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Why Did Drug Cartels Go to War in Mexico? Subnational Party Alternation, the Breakdown of Criminal Protection, and the Onset of Large-Scale Violence

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Abstract

This article explains why Mexican drug cartels went to war in the 1990s, when the federal government was not pursuing a major antidrug campaign. We argue that political alternation and the rotation of parties in state gubernatorial power undermined the informal networks of protection that had facilitated the cartels' operations under one-party rule. Without protection, cartels created their own private militias to defend themselves from rival groups and from incoming opposition authorities. After securing their turf, they used these militias to conquer rival territory. Drawing on an original database of intercartel murders, 1995 to 2006, we show that the spread of opposition gubernatorial victories was strongly associated with intercartel violence. Based on in-depth interviews with opposition governors, we show that by simply removing top- and midlevel officials from the state attorney's office and the judicial police—the institutions where

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protection was forged—incoming governors unwittingly triggered the outbreak of intercartel wars.

Keywords
conflict processes, democratization and regime change, Latin American politics, subnational politics

Although civil wars represented the most violent conflicts in the world during the second half of the 20th century, some of the most lethal conflicts in the world today do not involve armed rebel groups seeking to depose national governments but organized criminal groups (OCGs) fighting for control over criminal markets. For example, after a century of civil war and revolution, Latin America remains one of the most violent world regions, but violence there is no longer associated with revolutionary struggles for social justice but with turf wars for the control of drug trafficking corridors. The case of Mexico's Drug Wars exemplifies the lethality of such conflicts: Between 2007 and 2012, more than 70,000 people were murdered in intercartel conflicts (Shirk & Wallman, 2015). This is more than three times greater than the median death toll of all civil wars in the second half of the 20th century.[1]

Most theories of crime (Sampson, 1993) and organized crime (Gambetta, 1993; Schelling, 1971; Varese, 2011) in the social sciences underpredict the extent of criminal violence that countries such as Mexico are experiencing today. Although scholars of organized crime recognize that violence and coercion are fundamental to settling disputes and to succeeding in the criminal underworld, most of them claim that criminal lords and mafias prefer to hire bodyguards and hit men to resolve criminal disputes with a minimum of violence (Gambetta, 1993), rather than create organized armies to fight wars. Large-scale criminal violence is bad for business because it gives rise to agency costs: Engaging in turf war forces OCGs to develop private militias to defend their territories, but these private armies can become independent and contest their bosses' control over criminal markets. Large-scale criminal violence also creates undesirable publicity that can attract government interventions in the criminal underworld (Andreas & Wallman, 2009; Snyder & Durán-Martínez, 2009).

If large-scale violence can have such undesirable consequences for OCGs, why do criminal lords engage in criminal wars?

In this article, we analyze the outbreak of intercartel wars and the onset of large-scale criminal violence in Mexico—a country where drug cartels have been the leading smugglers of illegal drugs from South America into the

United States since the 1980s. After a period of peaceful coexistence in the 1980s, cartels went to war in the 1990s (reaching nearly 350 annual battle deaths in 1997), and warfare became even more intense in the 2000s (reaching nearly 1,400 annual deaths in 2006).[2] Intercartel wars first broke out in municipalities in northwestern states along the U.S.–Mexico border but rapidly spread to the northeast and to the Pacific Coast, where Mexico's five major cartels (Tijuana, Juárez, Sinaloa, Gulf, and La Familia Michoacana) engaged in six prominent turf wars between 1990 and 2006.

While much of the attention on drug violence in Mexico has focused on the dramatic spiral of violence that followed the 2007 federal intervention, the so-called War on Drugs (Shirk & Wallman, 2015), in this article we focus on the 1990 to 2006 period because we want to understand the outbreak of criminal wars prior to the major government intervention. In a context in which national authorities did not proactively confront drug cartels, we want to know why drug lords developed their own private militias and went to war after a long period of peaceful coexistence, despite the jeopardy to their core business interests.[3]

We suggest that Mexican cartels went to war when they lost access to informal networks of *subnational* government protection.[4] Because drug trafficking is a global chain of *local* operations, in which subnational judicial and police authorities can play a crucial role in the provision of protection for drug trafficking operations, our focus is on subnational political actors. We argue that, after six decades of one-party rule, subnational electoral democratization and the alternation of political parties in *state gubernatorial power* led to the breakdown of informal government protection networks and motivated drug lords to create their own private militias to protect themselves against potential attacks from rival cartels and from incoming opposition authorities.[5] Cartels recruited security forces from the authoritarian era to train young males from street gangs to defend their drug trafficking routes. The development of private militias marked a major transformation in Mexico's drug trafficking industry: It allowed cartels to defend their turf, renegotiate informal protection with incoming opposition authorities by means of bribes and coercion, and venture beyond their own turf to conquer drug trafficking routes under their rivals' control. The spread of party alternations in states with drug trafficking routes led to the proliferation of private militias and to the outbreak of large-scale criminal wars.

Unlike scholars who suggest that the antinarcotics policies launched by incoming opposition authorities against the cartels explain the outbreak of drug violence (Osorio, 2015), we argue that by simply removing top- and midlevel personnel in the state attorney's office and the state judicial police—the institutions that had provided informal protection for drug cartels under

one-party rule in the late 1980s—incoming opposition governors unwittingly created a great degree of uncertainty in the criminal underworld and provided incentives for drug lords to create their own armies to defend their multibillion-dollar illegal businesses.

Unlike scholars who focus on party alternation at the national level and emphasize the causal impact of the defeat of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in the 2000 presidential election on the outbreak of intercartel wars (O'Neil, 2009), and unlike studies that focus on municipal democratization in the 1990s (Dube, Dube, & García-Ponce, 2013; Ríos, 2015), we focus on changes in state gubernatorial power.

We test our main proposition using data from the Criminal Violence in Mexico (CVM) Dataset, an original newspaper-based data bank of intercartel murders that we created. Building on the assumption that cartels go to war when they have (a) motivations and (b) organizational capacity to fight and (c) when they face threats or opportunities, we test our main proposition—that subnational party alternation and the breakdown of protection motivated cartels to go to war—against several alternative explanations. Our analyses show that intercartel violence in municipalities from states that underwent party alternation in gubernatorial power was 79.1% *greater* than in those where the PRI remained in the gubernatorial palace. Our results also show that the most important increase in violence took place during an opposition governor's first year in office, when old personnel had been removed and new security policies had not yet been implemented.

From in-depth interviews with former opposition governors, we corroborate that incoming authorities did immediately remove top- and midlevel personnel in the state attorney's office and in the state judicial police—the two institutions where officers had developed informal government protection networks for cartels. Yet, opposition governors removed these personnel, not because they knew they were in collusion with drug cartels, but because they had played a key role in repressing political dissidents. This is why the sudden outbreak of intercartel wars a few weeks within their coming into office caught the governors by surprise.

The article is structured into five parts. We first evaluate extant explanations of intercartel wars in Mexico, and in the section "A New Explanation for the Onset of Large-Scale Criminal Wars," we develop our own hypotheses about subnational political alternation, the breakdown of informal government protection, and the onset of criminal wars. In the section "Quantitative Evidence," we discuss the statistical tests and the robustness checks, and in the section "Qualitative Evidence," we present the case studies based on in-depth interviews with opposition governors. In the conclusion, we discuss why our findings about party alternation in gubernatorial power triggering

the rise of private militias and the proliferation of intercartel wars is a novel explanation of Mexico's drug violence and why these findings contribute in important ways to a more appropriate understanding of the political drivers of large-scale criminal violence in new democracies.

Large-Scale Criminal Violence: Extant Explanations

Even though leading social–scientific schools of crime and organized crime underestimate the extent of large-scale violence in such countries as Mexico, these literatures offer a useful starting point. Three influential propositions have framed most studies: (a) competition in criminal markets stimulates criminal violence (Gambetta, 1993; Reuter, 2009; Schelling, 1971), (b) criminal groups engage in violence when they have access to guns (Dube et al., 2013) and to foot soldiers (Sampson, 1993), and (c) OCGs emerge where the state is weak (Skaperdas, 2001) and become violent when it represses poorly (Lessing, 2015). This wide variety of factors not only speaks to the potentially multicausal nature of intercartel wars but also opens the possibility for confusion. To more effectively assess these factors, we group different explanations using a simple framework in which we assume that cartels go to war when they have *motives* and *organizational resources* and when they face *threats* or *opportunities*.

Motives

Most studies of drug violence in Mexico claim that competition for drug trafficking routes and the desire to establish or safeguard monopolistic controls motivated cartels to go to war. Scholars have identified two triggers of competition: greed and protection.

Greed. Scholars have suggested that exogenous business shocks provided powerful economic incentives for cartels to fight for control over drug trafficking corridors. An important account suggests that the crackdown on Colombian cartels in the 1990s and the potential for a major *business expansion* led Mexican cartels to fight for control over the production of drugs and their traffic from South America into the United States (Bagley, 2012; Shirk & Wallman, 2015).

