

## PARTY DOMINANCE AND THE LOGIC OF ELECTORAL DESIGN IN MEXICO'S TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY

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### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the role of electoral institutional design in Mexico's transition to democracy. Our argument is that electoral rules facilitated party dominance through two mechanisms: electoral rules disproportionately rewarded existing majorities and, at the same time, discouraged potential majorities from forming. More specifically, the rules rewarded parties that could win a majority of the vote in single-member districts; but at the same time, rewarded minority parties with seats from multi-member districts, mitigating Duvergerian incentives to coordinate behind a single challenger. In the short run, seats from multi-member districts benefited opposition parties by significantly reducing entry costs; in the long run, however, these seats helped sustain party dominance, by discouraging coordination among opposition parties and voters.

KEY WORDS • democracy • electoral system • institutional design • party dominance

Why did the transition to democracy in Mexico take so long? Despite decades of efforts by democratic opposition parties to unseat the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), and a secular decline in that party's electoral support, during the last decade the PRI kept on successfully winning elections, in the midst of economic crisis, corruption scandals, and real electoral threats from two well organized challenger parties. We argue that electoral rules facilitated party dominance in Mexico through two mechanisms: electoral rules disproportionately rewarded existing majorities and, at the same time, discouraged potential majorities from forming. More specifically, the rules rewarded the party that could win a majority of the vote in single-member districts; but at the same time, rewarded minority parties with seats from multi-member districts, mitigating Duvergerian incentives to coordinate behind a single challenger. In the short run, seats from multi-member districts benefited opposition parties by significantly reducing entry costs; in the long run, however, these seats

helped sustain party dominance, by discouraging coordination among opposition parties and voters.

The conventional view of the role of electoral institutions in Mexico's democratization unduly stresses the disproportionality of Mexico's mixed plurality-PR electoral rules, and how these rules can work at 'manufacturing' majorities for the PRI, as one of the key mechanisms that sustained its dominance. But the PRI actually never needed to manufacture a majority for itself. It sustained its dominance simply because it was the largest electoral force. The crucial question to understand the transition to democracy in Mexico is why an alternative majoritarian opposition coalition was so difficult to form, in order to dislodge the ruling party. Politicians in Mexico crafted institutions in such a way that party dominance became a self-enforcing equilibrium, which did not break down until the party's unpopularity at the national level had seeped down to the local and district levels, enabling the opposition to win in single-member districts. Our argument is, hence, about the effects of electoral rules in a dynamic setting. In the short term, movements toward greater proportionality in the electoral system benefited the opposition by reducing entry costs. In the long term, however, they helped the PRI by dividing the opposition camp.

The unique combination of electoral rules found in Mexico, crafted in a 30-year time span, did not result from an authoritarian imposition on the part of the ruling party. Institutional changes necessary to produce rules that protected the dominance of the PRI resulted from partisan compromises. In particular, the PRI followed a divide-and-rule strategy, offering short-term electoral benefits to a fraction of the opposition, in exchange of rules that would eventually make the incumbent party even more difficult to dislodge. In doing so, the PRI could successfully discourage opposition parties coming together behind an overarching agenda of institutional reform.

In the 2000 presidential elections the PRI was finally defeated, without coordination by the opposition parties. Our argument does not imply that coordination was a necessary condition for democratization in Mexico – the victory of Vicente Fox, from the Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), demonstrates that it was not. We argue, however, that a crucial mechanism through which the PRI was able to retain its prominent electoral position for so long was the crafting of electoral rules, which opposition political actors willingly abided to, and in some cases even promoted.

The paper unfolds as follows. In the first section, we discuss the logic of institutional design, focusing on the establishment of institutional constraints for opposition coordination. The next two sections after that then provide evidence of the arguments, demonstrating the effects of different sets of rules on opposition coordination and the maintenance of party dominance. We proceed by first showing that coordination of challengers is possible, as witnessed in state and municipal executive contests. We then turn to

showing how challenges to the PRI failed at the national level because, within a system of mixed electoral rules comprising single-member and multi-member districts, the latter dominated both voters and parties' strategic calculations. The last section concludes with some thoughts on the significance of our analysis in a comparative perspective.

