN	1.28	0.48
Peschard	PRI	2.28	0.60		Sánchez	PAN	1.62	0.55
Barragán	PRD	3.25	1.03		González Luna	PAN	1.80	0.56

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Data and updated versions at:

http://artsci.wustl.edu/~grosas/

6 Which party controls the non-partisan Council?

TABLE 2. Identity of the median voter			
Councilor	Sponsor	1996-2000	2000-2003
Barragán	PRD	0.011	0.000
Cárdenas	PRD	0.000	0.000
Cantú	PT	0.006	0.000
Zebadúa	PRD	0.091	—
Molinar	PAN	0.561	—
Lujambio	PAN	0.267	0.247
Luken	PAN	—	0.004
Rivera	PRI	—	0.354
Merino	PRI	0.039	0.172
Peschard	PRI	0.006	0.072
Woldenberg	PRI	0.020	0.154
Councilor	Sponsor	2003-2005	
González Luna	PAN	0.024	
Sánchez	PAN	0.057	
Albo	PAN	0.138	
Ugalde	PRI	0.374	
Latapí	PRI	0.382	
López Flores	PRI	0.015	
Andrade	PRI	0.009	
Morales	PAN	0.001	
Gómez Alcántar	PVEM	0.000	

Based on 2,500 draws from posterior distribution

7 Conclusion

It is well known that US citizens tend to love their individual representatives but dislike Congress. In Mexico, we observe a different paradox, namely, that IFE is regarded as a reputable agency, but political parties are not trusted. Our analysis fuels this paradox by suggesting that parties, as principals, are firmly in control of their agents’ behavior in IFE’s Electoral Council. To the extent that IFE’s behavior is indeed above the political fray, it is not because its Councilors are embodiments of technocratic efficiency, but instead because, as “party watchdogs”, they rabidly check one another.

References