If the greed argument is correct, we should expect that the expansion of the drug trafficking business would have led to the simultaneous outbreak of intercartel wars across drug trafficking routes in Mexico. Yet, intercartel wars broke out unevenly and sequentially over the course of the 16 years between

1990 and 2006. This punctuated pattern suggests that exogenous business shocks may not have originated intercartel wars but only contributed to the escalation of ongoing conflicts.

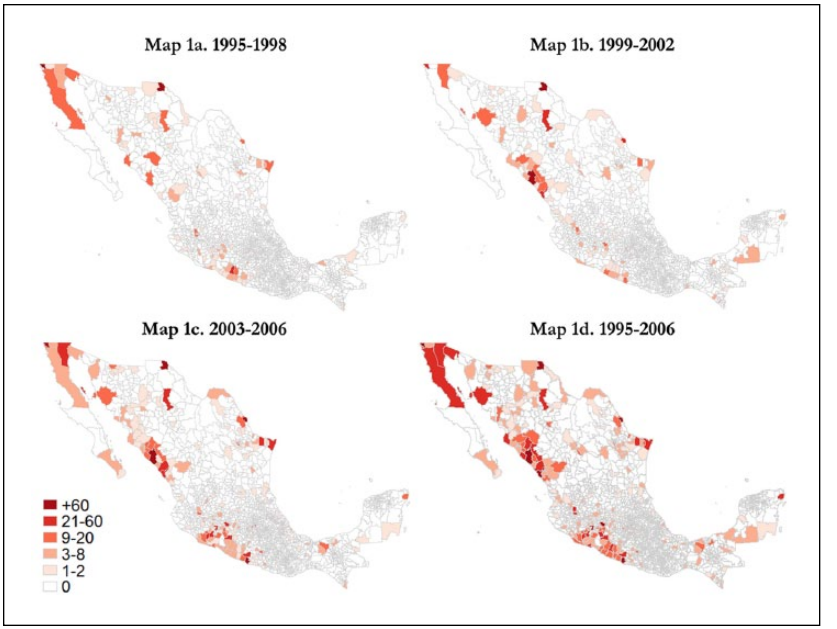
Protection. Another argument emphasizes the transition from one-party rule to multiparty democracy. Assuming that federal authorities were the leading actors in the provision of protection for drug cartels, one account suggests that the defeat of the PRI at the national level opened a new era of violent turf wars (O'Neil, 2009). A second account assumes that municipal police forces were key in the provision of protection for cartels and suggests that municipal electoral competition jeopardized the cartels' access to informal protection networks (Dube et al., 2013).[6] A third account suggests that alternation at all levels of government (federal, state, and municipal) undermined the state's role in drug trafficking operations and left cartels on their own to autonomously regulate the drug industry through violence (Astorga & Shirk, 2010; Ríos, 2015).

The first account's claim that the defeat of the PRI in the 2000 presidential election led to the onset of intercartel violence fails to explain the turf wars of the northwest, northeast, and Pacific coast that broke out in the 1990s (see Maps 1a and 1b in Panel 1 below). Due to this time inconsistency, the only plausible case to make is that national alternation may have stimulated, but not originated, intercartel wars. Accounts of the second type based on municipal democratization do not face this time inconsistency problem, because Mexico experienced a major surge of municipal electoral competition in the 1990s. The main problem here is that municipal authorities cannot provide extensive protection for cartels because they have very limited weaponry (Sabet, 2012) and because they have no jurisdiction on drug trafficking operations (these are responsibilities of federal and/or state-level authorities). Although the approach that points at alternation at all levels of government does not suffer from the limitations of the first two approaches, we show below that it overestimates the federal and municipal effects while underestimating the impact of state-level politics.

Organizational Resources

Whether cartels decide to go to war in search of profits or protection, they need soldiers and weapons to fight these conflicts.

Soldiers. The sociology of crime has shown that young men from mono-parental families in impoverished U.S. urban areas are attracted to street gangs and criminal organizations and often engage in lethal criminal violence (Sampson,



Panel 1. The geography of intercartel murder in Mexico, 1995-2006.

1993). Sociologists analyzing criminal wars in Latin America have documented that a desire for rapid economic mobility, status, and social respect has led an overwhelming number of young males from marginalized urban communities to become foot soldiers in the drug wars (Brenneman, 2013).

While the structural availability of young men to fight criminal wars can explain a crucial aspect of large-scale criminal violence, it cannot by itself explain why cartels went to war in the first place. Members of street gangs may be available to fight turf wars in exchange for economic rewards, but if cartels have no incentives to fight, drug lords will not develop private militias and gang members will not become soldiers. Hence, the availability of willing soldiers may explain the duration of criminal wars but not the cartels' initial motivation to wage them.

Weapons. Because most of the assault weapons in Mexico's intercartel wars come from the United States, Dube et al. (2013) assess the impact of the 2004 expiration of the U.S. ban on assault weapons on criminal violence in Mexican municipalities located along the U.S.–Mexico border. Using California—the state where a local ban remained in effect—as a point of comparison, they

show that Mexican municipalities along border states where the ban was lifted and cartels had access to assault weapons experienced a significant increase in criminal violence after 2004.

Although the availability of weapons can explain the evolution of intercartel wars, it cannot explain the cartels' initial incentives to fight. In fact, cartels in northwestern Mexico created private militias and went to war as the U.S. ban on assault weapons went into effect in 1994. Dube et al. (2013) recognize this point and supplement their central claim about the relation between the availability of U.S. assault weapons and Mexican intercartel violence with the argument that the cartels' *initial* motivation to fight came from the breakdown of informal government protection networks in municipalities along the U.S.–Mexico border, led by municipal electoral competition in the 1990s.

Threats and Opportunities

Besides motivations and organizational resources, the decision to go to war can be a response to threats or opportunities. Scholars of organized crime have focused on the state: State repressive actions against OCGs can backfire and stimulate more violence; however, a weak state allows space in which OCGs can rise.

State repression. Scholars suggest that since the 2007 federal intervention in Mexico, the policy of leadership decapitation—arresting or killing cartel leaders—has led to intracartel succession crises, fragmentation and competition, and a dramatic increase in violence (Calderón, Robles, Díaz-Cayeros, & Magaloni, 2015; Guerrero, 2011; Phillips, 2015). Scholars also suggest that after Mexico's democratization in 2000, incoming federal and municipal opposition authorities, responding to an electoral mandate to confront drug cartels, seized drugs and weapons from the cartels, triggering a violent backlash (Osorio, 2015). An alternative formulation argues that when national governments adopt conditional repression and target only those cartels who attack them, violence does not substantially increase; but when governments follow strategies of unconditional repression and attack all cartels, violence becomes particularly intense. According to Lessing (2015), the state's adoption of a strategy of unconditional repression since 2007 explains the dramatic increase of violence in Mexico.

Arguments that focus on state repression can explain the intensification of cartel violence but not why cartels went to war in the first place in Mexico. The main limitation is that cartels went to war 10 years before national

democratization in 2000 and in a context in which federal authorities had taken a merely reactive antinarcotic stance, as opposed to the proactive policies that they adopted after 2006.

State absence. Students of organized crime have long argued that OCGs and mafias emerge in countries with weak state presence, where criminal lords take advantage of ungoverned spaces (Skaperdas, 2001). In these ungoverned territories, criminals rely on violence to settle disputes over criminal markets, and the outbreak of criminal competition leads to violence.

Although a state-centric explanation could help us understand the uneven geographic spread of large-scale violence in Mexico, this account faces an important empirical challenge: Intercartel wars in the 1990s and 2000s took place in prosperous cities, where the state had more presence. This unusual pattern in which criminality is associated with greater state presence suggests that we need to move beyond the prevailing zero-sum conception of the relationship between states and armed groups in the political violence literature and develop a different understanding of the relationship between OCGs and the state.

A New Explanation for the Onset of Large-Scale Criminal Wars

Redefining Organized Crime

Explaining the puzzle of large-scale criminal violence requires that we address two widely shared misconceptions about OCGs. First, the assumption that OCGs are illegal enterprises that are exclusively interested in economic profits (Reuter, 2009) has led some scholars to mistakenly conclude that political factors are irrelevant in accounting for criminal behavior. Second, the assumption that OCGs can only monopolize criminal markets through the use of violence (Skaperdas, 2001) has led scholars to misleadingly suggest that OCGs—like armed insurgent groups—always represent a challenge to the state's monopoly of violence.

These two misconceptions have nurtured an understanding of OCGs as *apolitical* nonstate actors whose activities are axiomatically opposed to the state. But this characterization misses a fundamental point: Unlike armed rebel groups, which seek to displace the state and rule, OCGs need some level of informal state protection to successfully operate the criminal underworld (Snyder & Durán-Martínez, 2009).

Consider the case of the drug trafficking industry. The successful smuggling of illegal drugs across countries requires that key law enforcement

agents refrain from enforcing the law when they discover smugglers receiving or transporting illegal merchandise. Drug cartels require the complicity of law enforcement agents charged with policing the streets, the highways, private airports, ports and border exit points, and customs. If smugglers are arrested in spite of police protection, they need contacts in the public prosecutor's office to derail the criminal investigation and, in the event that they are indicted, they need contacts in the prison system to continue conducting business behind bars or to escape from prison. Drug cartels also need protection from rival cartels. Establishing monopolistic controls over drug trafficking routes requires that challengers are kept at bay.