### **1. Institutional Constraints for Opposition Coordination**

As summarized by Cox (1997), the literature on dominant party systems argues that coordination failure plays a key role in sustaining party dominance. Most accounts explain that failure in the light of the median position occupied by the dominant party. In multi-dimensional settings – and there is strong evidence that Mexico's party competition is indeed multi-dimensional – dominance becomes, however, particularly puzzling. In conditions of multi-dimensional competition there is no median where the dominant party can be placed and become invulnerable. What is distinct about the PRI's performance in government for so long was not its position in the political spectrum, but its ability to craft electoral rules, and repeatedly change them, without threatening its dominance.

Table 1 presents the results of presidential elections in Mexico from 1964 until 1994. This table shows the percentages of votes received by the PRI in each election and votes received by the first and second loser. While the margin of victory for the PRI was narrowing throughout those decades, the most significant aspect that should be highlighted in the table is that there was no opposition coordination, as reflected in the second-to-first loser (SF) ratio. In fact, even in the 2000 presidential elections, when the PRI finally lost office, there was no coordination either. The third party in the race still obtained 16.6 percent of the popular vote (which was, quite surprisingly, almost the same percentage received by the second losers in both 1988 and 1994).

This suggests that the Mexican system is not characterized by non-Duvergerian equilibria, in which voters do not know which party to discount through strategic voting, given a virtual tie between them: the trailing third place still receives a significant share of the vote, even when its candidate has no chances of winning. However, as we will see later, coordination does occur in local races, suggesting that voters in Mexico are sophisticated enough to understand the wasted vote rationale of backing the strongest contenders.

What accounts for the split of the opposition at the national level? Institutions play a crucial role in hindering coordination. Table 2 presents a summary of the transformation of the electoral rules in Mexico between 1960 and 1996. The first column shows the rules for each of the elective posts

**Table 1.** Lack of Coordination in Presidential Races

Year	PRI % vote	First loser % vote <sup>a</sup>	Second loser % vote <sup>b</sup>	Effective number of parties <sup>c</sup>	SF ratio
1964	87.77	11.04	0.68	1.28	0.06
1970	85.09	13.83	0.86	1.30	0.06
1976	87.84	3.69	1.97	1.13	0.53
1982	68.43	15.68	3.48	1.84	0.22
1988	50.71	30.59	16.79	2.61	0.55
1994	48.77	25.94	16.6	2.83	0.64

<sup>a</sup>First loser is the PAN candidate in most years, except 1976 when it did not field a candidate and the Partido Popular Socialista (PPS) was the first loser, and 1988 when the Frente Democrático Nacional (FDN) nominated Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas as a common candidate.

<sup>b</sup>Second loser is the PPS in 1964 and 1970, the PARM in 1976, the Partido Socialista Unificado de México (PSUM) in 1982, the PAN in 1988 and the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) in 1994.

<sup>c</sup>Calculated with effective vote, which discards invalid votes and those cast for unregistered candidates. In 1988 the index is calculated for the FDN coalition counted as a single party.

*Source:* Own calculations from data in Gómez Tagle (1997) cuadro 4.

in 1960; the second column provides some of the details of the reforms these rules underwent; and the last column summarizes the current rules. As exhibited by Table 2, the general trend in Mexico's electoral reforms has been to keep single-member districts in place while adding multi-member district races.

In the early 1960s the system was purely majoritarian. The Lower Chamber was elected through a variable number of single-member districts, increased according to population estimates with each census. Two senators from each of the states were elected under a binomial formula in statewide races where voters could cast only one vote. Governors, local legislators and municipal presidents were all elected in single-member plurality races. Thus, elections everywhere were single-member district races. In the years of greatest party hegemony, the electoral system created an insurmountable threshold for minority opposition parties. Virtually all the elective offices in the country were controlled by the PRI. The consecutive electoral reforms gradually added multi-member district races without eliminating the majoritarian nature of the system. The resulting set of rules created strong incentives for opposition parties to compete against each other as long as they could not seriously attempt to win in single-member districts. As the last column in Table 2 shows, under the current system single-member districts are retained for two-fifths of the Chamber of Deputies, half of the Senators, Governors and the Mayors. This transformation, from a majoritarian to a mixed electoral system, we argue, is responsible for the dominance of the PRI.