Depending on the balance of power between OCGs and the state, criminal lords may try to penetrate the state and obtain protection through bribes and coercion (Snyder & Durán-Martínez, 2009), or state agents may seek to regulate the criminal underworld in exchange for private rents (Arias, 2009; Astorga, 2005). Thus, instead of assuming a zero-sum relation between OCGs and the state, it is crucial to understand the different forms of engagement between criminal actors and state agents. This takes us into the world of political regimes and institutions.

Authoritarian Regimes and Organized Crime

A few influential studies of organized crime have made the important observation that security forces in authoritarian regimes often play a key role in the development of criminal markets (Astorga, 2005; Cruz, 2011; Snyder & Durán-Martínez, 2009; Varese, 2011). Security officers from authoritarian regimes are crucial players in the development of organized crime because they have the skills and enjoy the political impunity to operate illegal markets. To fulfill their mandate of suppressing political dissidents, military and police personnel and members of paramilitary forces typically develop special skills in extrajudicial violence and in illegal information gathering. While these two skills prepare state specialists in violence to repress dissidents, they also empower them to regulate or protect the criminal underworld.[7] Because state specialists in violence could also use their skills to rebel against the regime, authoritarian leaders often seek to appease them by extending their political impunity into criminal impunity and allowing them to profit from regulating, running, or protecting criminal industries. Through these egregious arrangements, autocrats secure the loyalty of state specialists in violence and at the same time secure the stability of criminal markets. The unraveling of authoritarian controls, however, is likely to have a major impact on criminal markets and on criminal behavior.

The Breakdown of Authoritarian Regimes and the Onset of Criminal Violence

The breakdown of authoritarian regimes has the potential to disrupt the protection networks that allow illegal markets to operate effectively (Snyder & Durán-Martínez, 2009). Students of organized crime have observed that specialists in violence from the ancient regime often play a key role in the development of postauthoritarian criminal markets. Gambetta (1993) first noted that after the demise of feudal relations and the rise of commercial agriculture in southern Italy, unemployed private guards of former Sicilian landowners created the Mafia. Varese (2005) observed that former agents of the Soviet secret police (KGB) and veterans of the Soviet war in Afghanistan played a leading role in the rise of the Russian Mafia after the demise of the Soviet Union. In Latin America, Cruz (2011) documented the crucial role that security forces from the authoritarian era played in the development of postauthoritarian criminal networks and in the production of criminal violence in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

But transitions from authoritarian rule to democracy do not always give rise to OCGs and to major waves of criminal violence. Cruz (2011) suggests that an outbreak of large-scale criminal violence is *less* likely to occur when new democratic elites adopt major security-sector reforms that constrain military and police behavior through powerful mechanisms of civilian oversight and societal accountability.

Because Mexico experienced a transition in which newly elected democratic elites *did not* introduce major security-sector reforms, the expansion of OCGs and the outbreak of large-scale criminal violence was more probable. Within Mexico, however, intercartel violence varied widely across subnational regions in the 1990s and 2000s. The fact that subnational political alternation also varied widely across subnational regions during these years (Beer, 2003; Díaz-Cayeros, 2006) provides us with a unique opportunity to test whether these two processes were causally associated. In assessing the potential linkages between subnational party alternation and the outbreak of criminal wars, however, it is crucial to understand the structure of the informal networks of government protection for criminals forged during the authoritarian period.

Although there is a consensus in the literature on drug violence in Mexico that government officials under one-party rule regulated the drug business (Astorga, 2005) and developed informal networks of protection for drug cartels (Snyder & Durán-Martínez, 2009), there is little agreement about the actors who provided this protection and about the structure of these informal

networks. Drawing on extensive interviews with former opposition (non-PRI) governors, we reconstruct the main nodes and connections of these networks.

Subnational Protection Networks in Mexico

Information from declassified documents, testimonies by protected witnesses and two military trials has now clearly established that top Mexican officials linked to the Federal Security Directorate (DFS)—a security agency led by military personnel and charged with political policing and antiinsurgency operations under one-party rule—regulated the criminal underworld in Mexico and developed the first informal networks of protection that enabled the rise of Mexican cartels to world prominence in the 1980s (Aranda, 2002; Astorga, 2005). However, the partial liberalization of authoritarian controls in 1977, together with pressures from the U.S. government after leaders of the Guadalajara Cartel ordered the assassination of an agent from the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) who had infiltrated the cartel, led to the dissolution of the DFS in 1985 and to the decentralization of political repression from the military to civilian authorities in Mexico's 31 states.

Although many DFS agents were relocated to the state-level delegations of the National Attorney's Office (PGR) and were able to influence federal police operations in the states, the upper hand and the know-how of political repression were transferred from federal forces to the state-level judicial police under the control of state governors and the state attorney generals (the state public prosecutors). Drawing on the most extensive data set on human rights violations in Mexico, Figure 1 shows that in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, the state judicial police was the main repressive force against political dissidents in Mexico. While the army was an important actor, mainly in response to the outbreak of armed insurgency in the late 1990s, subnational security forces, particularly officers from the state judicial police, gained the coercive upper hand at a time when cartels were expanding.

In several in-depth interviews, former opposition governors and their cabinet members identified the state judicial police—the actor in charge of repressing political dissent—as the leading player in the development of the informal networks of government protection for drug cartels from the mid-1980s onwards.

Ernesto Ruffo, from the Right-wing National Action Party (PAN)[8] and the first opposition mayor of Ensenada (1986-1989) in the northwestern state of Baja California, reports that during his tenure "when municipal police forces found any drugs, state judicial police and members of the federal police would dismantle any operation." In his recollection, commanders from the state judicial police were simultaneously "in charge of political repression"

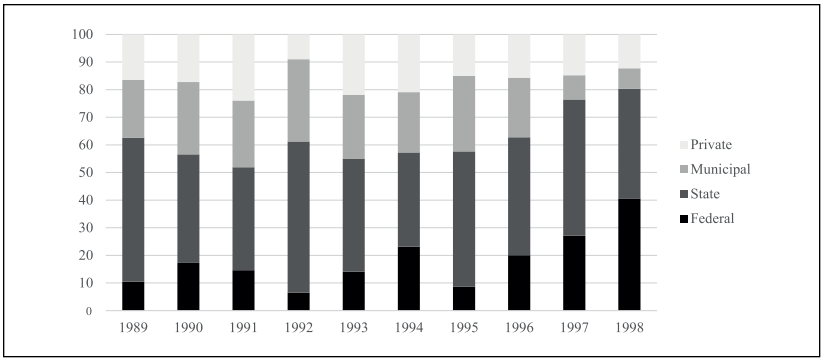


Figure 1. Repression of political dissidents by perpetrator in Mexico (%), 1989-1998.

Source. Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Francisco de Vitoria.

Repression includes physical attacks, unlawful eviction, illegal arrests, torture, forced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings. Private = private guards and vigilante groups; Municipal = municipal police; State = state judicial police; Federal = army and federal police.

and of "establishing connections with drug traffickers." When Ruffo became the first opposition governor in Baja California (1989-1995), he quickly recognized the state judicial police, the state-level delegation of the PGR, and the federal police as the key institutional nodes from which officers provided informal protection for drug trafficking operations and assured drug lords of the impunity to thrive in illegal markets.

Alberto Cárdenas (PAN),[9] the first opposition governor in the western state of Jalisco (1995-2001), describes the previous government under the PRI as a case of "narco power." His first public prosecutor, Jorge López,[10] is explicit about the importance of informal government protection networks for the development of the drug trafficking industry: "The narco industry can only flourish through the corruption of the state judicial police, the state attorney, and the public prosecutors' offices."

Zeferino Torre Blanca, from the leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) and the first opposition governor in the southern state of Guerrero (2005-2012),[11] is explicit about the political–criminal nexus under one-party rule: "Prior [PRI] governments regulated organized crime" and "there were no intercartel conflicts because one cartel dominated the business." For Torre Blanca, "the central actors" in the provision of criminal protection were "state judicial police officers who colluded with the state attorney's office." Lázaro Cárdenas Batel (PRD),[12] the first opposition governor in the western state of Michoacán (2001-2007), also underscores the central role that

"commanders from the state judicial police" played in the informal provision of government protection for cartels under the PRI. In both governors' accounts, municipal police officers were *informants* for state-level judicial police who enabled criminal operations and, in collusion with officers from the state attorneys' offices, derailed investigations to avoid criminal punishment for narcos.

Although opposition governors may have incentives to portray the PRI era as one marked by corruption and their tenure as a period of untainted politics, they did not do this in our interviews. All four of the governors we interviewed reported that throughout their 6-year terms in office, cartels actively sought to reconstruct their networks of informal government protection in the state judicial police and the state attorney's office through bribes and coercion. Ruffo removed his police chief after an internal investigation found that he was on the Tijuana Cartel's payroll; Alberto Cárdenas removed his police chief because he provided protection to the Juárez Cartel; Cárdenas Batel's secretary of security was assassinated; and Torre Blanca's state judicial police became so corrupt that he decided to establish a new, parallel police force. This gives us confidence that by identifying the state judicial police and the states' public prosecutor offices as the central actors in the provision of protection for cartels, the governors are not making partisan statements.

Based on interviews with the governors, Figure 2 provides a visual image of the key institutional actors in the informal networks of protection that enabled drug trafficking operations in the 1985 to 2006 period. The central players in these networks were top- and midlevel officials from the state judicial police who recruited officers from the state public prosecutors' offices and directors of the prison system. They also enlisted municipal police officers and officers from the state-level delegations of the national attorney to work as informants. While national and municipal actors were part of these multilayered networks, their role was dependent on state-level officials. Without jurisdiction to deal with criminal cases and with limited weaponry, municipal police forces were too weak to play a central role in these networks. And, although drug-related crimes were the sole jurisdiction of federal judicial and police institutions, state-level police forces played a key mediating role in determining whether a criminal would be prosecuted and whether the case scaled up to the federation.[13]

On the basis of our new conceptual understanding of state–criminal connections, and building on the importance of informal subnational government protection networks in Mexico, we develop two hypotheses.

Our first claim is that the breakdown of PRI hegemony in the states and the alternation of political parties in gubernatorial power led to the breakdown of informal networks of government protection for drug cartels and

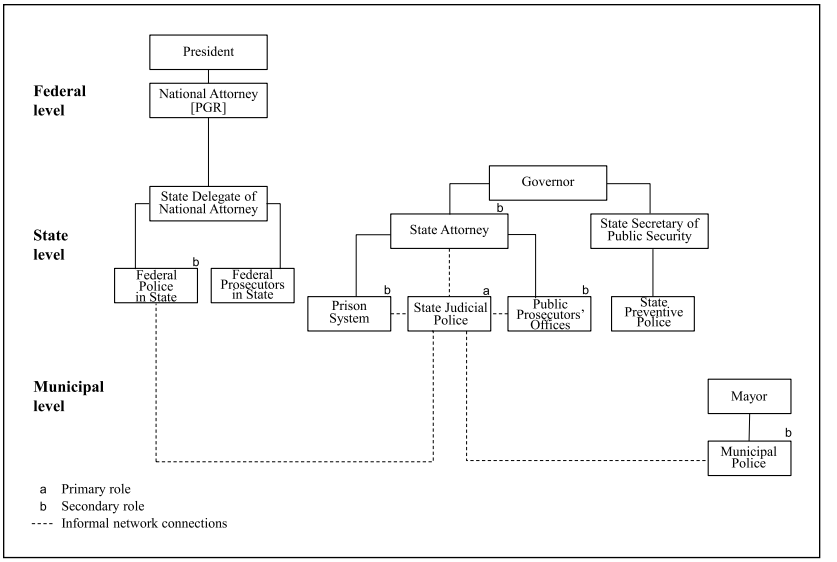


Figure 2. Government institutions with agents involved in informal networks of protection for drug cartels in Mexico, 1985-2006.

motivated drug lords to develop their own private militias to defend their drug trafficking routes. Because organized crime cannot go one day without protection (Schelling, 1971), the development of a private army would allow cartels to defend themselves from two threats: incoming state opposition authorities and rival cartels.

The election of opposition authorities and the appointment of new personnel in the state attorney's office and the state judicial police introduced a great degree of uncertainty for the home cartel. While drug lords could renegotiate informal protection with incoming authorities—as they actually did—penetrating opposition networks to corrupt new officers would take some time. As new opposition governors would initially seek to differentiate themselves from previous PRI governments by emphasizing anticorruption and prohuman rights agendas, a private army would not only allow cartels to defend themselves in the event of a sudden government attack but would also empower them to renegotiate protection with incoming authorities using bullets—rather than only bribes, as they had done in the past.

The election of opposition authorities and the breakdown of informal government protection networks not only created a great degree of uncertainty about the incoming government but also made the home cartel vulnerable to

rival attacks. Attacks from rival cartels are imminent because cartels cannot easily divide up mutually prized drug trafficking routes and, more important, because after subnational political alternation and the removal of state agents who regulated and protected the criminal underworld, cartels would be unable to credibly commit themselves to honor an agreement.[14] In the absence of a third-party enforcer, the rapid development of a private security apparatus would allow cartels to safeguard property rights over drug trafficking routes.

Hence, we would expect the following in Mexico's formerly one-party regime:

> **Hypothesis 1 (H1):** Subnational party alternation in gubernatorial power (a) contributed to the breakdown of informal government protection networks for drug cartels and (b) motivated drug lords to develop their own private militias to protect their drug trafficking routes.

Our second claim is that the spread of subnational party alternation in states with drug trafficking routes and the proliferation of private militias led to the outbreak of intercartel wars. Besides providing immediate protection to cartels in states experiencing political alternation and allowing them to renegotiate protection with incoming authorities, the development of private militias would also empower drug lords to seek to contest their rivals' control over drug trafficking territories. When a cartel survives a subnational democratization experience and creates a powerful private army to defend its domain, the cartel's leaders can take advantage of subsequent democratization experiences in other states to send their private armies to try to conquer rivals' territories. As Lessing (2015) puts it, intercartel wars are "wars of conquest." Note, however, that the development of a private army is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for conquest—cartels used their private armies to contest rival territory only after political alternation rendered their rivals vulnerable to attack.

Hence, we would expect the following in Mexico:

> **Hypothesis 2 (H2):** The spread of subnational party alternations in state governments led to the outbreak of multiple intercartel wars and to large-scale criminal violence.

Figure 3 summarizes our central argument and outlines our research strategy. As the figure illustrates, we first subject to statistical tests the likely association between the alternation of political parties in gubernatorial power and intercartel violence (H2), and then use case studies to assess whether

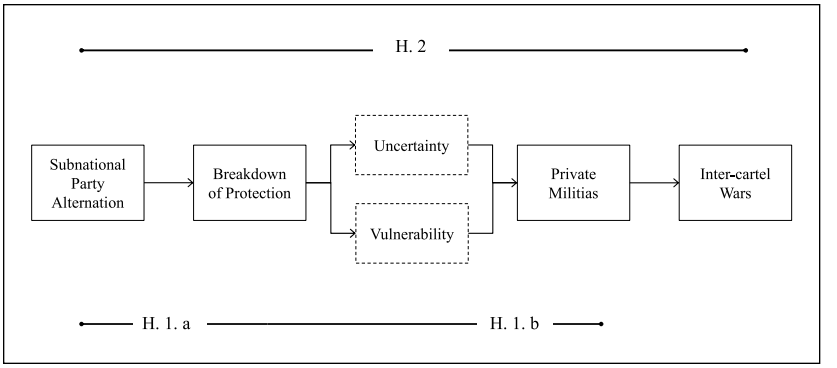


Figure 3. Explanatory model of intercartel wars.

political alternation and the removal of key personnel in the states' judicial and police institutions led to the breakdown of informal government protection networks (H1a) and to the rise of private militias (H1b).

Quantitative Evidence

Intercartel Violence

In the 1990s, after a decade of peaceful coexistence in which they rose to world prominence in the drug trafficking industry, Mexican cartels went to war. Drawing on the CVM Dataset, we analyze 4,275 murders perpetrated by drug cartels and their criminal associates between 1995 and 2006.[15] To our knowledge, this is the first data set to quantify intercartel violence during this period. The CVM reports murders resulting from intercartel conflicts.

Intercartel violence began in northern Mexico in the early 1990s, but it quickly spread to other parts of the country. As Map 1a in Panel 1 shows, the first major intercartel conflicts broke out in the states of Baja California, Chihuahua, and Sinaloa in *northwestern* Mexico, where the Tijuana, Juárez, and Sinaloa cartels engaged in major turf wars (Blancornelas, 2002; Grillo, 2011). Intercartel conflicts spread throughout the 1990s to states under the control of the Sinaloa Cartel, including the *western* state of Jalisco along the Pacific coast (Grillo, 2011). As Map 1b shows, violence first appeared in the late 1990s in the *northeastern* states of Tamaulipas and Nuevo León—two strongholds of the Gulf Cartel—where the Sinaloa Cartel sought to take control over the Gulf's territories (Grillo, 2011). As Map 1c reveals, intercartel violence broke out in the 2000s in the *western* state of

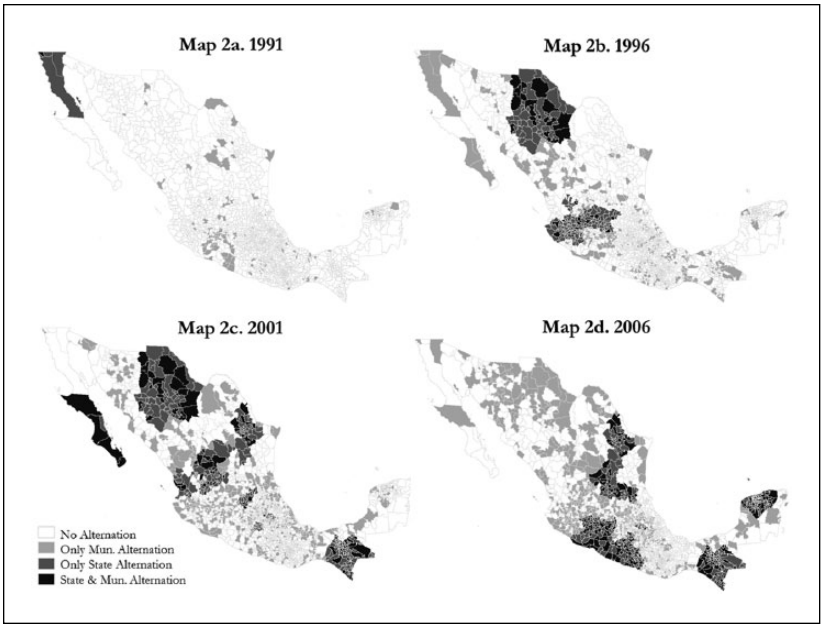
Michoacán and the *southwestern* state of Guerrero along the Pacific coast, where the Gulf Cartel and their private militia, the Zetas, sought to displace the Sinaloans from these important drug production and trafficking regions (Maldonado, 2012). As Map 1d shows, by 2006, Mexico was experiencing multiple intercartel wars.