One could object, however, that the rules for the composition of the assemblies should not significantly discourage coordination in a presidential race. Shugart and Carey (1992) show that in presidential systems, the timing of presidential elections with respect to congressional elections is essential for determining the number of parties and ultimately the incentives to coordinate. All Latin American countries have a combination of plurality-win presidential races with different forms of PR congressional elections. While such logic holds in gubernatorial races in Mexico, which are often concurrent with local legislatures, it does not prevail at the national level. The reason for this anomaly is related to the peculiarities of a dominant party system.

As long as the opposition parties did not perceive that they could not seriously attempt to challenge the dominant party in the executive, they focused their electoral resources in the assembly races, where they could attempt to establish themselves as relevant players in the system, by winning some of the multi-member seats. Rather than imposing a single-seat nationwide district over the assemblies, concurrency under a dominant party system implies that assembly multi-member districts contaminate the presidential race.

A further disincentive to coordinate came from the rule for cross-endorsement established in the electoral reform of 1993, as revealed in the last row of Table 2. After the 1988 experience, the PRI changed the rule that allowed parties to nominate common presidential candidates while keeping a separate identity for the congressional and senatorial races taking place concurrently.

The new rule implied that if two parties want to nominate a common presidential candidate, they must also share candidates in all the congressional and senatorial races – all 628 other races at stake. If parties intend to coordinate, they must do so much before the start of the campaigns. If opposition parties wanted to nominate a common presidential candidate, they must first craft alliances for each of the races taking place simultaneously and sacrifice their internal dynamics for the distribution of seats within the party. This clearly involves great transaction costs, although the regional distribution of support for opposition parties makes this a controversial issue probably in only half of the single-member districts.

This rule protected the PRI from risky coordination among opposition forces in the single most important race, the presidency. But the greatest paradox is that the PRI did not impose this rule for cross-endorsement on the opposition parties. The PAN supported it in a congressional coalition with the PRI. The PAN voted against cross-endorsement in presidential races because in the past presidential alliances had benefited the Partido de la Revolucion (PRD), not the PAN. The 1993 electoral reform also offered important side-payments to the PAN. It eliminated the ‘self-certification’

**Table 2.** Institutional Change in Mexico. Rules for Representation

	1960	Changes	1999
<b>Chamber of Deputies</b>	178 single member districts	<p>A. Party deputies (1963). Besides single member district deputies, legal 2.5% threshold to receive at least 5 deputies. One more deputy for each 0.5% of vote, to a maximum of 20. No party deputies for parties winning more than 20 single member districts. In practice, allocation of party deputies according to government discretion.</p> <p>B. Lower threshold (1972). Reduced to 1.5%, to validate PARM and PPS party deputies previously granted in spite of being below threshold.</p> <p>C. Drawing of 300 single member districts and introduction of closed list plurinominales (1977). Relatively homogeneous districts drawn according to 1970 census data. Party seats changed into 100 compensatory seats, distributed with a relatively proportional rule only to parties winning less than 60 single member districts.</p> <p>D. Increase of plurinominal seats but elimination of compensatory feature (1986). Plurinominal seats are increased to 200. They are no longer compensatory seats, but allocated to any party with more than 1.5% but less than 51% percent of the vote. Upper bound of 350 deputies to majority party. 'Governance clause' assures absolute majority if under 51% of the vote.</p> <p>E. Change of formula (1989). If no party above 35% of the vote, plurinominal deputies used as compensatory seats to ensure perfect proportional representation. Between 35% and 60%, absolute majority assured through those seats. Between 60% and 70% equal seat vote ratio to majority party.</p> <p>F. Change of formula (1993). Inconsistencies of previous formula are eliminated, plurinominal seats allocated in a relatively proportional manner, independent of single member district results. Easier access to new parties through conditioned registry.</p> <p>G. Reform to campaign finance and access to media (1996). Increase of threshold to 2%.</p>	300 single member districts. 200 multi-member seats divided into 5 regional districts. 2% Threshold.