The intensity of intercartel violence in the municipality *i* and in year *t* is our dependent variable. We use a municipal count of narco murders covering all Mexican municipalities ($N = 2{,}100$) between 1995 and 2006 as the indicator of intercartel violence.[16] Note that whereas homicide data often include all deaths reported by judicial authorities, here we only analyze murders that can be attributed directly to drug cartels.[17]

Subnational Party Alternation

Party alternation in state gubernatorial power is our key explanatory variable. We use a dummy variable, *state alternation*, to identify all municipalities in states where the political party in gubernatorial power changed.[18] We assign a value of zero to municipalities where the PRI remained in gubernatorial power and one where a governor from a different party was elected to office. Governors rule for 6-year terms, so we assign a value of one to every year in which a party other than the PRI governed during a 6-year term. Because we associate the rotation of political parties in gubernatorial power with the breakdown of informal networks of protection, when the same opposition party is reelected, we no longer consider it to be a case of power rotation and code the second or third term in office as zero until a new party comes to office. This specification assumes (a) that the most significant rotations in top- and midlevel personnel in the state attorney's office and police forces took place when parties alternated in office[19] and (c) that drug cartels were able to reconstitute subnational networks of protection with opposition governors and that a subsequent rotation of power could lead to the outbreak of violence.

As an alternative indicator, we create an ordinal index of subnational alternation, *subnational alternation index*, which identifies municipalities experiencing simultaneous rotation in parties in gubernatorial and municipal powers. The index takes values from zero to three. We consider four combinations of alternation: Municipalities with no alternation in gubernatorial or municipal power, where the PRI ruled at both levels, receive a zero score. Municipalities where a new mayor but not a new governor comes to power receive a score of one, and municipalities where a new party won the governorship but the PRI remained in control of the municipality receive a score of two. And municipalities with dual alternation receive a three score. This



Panel 2. The geography of subnational party alternation in Mexico, 1991-2006.

specification assumes that party alternation at the gubernatorial and municipal level can have an impact on intercartel violence because officials at both levels play important roles in the provision of protection for cartels.

Maps 2a to 2d in Panel 2 show the geographic evolution of state and municipal alternation in Mexico at different points in time: 1991, 1996, 2001, and 2006. Up to 1988, the PRI had won every gubernatorial election in Mexico's 31 states and nearly all municipal races since its foundation in 1929. But, as the maps show, between 1989 and 2006 Mexico experienced a subnational democratic revolution (Beer, 2003; Díaz-Cayeros, 2006): The center-right PAN won ten governorships, the center-left PRD won six, and by 2006 two thirds of Mexican municipalities were governed by a party different than the PRI.[20] We explore whether the uneven spread of party alternation trajectories had an impact on the outbreak of intercartel wars.

Alternative Explanations and Controls

We test for alternative motivations to go to war and control for a number of factors associated with organizational resources and threats and opportunities.

Motives I: Greed. To address the formulation that cartels went to war in response to changes in international drug markets, we test for the percent change of the *international retail price of cocaine* in the previous 5 years (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2008).

Motives II: Protection. To assess the likely role of municipal and national alternation in the breakdown of government protection networks, we include a dummy variable, *municipal alternation*, which identifies municipalities that experienced a rotation in the party in office and a dummy variable, *national alternation*, to identify the years following the PRI's presidential defeat.

Organizational resources: Soldiers and weapons. To test for the claim that lack of social cohesion in impoverished urban communities leads young males into violent criminal activities, we control for the municipal share of the population *ages 15 to 34*, the municipal proportion of *female-headed households*, and the municipal *sex ratio*.[21] We also control for the municipal Gini index of *income inequality*[22] to assess claims about aspirational crime. Finally, to test for the availability of weapons, we use a dummy variable to identify the years after the 2004 *expiration of the U.S. ban on assault weapons*.

Threats and opportunities. To test for arguments about state repressive activities against the cartels, we draw on the CVM to include a count of cartel bosses who were imprisoned or killed—*leadership decapitation*. For every boss eliminated, we assign a value of 1 to all the municipalities from the cartel's home state. To test for the state presence, we use the number of public *prosecutors per 10,000 population* per municipality.[23]

We control for seven geographic regions—*North*, *North center*, *Center*, *Gulf*, *Pacific*, *Southwest*, and *Southeast* (reference category)—and use the natural log of population as the models' offset variable.

For statistical testing, we use negative binomial (NB) models—the most appropriate modeling technique for count data when observations are nonindependent and overdispersed.[24] We fitted random effects models, because some of the key independent variables do not vary for several consecutive years, rendering fixed effects inappropriate. We transform coefficients into incidence rate ratios (IRRs) to facilitate substantive interpretation.

Results

The results, summarized in Table 1, strongly suggest that the alternation of political parties in gubernatorial power is a powerful predictor of intercartel violence in Mexico during the 1995 to 2006 period.

Table 1. Subnational Party Alternation and Intercartel Violence in Mexico, 1995-2006 (Random Effects Negative Binomial Models With Logged Population as Offset Variable).

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	Coefficient	IRR	Coefficient	IRR	Coefficient	IRR	Coefficient	IRR
Loss of protection								
State alternation	0.440***	1.553	0.506***	1.659	0.488***	1.629	0.583***	1.791
	[0.083]		[0.081]		[0.082]		[0.082]	
Municipal alternation					0.102	1.107	0.062	1.064
					[0.069]		[0.069]	
National alternation					0.521***	1.683	0.740***	2.096
					[0.079]		[0.079]	
Greed								
Δ International retail price of cocaine							0.045***	1.046
							[0.003]	
Organizational resources								
Age 15-34			0.026*	1.026	0.062***	1.064	0.013	1.013
			[0.015]		[0.017]		[0.016]	
Female-headed households			0.085***	1.089	0.116***	1.123	0.093***	1.098
			[0.014]		[0.015]		[0.014]	
Sex ratio			0.084***	1.088	0.096***	1.101	0.090***	1.094
			[0.012]		[0.013]		[0.012]	
Income inequality			1.033	2.810	2.235***	9.346	0.851	2.342
			[0.810]		[0.845]		[0.828]	
Expiration of U.S. ban on assault weapons			0.992***	2.697				
			[0.075]					
Threats and opportunities								
Leadership decapitation			0.281***	1.324	−0.180***	0.835	−0.077	0.926
			[0.073]		[0.067]		[0.070]	

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	Coefficient	IRR	Coefficient	IRR	Coefficient	IRR	Coefficient	IRR
Prosecutors per 10,000 population			0.160***	1.174	0.135***	1.144	0.143***	1.154
			[0.041]		[0.047]		[0.047]	
Geographic controls								
North	1.715***	5.559	1.776***	5.904	1.854***	6.383	1.746***	5.734
	[0.322]		[0.339]		[0.342]		[0.343]	
North center	−0.628	0.534	−0.09	0.914	0.033	1.034	−0.124	0.883
	[0.384]		[0.407]		[0.412]		[0.412]	
Center	0.07	1.072	0.527	1.694	0.613*	1.846	0.537	1.710
	[0.335]		[0.355]		[0.360]		[0.360]	
Gulf	0.808**	2.244	1.049***	2.854	1.047***	2.850	1.034***	2.813
	[0.335]		[0.353]		[0.356]		[0.357]	
Pacific	1.573***	4.820	1.943***	6.977	2.036***	7.663	1.912***	6.770
	[0.325]		[0.349]		[0.355]		[0.355]	
Southwest	1.182***	3.261	1.363***	3.909	1.388***	4.008	1.336***	3.804
	[0.329]		[0.349]		[0.354]		[0.354]	
Constant	−15.104***		−27.141***		−30.588***		−25.819***	
	[0.318]		[1.713]		[1.828]		[1.768]	
Observations	24,023		23,830		23,830		23,830	
Log-likelihood	−4,323.363		−4,149.514		−4,209.717		−4,111.013	
BIC	8,747.594		8,470.366		8,600.851		8,413.520	

Standard errors in brackets. IRR = incidence rate ratio; BIC = Bayesian Information Criteria.
*$p < .10$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$.

Model 1 presents our baseline results. Controlling only for subnational geographic regions, our findings show that intercartel violence in municipalities from states that experienced party alternation in gubernatorial power was 55.3% greater than in municipalities from states that remained under PRI hegemony (IRR = 1.553). These are places where cartels presumably lost protection as a result of the rotation of parties in gubernatorial power. But cartels may find themselves without protection and nonetheless fail to create an army when they do not have access to fighters, weapons, and opportunities for action. The results in Model 2 show that after controlling for these factors, the rotation of political parties in gubernatorial power remains a strong predictor of narco violence: Municipalities from states experiencing party alternation on average scored 65.9% more intercartel violence (IRR = 1.659) than those that remained under PRI hegemony.

The results in Model 3 show that when we add municipal and national alternation, the rotation of political parties at the state level continues to be a strong predictor of intercartel violence.[25] In this model, municipal alternation is not statistically significant,[26] but national alternation is and it has a strong substantive effect: Compared with pre-2000 municipalities, post-national alternation municipalities experienced 68.3% more violence (IRR = 1.683). Note, however, that because national alternation cannot explain the 1995-2000 violence, the PRI's defeat in presidential power can only explain the intensification but not the outbreak of intercartel violence.

The results in Model 4 reveal that when we add economic motivations associated with changes in the international price of cocaine, party alternation becomes a stronger predictor of intercartel violence: Municipalities from states experiencing gubernatorial alternation experienced 79.1% more violence. Note that the fluctuation of the international price of cocaine had a large net effect: A one unit increase in the percent change of the international price of cocaine resulted in 4.6% more violence (IRR = 1.046). These results suggest that although the rotation of parties and the loss of government protection gave cartels an incentive to create private militias to defend their turf, increases in the price of cocaine possibly motivated them to use these private armies to conquer new territories.

The results across models suggest that organizational factors matter: Intercartel violence was more intense in municipalities where young males from female-headed households were available to fight and when cartels had access to U.S. assault weapons. The results also show that threats and opportunities matter in unexpected ways: State attacks against cartels, via leadership removal, had no consistent effect on intercartel violence, and municipalities with more public prosecutors were more, not less, likely to experience intercartel violence. In widely corrupt judicial systems, in which

law enforcement agents often collude with organized crime, the presence of public prosecutors or police agents is often associated with more criminality and violence.

Robustness Checks

Our key finding is robust to different specifications of state alternation. As shown in Table A2 in the online appendix, the subnational alternation index is an important predictor of intercartel violence across models. Model 4 reports that for every additional alternation, intercartel violence increases by 25.9% (IRR = 1.259). This means that whereas a rotation of parties in municipal power (level 1) would yield 25.9% more violence, a rotation of parties in both municipal and gubernatorial power (level 3) would yield 77.7% more violence (25.9 × 3).

As reported in Table A3, our main finding is also robust to a number of additional controls, including poverty and a municipality's physical proximity to global markets (ports and international borders). Our key finding remains unchanged if we use fixed effect models to capture unobserved characteristics of the municipalities (see Table A4) and when we split the sample by geographic region (see Table A5) and test our models using only municipalities from the *North* and *Pacific*—the two regions with the greatest impact on intercartel violence in all models in Table 1.

Our results hold even when we address potential biases due to a large number of zero counts and test all our models using a dichotomous measure of the dependent variable (1 = nonzero counts of intercartel murders, 0 = otherwise; Table A6) and subsequently retest the models only using positive counts (Table A7). In Table A7, we include a lag of murders in neighboring municipalities to test for spatial effects[27] and the results continue to suggest that party rotation in gubernatorial power remains an important predictor of intercartel violence.

Time Trends

If it is the case that by removing key personnel in the judicial and police system, incoming opposition governors unwittingly dismantled the informal networks of government protection for drug cartels, then we should observe a major uptick of intercartel violence during opposition governors' first year in office. To assess time trends, we created a count variable to identify each of the 6 years of a governor in office, *State government cycle*. For convenience, we code the first year in office as zero. We then assess the evolution of violence after a rotation of political parties in gubernatorial office through the interaction *State alternation* × *State govt cycle*.[28]

The results in Table 2 reveal a conspicuous hike in intercartel violence during the first postauthoritarian year. Model 1 shows an important increase in violence immediately after the rotation of political parties in a state governorship. In this interaction model, the coefficient of the *State alternation* variable shows that when *State government cycle* is equal to zero—that is, during an opposition governor's initial year in office—violence increases by 53.5% (IRR = 1.535). The interaction *State alternation* × *State govt cycle* shows that after the important increase of violence during the first year of an opposition governor in office, violence increases slightly at an annual rate of 6.6% (IRR = 1.066) for the remainder of the 6-year term in office. This result strongly suggests that drug cartels went to war during the first year after a rotation of parties in gubernatorial office. To understand why, we turn to case studies.

Qualitative Evidence

Drawing from in-depth interviews with the first opposition governors from three Mexican states, in this section we explore the mechanisms that connect party rotation in gubernatorial power with the outbreak of intercartel wars. Building on our statistical results, we focus on states from the two geographic regions that systematically produced the most intense intercartel violence: Baja California (*North*) and Jalisco and Michoacán (*Pacific*). We assess two administrations from the right-wing PAN (Baja California and Jalisco) and one from the leftist PRD (Michoacán). Because the statistical results show that the first year of an opposition administration was particularly violent, we focus on how an opposition governor's early decisions affected criminal markets.

Baja California

Ernesto Ruffo, the former mayor of Ensenada who became the first opposition governor to defeat the PRI in 1989, learned about the extent of the collusion between the state judicial police and the federal police with the Tijuana Cartel during his term as municipal president (1986-1989). As a result, during his gubernatorial campaign, Ruffo did not accept any federal or state protection and instead recruited 15 police members from his municipal administration to work with him. Ruffo ran an anticorruption campaign, but organized crime and drug trafficking were not part of his campaign rhetoric (García & Tapia, 2006). After his victory, the new governor immediately removed the top- and several midlevel officials from the state attorney's office and from the state judicial police—he named a military zone commander as police

Table 2. Assessing the Evolution of Violence Following Party Alternation, 1995-2006 (Random Effects Negative Binomial Models With Logged Population as Offset Variable).

	Model 1	
	Coefficient	IRR
Loss of protection		
State alternation	0.428***	1.535
	[0.129]	
State government cycle	−0.029	0.972
	[0.024]	
State alternation × State govt cycle	0.064*	1.066
	[0.038]	
Municipal alternation	−0.01	0.990
	[0.105]	
Municipal government cycle	−0.123**	0.885
	[0.051]	
Municipal alternation × Mun govt cycle	0.061	1.063
	[0.078]	
National alternation	0.744***	2.104
	[0.079]	
Greed		
Δ International retail price of cocaine	0.046***	1.047
	[0.003]	
Organizational resources		
Age 15-34	0.015	1.015
	[0.016]	
Female-headed households	0.095***	1.100
	[0.014]	
Sex ratio	0.092***	1.097
	[0.012]	
Income inequality	0.812	2.253
	[0.829]	
Threats and opportunities		
Leadership decapitation	−0.096	0.908
	[0.071]	
Prosecutors per 10,000 population	0.142***	1.153
	[0.048]	
Geographic controls	YES	
Constant	−25.905***	
	[1.782]	
Observations	23,830	
Log-likelihood	−4,105.512	
BIC	8,442.835	

Standard errors in brackets. IRR = incidence rate ratio; BIC = Bayesian Information Criteria.
*$p < .10$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$.

chief and appointed his 15 loyalists to replace midlevel officials within the attorney general's office to oversee police operations.[29]

In hindsight, Governor Ruffo is clear about the consequences of his initial actions:

> There was a status quo between corrupt bad elements in the police and the good ones. But when the new opposition government came to power in 1989, the connections between the bad guys and the police began to crumble and violence broke out.

Uncertainty over the protection of drug trafficking corridors made the Tijuana Cartel vulnerable to rival attacks. A few weeks into his government, Ruffo recalls, there were several murders associated with the drug business:

> The Tijuana and the Mexicali drug trafficking corridors were very important to the Arellano Félix brothers [the leaders of the Tijuana Cartel]. After our victory, we saw rival gangs coming into the state, and conflicts over the control of the plazas broke out.

To safeguard their turf against potential government attacks and against rival cartels, the Arellano Félix reacted immediately and recruited defectors from the state judicial police, young males from the Tijuana elite, and street gangs operating on the U.S.–Mexico border to develop a private militia under the command of Ramón Arellano Félix (Blancornelas, 2002). This was the first private militia in Mexico's drug wars (Grillo, 2011). It enabled the Tijuana Cartel to signal to other cartels that they were not unprotected and were ready to defend their control over the profitable route into California. It also enabled them to corrupt or kill key members of the new administration and renegotiate the terms of protection. As Ruffo reports, his police chief was corrupted by the Tijuana Cartel and several of his 15 police loyalists were murdered.