**Table 2.** Continued

	1960	Changes	1999
<b>Senate</b>	64 senators, two member formula for each state and the Federal District.	A. Renewal of chamber by halves (1986). Half of the senators elected in midterm elections, eliminating the two member formula. B. Doubling size of chamber and introduction of first minority senator (1993). Elimination of staggered Senate election. Trinomial formula with only one vote cast, and one senator to the first minority. C. Introduction of principle of proportional representation (1996). Return to binomial formula, plus first minority. 32 Senators by principle of proportional representation.	Two member formulas for each state and the DF. First minority senators to the candidate heading the first losing party list. 32 PR senators in nationwide district.
<b>Governors</b>	Direct election. Staggered from federal.	No change.	Direct election. Staggered from federal.
<b>Municipal government</b>	Council headed by president from majority party.	A. Introduction of proportional representation in municipal council (1977). PR principle for municipalities with more than 300,000 inhabitants. B. Proportional representation in all municipal councils (1983). State legislation will determine the specific form it takes.	Council headed president from majority party, PR council members.
<b>Common presidential candidate</b>	Cross-endorsement allowed.	Endorsement of presidential candidate from other party allowed only if common candidacies are presented for all concurrent races (i.e. 128 senators, 500 deputies), common campaign platform is presented and campaign finance is granted in proportion to largest coalition partner.	Cross-endorsement requires a coalition for all races.

*Source:* Own compilation drawing from Gómez Tagle (1997); Molinar (1991a); Lujambio (1995); Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos Comentada (1990) México: UNAM; Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos (<http://www.juridicas.unam.mx/cnsinfo/fed00.htm>); Código Federal de Instituciones y Procedimientos Electorales (1996) México: Instituto Federal Electoral; and Ordenamientos Electorales (1994) México: Tribunal Federal Electoral.

by the electoral colleges, granting the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) the authority to certify the electoral results (see Schedler, 1999). The 1993 reform also changed the rules for the composition of the Senate. The 1993 rule implied that three senators were going to be elected by plurality and a fourth one given to the second largest party in the state. The new rule for selecting the Senate largely benefited the PAN over the PRD, since the right-wing opposition party was the second largest party in most states. The following sections provide evidence to our argument. We will first show that coordination was possible, and that when it took place, it generally worked against the PRI. We then explore the national electoral arenas, showing how the rules summarized in Table 2 discouraged coordination, and determined electoral payoffs.

## **2. Opposition Coordination: State and Municipal Races**

The election of state and municipal executives in Mexico is carried out in direct elections over a large single-member district, namely, the state or the municipality. If coordination occurs, one should find two- candidate contests in these races. In Table 3 we present electoral results for all gubernatorial elections taking place between 1993 and 1999 in Mexico. The table also reports which party won, the effective number of parties in each race, whether a coalition was formed, which party previously held office in the state, and the second-to-first (SF) loser's vote total ratio proposed by Cox (1997).

Gubernatorial elections in Mexico have become extremely competitive. Between 1993 and 1999, the PRI lost 11 out of 32 gubernatorial races. The PRI only obtained an absolute majority of the vote only in eight races. Most significantly, Table 3 shows that the ruling party tends to lose where the opposition coordinates. In all the states where the PAN won (Baja California, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Nuevo Leon, Querétaro, and Aguascalientes), the PRD is virtually non-existent (average SF ratio of 0.14). In these states, that is, a bipartisan pattern of competition prevails.

Generally speaking, where the PRD wins, the PAN does exist as a significant competitor but it is nonetheless subject to strategic defections. The PRD won Zacatecas and Baja California Sur by nominating candidates that split from the PRI after losing the party's nomination. Thus, many of the votes to the winning governors came directly from the PRI and its traditional bases of support. In these states PAN's support was weak, and although there was no full coordination, opposition voters probably tended to vote strategically for the PRD's nominee. The evidence of strategic voting in the 1997 Mexico City election is quite persuasive: the PAN started in first place and the PRD in third place; by the end of the race the order was reversed, presumably due to strategic voting.