After the Tijuana Cartel secured its turf, the Arellano Félix used their private army to venture into territory traditionally under the control of the Juárez and the Sinaloa cartels, triggering the outbreak of Mexico's first major intercartel war.[30] They attacked their rivals when they were most vulnerable, following the rotation of gubernatorial power and the breakdown of government protections in Chihuahua and Jalisco.

Jalisco

Although Guadalajara, the state capital of the western state of Jalisco and the place of residence of the Sinaloa Cartel families (Astorga, 2005), had already seen a few glimpses of intercartel violence between the Arellano Félix

brothers and the Sinaloa Cartel in the early 1990s, Alberto Cárdenas, the PAN gubernatorial candidate, did not address drug violence in his 1994 to 1995 campaign (Arellano, 2011). Instead, the protection that petty crime received from the Guadalajara police and the widespread use of torture by members of the state judicial police were key campaign issues.[31] To address these problems, Cárdenas appointed a prominent lawyer and civilian leader, Jorge López, as his new attorney general and placed the judicial police under the command of a military zone commander, Cap. Montenegro. As López reports, he changed every top- and midlevel official in the attorney's office and introduced a new agenda of human rights to train police officers.

In hindsight, Governor Cárdenas reflects on the consequences of his team's initial actions: "If you change the rules of the game and remove some of the key pieces from the chess board, you are going to face a major counterattack." López recalls the outbreak of major intercartel wars: "Cartels fiercely fought to control Jalisco. The Sinaloa Cartel initially dominated this plaza. But they were first challenged by the Tijuana Cartel. Things got worse when the Juárez Cartel [from the northern state of Chihuahua] entered the dispute." Amado Carrillo, leader of the Juárez Cartel, and his private militia, La Línea—created after the 1992 PRI gubernatorial defeat in Chihuahua—were able to corrupt Cap. Montenegro, and they became a major threat to the Sinaloans. López eloquently recollects: "It was the outbreak of war—the dance of the machine guns!"

After the rotation of parties in Jalisco and other key states of the Sinaloa Empire—including Nayarit, Michoacán, and Guerrero—the leaders of the Sinaloa Cartel developed two private militias: one led by the Beltrán-Leyva brothers to defend their turf in Sinaloa, Nayarit, and Guerrero, and a second led by Ignacio Coronel and his brothers to defend Jalisco and Michoacán (Grillo, 2011). The Beltrán-Leyvas and the Coronels recruited defectors from federal and state judicial police forces to operate as hit men in their new powerful armies. After Cap. Montenegro was removed from office and eventually imprisoned for providing protection to the Juárez Cartel, the Sinaloans secured their turf and used their private armies to venture into the northeast to contest the Gulf Cartel's turf. The 1997 PRI gubernatorial defeat in Nuevo León—where the Gulf Cartel leaders had their residence—offered the Sinaloans a unique opportunity to expand east. This conflict reached unprecedented levels of violence after the Gulf Cartel recruited elite military defectors—the Zetas—to defend their turf (Ravelo, 2013).

Michoacán

Lázaro Cárdenas Batel, the first leftist opposition governor in Michoacán, reports that he was aware of marijuana production and drug trafficking in the

state and of occasional narco shootouts but that these were not issues during his 2001 election campaign.[32] He was more concerned about the economy, immigration, establishing a good relationship with the powerful teachers' union, and overcoming a repressive past.[33] That is why he appointed new personnel with "social sensitivity" to security and police positions. Out of concern for human rights, rather than security and drug trafficking, Cárdenas Batel removed all top- and midlevel officials from the state attorney's office and the secretary of public security—everyone from "secretaries, undersecretaries, and police regional commanders."

The sudden outbreak of narco violence in 2002 was "a shocking surprise" to Governor Cárdenas Batel. He bitterly recalls: "I had been in office for two days when one of the Valencia brothers [the leader of the main local drug trafficking organization, linked to the Sinaloa Cartel] was brutally murdered." It was the beginning of a protracted conflict for the state's drug trafficking corridors. After the 2002 political alternation, the Zetas, the powerful private militia of the Gulf Cartel, made a rapid entry into Michoacán. In collaboration with La Familia Michoacana, a self-defense group that protected citizens against the Sinaloa Cartel, the Zetas removed the Valencias and the Sinaloans from Michoacán (Maldonado, 2012) and through bribes of midlevel officials and the assassination of some of Cárdenas Batel's closest collaborators sought to reconstitute protection networks. By 2005, however, the alliance between La Familia and the Zetas broke down over differences in the allocation of drug trafficking routes, and the state plunged into a major new conflict (Grillo, 2011).

The Outbreak of Multiple Intercartel Wars

The spread of subnational political alternation experiences and the breakdown of informal government protection networks for drug cartels led to the proliferation of private militias throughout Mexico. As the narratives of Baja California, Jalisco, and Michoacán reveal, the cartels used these militias not only to defend their turf but also to seek to conquer enemy territory. This chain of events was not unique to these states but was prevalent in other post-authoritarian states with drug trafficking corridors, including Chihuahua, Nuevo León, Zacatecas, Guerrero, and Morelos.

Figure 4 shows the timeline of rotation in gubernatorial power in Mexico and the rise of private militias from 1989 to 2006. It identifies with a downward arrow the timing of alternation in gubernatorial power in states with drug trafficking routes and with an upward arrow the timing of the rise of the cartels' private militias. The information helps us dispel a concern about reverse causality: Because private militias emerged *after* the removal of the PRI from gubernatorial power and they went to war *after* the rotation of

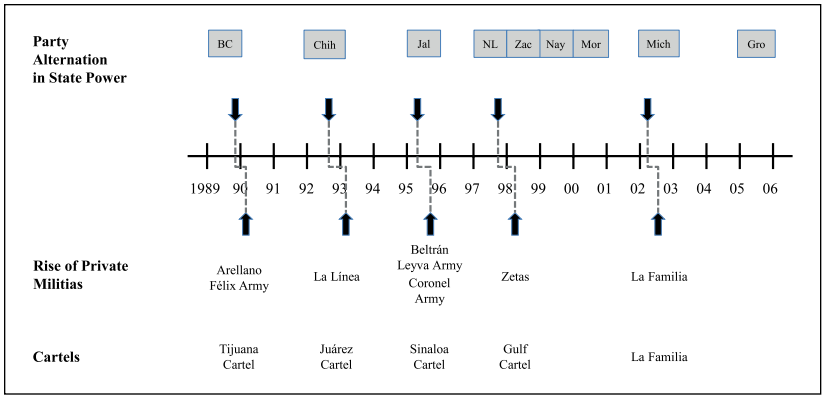


Figure 4. Timeline of party alternation in state power and the rise of private militias in Mexico, 1989-2006.
Downward arrows indicate dates of opposition governments taking office. Upward arrows indicate approximate dates of rise of private militias. BC = Baja California; Chih = Chihuahua; Jal = Jalisco; NL = Nuevo León; Zac = Zacatecas; Nay = Nayarit; Mor = Morelos; Mich = Michoacán; Gro = Guerrero.

parties in office, it is implausible that intercartel wars might have led voters to oust the PRI from power. If drug violence had been a prominent factor driving political alternation in gubernatorial power, it would have been a key issue in the winning candidates' campaign rhetoric, but intercartel violence was not addressed in election campaigns in this period.

The outbreak of intercartel violence after the first political alternation did not lead voters to demand subsequent state party alternation either. In two thirds of the states with drug trafficking corridors where alternation led to the outbreak of intercartel wars, opposition parties were not removed but reelected for a second term. Intercartel violence was not a major issue for voters. This is not surprising: Levels of drug violence between 1995 and 2006 were not nearly as high as in the 2007 to 2012 period; moreover, drug cartels in the first period did not target civilians or politicians or seek to rule over local populations, as they did in the second period. Hence, prior to 2007, we can rule out the possibility of crime issue voting as potential driver of reverse causality.

Conclusion

Large-scale criminal violence represents a major puzzle for dominant theories of organized crime. The extent and lethality of criminal wars unfolding in Mexico compel us to question established assumptions and to formulate

new theoretical explanations. Unlike most studies, which focus on the major outbreak of violence that followed the Mexican government's War on Drugs between 2007 and 2012, this article has concentrated on the two decades prior to the federal intervention—when national authorities were not proactively confronting drug cartels—and offers a new explanation of the outbreak of Mexican intercartel wars.

We have suggested that Mexican cartels went to war in the 1990s because they lost access to the informal state protection they had enjoyed under one-party rule. Our evidence shows that subnational party alternation in gubernatorial power led to the breakdown of protection and motivated drug lords to create their own private militias to defend their turf against potential attacks from incoming opposition governments and from rival cartels. These private militias empowered cartels to renegotiate informal protection with opposition authorities and allowed them to conquer rival territories in other states where the breakdown of PRI hegemony made home cartels vulnerable. Ultimately we show that the spread of subnational alternation experiences led to the proliferation of private militias and to the outbreak of intercartel wars.

Our analysis differs from dominant accounts of Mexico's drug violence in two important ways. Highlighting these differences has crucial implications not only for our understanding of intercartel wars in Mexico but also for the study of large-scale criminal violence more generally.

A first major difference is that whereas leading explanations of drug violence in Mexico suggest that uncertainty associated with municipal electoral competition led to the breakdown of informal government protection networks and to intercartel wars, we show a causal path involving a different mechanism—party alternation—operating at a different geographic level—state jurisdictions.

Rather than electoral competition and the mere presence of opposition parties waging electoral campaigns, our evidence reveals that the actual *rotation of parties* in state gubernatorial power and the *removal* of top- and mid-level officials from the state attorney's office and the state judicial police triggered the breakdown of protection. In our account, municipal actors were not the central players in the provision of criminal protection; instead, officers from the *state-level* judicial police were the central organizing actors of these networks. Whether municipal or state-level actors are the central suppliers of criminal protection is not simply a scholastic quarrel. If policy makers decide to undermine criminal protection networks and focus on dismantling municipal police forces and empowering state police forces, they may very well be strengthening state–criminal networks and inadvertently establishing the institutional basis for greater criminal violence.

The important theoretical implication is that party alternation—one of the defining features of representative democracy—can be a trigger of large-scale violence in societies where the spheres of organized crime and government

authority intersect. Although scholars of organized crime in economics and sociology have long assumed that government authorities and OCGs operate in separate, opposing spheres, in this article, we have shown the existence of a *gray zone* of government and criminal interaction. Whether these linkages are forged at the national, state, or municipal levels is largely a contextual matter that varies from one country to another. What is more general, however, is the impact that party alternation can have on unraveling state–criminal arrangements and triggering violence. For example, the rotation of political forces in such distant places as Guatemala (UNODC, 2010) and Brazil (Albarracín, 2016), where criminal and armed groups have developed intimate connections with subnational government authorities, has resulted in major outbursts of large-scale criminal violence.

A second important difference is that whereas dominant explanations of drug violence in Mexico take the existence of militias for granted and assume that cartels were de facto equipped to fight turf wars, in this article, we have discussed why cartels in principle would not want to create private armies, theorized the conditions under which they would do it, and provided qualitative evidence about the rise and proliferation of *private militias* in Mexico. Subsuming private militias under the broad conception of a cartel is historically inaccurate because for most of the 1980s Mexican drug lords only had their bodyguards to protect themselves and their families and subcontracted state specialists in violence to safeguard their businesses. The failure to identify, conceptualize, and assess the crucial role that private militias have played in Mexico's turf wars distorts the account of the outbreak and early development of criminal wars (1990-2006) and prevents us from fully understanding why the federal government's policy of leadership decapitation of drug cartels (2007-2012), which inadvertently allowed private militias to become independent criminal actors, gave rise to an unprecedented hike in drug violence from 1,400 to 12,000 murders per year.

Students of civil war have recognized the importance of militias (paramilitary forces) in the production of violence, the duration and termination of conflict, and in the transformation of local orders in civil war (Jentzsch, Kalyvas, & Schubiger, 2015). While we should be mindful of the differences between paramilitaries and the cartels' private militias—the former are sponsored by the state and/or civilians to fight rebels, whereas the latter are created by drug lords to fight the state and rival cartels—students of organized crime should follow the civil war literature in recognizing private militias as crucial players in Latin America's criminal wars, from Mexico to Guatemala to Brazil. Contrary to scholarly predictions that OCGs and mafias would only operate in their place of residence (Gambetta, 1993), the rise of private militias has provided criminal groups with greater mobility and unprecedented fighting power to engage in large-scale violence and to seek to control criminal markets and territories beyond their home towns.

In closing, we should end this article with a cautionary note: although our central contribution shows that party alternation in gubernatorial office and the breakdown of PRI hegemony in Mexico gave rise to private militias and triggered intercartel wars, let it be clear that we are *not* making a plea for the restoration of one-party rule! Rather, the Mexican case shows that when elites in new democracies fail to reform authoritarian judicial and security institutions and to punish state agents who repressed political dissidents and protected organized crime, the dynamics of democratic politics and the criminal underworld will become intertwined. Understanding the conditions that allow new democratic elites to successfully decouple authoritarian judicial and security institutions from organized crime without stimulating the outbreak of large-scale criminal wars is a central question for future research.

Authors' Note

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Notes

1. See Sambanis (2004).
2. We draw this information from the Criminal Violence in Mexico (CVM) Dataset (see below).
3. Following Lessing's (2015) distinction, we analyze the outbreak of *intercartel wars* in a time when *state–cartel conflicts* were relatively low.
4. For the pioneering studies on informal government protection networks for drug cartels in Mexico, see Astorga (2005); Snyder and Durán-Martínez (2009); Bailey and Taylor (2009); Astorga and Shirk (2010).
5. Prior to the defeat of Mexico's ruling party in the 2000 presidential election, several states experienced a process of subnational party alternation (Beer, 2003; Díaz-Cayeros, 2006).
6. We do not explicitly discuss Villarreal's (2002) pioneering analysis of the impact of municipal electoral competition on homicide rates in Mexico because his article does not deal with organized criminal groups (OCGs) and intercartel violence.
7. Information gathering and violence are precisely the two skills most crucial to success in the criminal underworld (Gambetta, 1993).
8. Interview with Governor Ernesto Ruffo, Mexico City, July 2014.
9. Interview with Governor Alberto Cárdenas, Guadalajara, July 2014.
10. Interview with Jorge López, Guadalajara, July 2014.
11. Interview with Governor Zeferino Torre Blanca, Mexico City, July 2014.
12. Interview with Governor Lázaro Cárdenas Batel, Washington, D.C., September 2014.
13. Although state-level judicial and police forces became the leading actors in the provision of protection for criminals, some elite members of the military continued to provide protection to cartels—see the story of Jalisco below.
14. In Fearon's (1995) seminal formulation, war is the result of bargaining indivisibility and commitment problems. For a discussion of rationalist theories of war in the context of Mexican Drug Wars, see Calderón, Robles, Díaz-Cayeros, and Magaloni (2015) and Lessing (2015).
15. The Criminal Violence in Mexico (CVM) Dataset contains information on drug-related violent events reported in three Mexican daily newspapers: Reforma (1995-2006), El Universal (1995-2006), and El Financiero (1997-2006). Based in Mexico City and Monterrey, and with extensive coverage of central and northern Mexico, *Reforma* is the most specialized source of daily information on drug trafficking in Mexico (Shirk & Wallman, 2015). *El Universal* offers good coverage of central Mexico and the Pacific and Gulf coasts, and *El Financiero* covers the central region. The three newspapers provide a fair coverage of the south. While the CVM does not provide a census of drug-related violence, it minimizes any significant geographic bias.
16. We exclude 418 municipalities from Oaxaca where political parties do not compete for office because communities select mayors through indigenous customary practices.
17. When news reports did not include the name of the cartels involved, we relied on three indicators to decide whether to include a murder in the data set: the use of

assault weapons, signs of torture and brutal violence, and written messages left on the bodies.

18. Electoral data come from Centro de Investigación para el Desarrollo, A.C. (CIDAC): http://cidac.org/base-de-datos-electoral/
19. See the case studies for evidence on this point.
20. Even though subnational alternation began in 1989, our statistical testing covers the 1995 to 2006 period. We began the analysis in 1995 because the sources of information on cartel murders are not sufficiently systematic for earlier periods. *Reforma*, the most specialized newspaper on drug violence and our key information source, was not launched until 1994 to 1995. This should not bias our results in any meaningful way. Between 1989 and 1994, there were two gubernatorial party rotations: Baja California (1989) and Chihuahua (1992). Starting in 1995, our panel covers most of the gubernatorial term of Chihuahua but only the last year of Baja California. To address this omission, we include Baja California as one of our case studies.
21. Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI) 1990, 2000, and 2005 censuses: http://sc.inegi.org.mx/cobdem/
22. Jensen and Rosas (2007).
23. INEGI judicial statistics 1990, 2000, and 2005: http://sc.inegi.org.mx/cobdem/
24. The variance of our dependent variable is 26 times greater than the mean ($\mu = 0.176$, $\sigma^2 = 4.719$). This is a strong indication in favor of the use of negative binomial (NB) instead of Poisson models. The results from a countfit test (Long & Freese, 2014) provide strong additional evidence in favor of the use of NB.
25. These models do not include the expiration of the U.S. ban on assault weapons because this variable is collinear with national alternation.
26. We ran additional tests in Table A1 in the online appendix to test for municipal electoral competition instead of municipal alternation. The results show that electoral competition is not statistically significant. Although these findings do not contradict Dube, Dube, and García-Ponce's (2013) claim that electoral competition in municipalities along the U.S.–Mexico border are associated with more narco violence, they do show that when we look beyond the border and consider *all* of Mexico's municipalities, municipal electoral competition is no longer statistically significant.
27. We were unable to include spatial controls in the models using the full sample (Table 1) due to the large number of zero counts of intercartel murders.
28. We follow a similar procedure to control for municipal time trends.
29. Interview with Governor Ruffo.
30. Interview with Jalisco's State Attorney Jorge López.
31. Interview with Governor Cárdenas.
32. "Asume Cárdenas Batel como Gobernador de Michoacán" (2002) report of Cárdenas Batel's inaugural address confirms this point.
33. Interviews with Governor Cárdenas Batel.

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