**Table 3.** Gubernatorial Elections in Mexico 1993–99

State	Year	PRI (%)	PAN (%)	PRD (%)	NP	Coalition	Victory	Previous	SF Ratio
Coahuila	1993	65.5	27.0	0.0	1.97		PRI	PRI	0.0370
Chiapas	1994	50.4	9.2	34.9	2.58		PRI	PRI	0.2636
Morelos	1994	75.8	7.9	0.0	1.65		PRI	PRI	0.1265
Tabasco	1994	57.5	2.6	38.7	2.08		PRI	PRI	0.0672
Baja Calif.	1995	42.3	50.9	3.3	2.27		PAN	PAN	0.0309
Guanajuato	1995	32.9	58.1	7.0	2.22		PAN	PAN	0.2134
Jalisco	1995	36.6	51.9	3.9	2.45		PAN	PRI	0.1568
Yucatán	1995	48.7	44.4	3.0	2.29		PRI	PRI	0.0868
Michoacán	1995	38.9	25.5	32.4	3.11		PRI	PRI	0.7869
Campeche	1997	48.0	3.1	41.2	2.46		PRI	PRI	0.1679
Colima	1997	42.6	38.2	16.3	2.82		PRI	PRI	0.4263
Dist. Fed.	1997	25.6	15.6	48.1	3.06		PRD	PRI	0.6085
Nuevo León	1997	41.9	48.5	3.2	2.41	PRD+PVEM	PAN	PRI	0.0751
Querétaro	1997	39.5	45.4	7.4	2.71		PAN	PRI	0.1834
S. L. Potosí	1997	49.5	41.4	9.1	2.36		PRI	PRI	0.3236
Sonora	1997	41.8	31.6	23.5	3.03		PRI	PRI	0.7181
Chihuahua	1998	50.3	42.2	5.5	2.30	PT+CDP	PRI	PAN	0.1298
Zacatecas	1998	39.8	13.5	46.7	2.53		PRD	PRI	0.3377
Durango	1998	39.9	30.3	8.4	3.29		PRI	PRI	0.7027
Veracruz	1998	49.0	27.2	17.9	2.88		PRI	PRI	0.6589
Aguascal.	1998	38.0	53.1	6.9	2.31		PAN	PRI	0.1800
Oaxaca	1998	48.9	10.2	37.6	2.56		PRI	PRI	0.2720
Tamaulipas	1998	54.9	26.6	16.1	2.51		PRI	PRI	0.6033
Puebla	1998	55.5	29.7	11.2	2.44		PRI	PRI	0.3760
Sinaloa	1998	47.5	32.7	18.1	2.73		PRI	PRI	0.5392
Tlaxcala	1998	44.3	8.6	34.0	2.38	PRD+PT+PVEM	Coalition	PRI	0.2764
B. Calif. Sur	1999	37.4	6.3	55.9	2.19		PRD	PRI	0.1672
Hidalgo	1999	53.5	32.1	14.4	2.44		PRI	PRI	0.4491
Q. Roo	1999	44.4	17.4	36.1	2.79		PRI	PRI	0.4807
Guerrero	1999	49.8	1.7	47.7	2.10	PRI+PRS and PRD+PT+PRT	PRI	PRI	0.0334
Nayarit	1999	44.8	52.9	0.0	2.08	PRD+PT+PVEM	Coalition	PRI	0.0189
Estado de México	1999	42.5	35.5	22.0	2.82	PAN+PVEM and PRD+PT	PRI	PRI	0.6208

*Source:* Own calculations from data collected and assembled by CIDAC, Centro de Investigación para el Desarrollo, AC drawing from official results given by state electoral commissions.

Among the 11 states that the PRI lost, two of them had been cases of opposition coalitions. In Tlaxcala, the coalition was connected, involving only left-wing parties. In Nayarit, all opposition parties, including PAN and PRD, crafted a winning coalition. Hence some form of coordination among

opposition parties seems to be a necessary condition for defeating the PRI. Forming a coalition is no guarantee of winning, as the partial coalitions of the left in Guerrero, Chihuahua and Nuevo Leon reveal. But as the SF ratios demonstrate, the PRI loses where the trailing opposition party is left with virtually no support. This might be due to local bipartism, to strategic defections, or to coalitions formed ad-hoc.

Conversely, the PRI tends to win where the opposition splits. This is particularly so in those cases where the PRI wins despite being a minority party (Yucatan, Michoacán, Campeche, Colima, San Luis Potosi, Sonora, Durango, Veracruz, Oaxaca, Sinaloa, Quintana Roo, Guerrero, and Estado de Mexico). The average SF ratio was 0.60. Of course that the ruling party might also win because there is little opposition presence (Morelos, for example). However, as can be appreciated from Table 3, there are very few hegemonic states left. The data suggest that the PRI's chances of retaining power in Mexico's more competitive environment crucially depend on the split of opposition parties. A similar pattern is found within the more than 2400 municipalities in the country. These elections take place every three years and are often not concurrent with gubernatorial ones. Municipal races tend to be less competitive than gubernatorial races. As Table 4 shows, the PRI won more than 60 percent of municipal races between 1993 and 1995. The table overstates, however, the PRI's absolute level of support is overstated, simply because most of these municipalities are small rural localities. The opposition has overwhelmingly won in densely populated urban municipalities, including many of the state capitals. Table 4 also reports the average SF ratio, the effective number of parties, and the margin of victory. Among the PRI victories – and in sharp contrast to gubernatorial elections – the distinction between hegemonic and non-hegemonic races is quite relevant at the municipal level. Only the indicators for non-hegemonic races are really meaningful, since in the hegemonic races the opposition barely exists, with the PRI winning with more than 90 percent.

In terms of the SF ratios in municipal races, there is no difference statistically speaking between cases where the PAN and the PRD won. But the SF ratios for PRI victories are statistically higher, suggesting, again, that there is a greater tendency for a failure at coordination where the PRI wins. Subnational election results suggest that voters in Mexico are sophisticated enough to cast their vote for the candidate with the greater chance of winning. Such coordination around only one challenger candidate leads to the prevalence of Duvergerian equilibria where the PRI can be defeated. The presence of bi-partyism in local and state elections is not reflected in national elections, though. As the next section discusses, this is not because patterns of bi-partyism at the local level are aggregated into multi-partyism at the national level, as in the case of Canada. In sharp contrast with the findings of this section, single-member district congressional elections at the

**Table 4.** Coordination in Municipal Races, by Winning Party (1993–95)

Party	Number	Percentage	SF ratio	Margin	N	NP Molinar
PRI	1541	64.1	0.2563	0.5986	1.99	1.53
Hegemonic	863	35.9	0.3019	0.9735	1.74	1.22
Not hegemonic	678	28.2	0.1982	0.1211	2.32	1.92
PAN	211	8.8	0.1792	0.1325	2.25	1.92
PRD	172	7.2	0.1902	0.1200	2.28	2.01
OTHER	34	1.4	0.3032	0.0719	2.59	2.28
USES	446	18.6				
TOTAL	2404	100.0	0.1980	0.4049	1.68	1.33

*Source:* Own calculations from CIDAC database of municipal results from the State Electoral Institutes in the 31 states.

*Note:* Hegemonic is defined as where the PRI wins by a margin of more than 25 percent of the vote.

national level are not characterized by strategic voting or coalitions. Two-way races, where the PRI can be defeated, are seldom observed in congressional elections. In senatorial elections, as we shall see, the rules create strong incentives for the major opposition parties to compete against each other in an attempt to be the largest minority in the state.

### 3. Failure to Coordinate: The National Party System

Having discussed electoral results in the local and state executive races, this section now discusses the effects of electoral rules at the national level. In particular, we examine institutional change in the Lower Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. As previously mentioned, coordination failure is more prevalent at the national level. We argue that electoral rules translating votes into seats played a crucial role in dividing the opposition.

The logic of institutional design has been threefold:

1. to preserve the majoritarian nature of the original single-member district races such that the system tends to disproportionately reward the existing majority;
2. to reduce entry costs to opposition parties by adding multi-member seats; and
3. to minimize the risk of losing the PRI's majority control of both chambers by establishing 'safety vote thresholds' above which a majority of seats was artificially manufactured. This safety threshold, as it will become apparent later, was never used in practice, because it was not

until the 1997 midterm election that the PRI officially lost the absolute majority of the vote.

Overall, electoral reforms tended to preserve the existing balance of forces emerging from previous elections: protect the PRI's dominance while accommodating a slowly growing, but divided opposition camp. Reforms for the translation of votes into seats continuously took place from 1960 until 1996. Throughout most of that period, the PRI was particularly successful at crafting institutions to its advantage.

### *3.1 The Chamber of Deputies*

The Chamber of Deputies in Mexico is characterized by a set of rules that, we argue, retained majoritarian districts in order to sustain the advantage of the incumbent PRI, while at the same time opening up spaces to opposition parties unable to win in the single-member districts. The opening of such spaces, however, has prevented the coordination of opposition parties around single challengers in single-member districts, so that the PRI keeps on winning most of the majoritarian races, but, even more importantly, the lack of coordination in legislative races by the opposition contaminates the concurrent presidential race.

Changes to the rules for the composition of the Chamber of Deputies were publicly justified on the grounds of enhancing political plurality. While it is clear that new parties were able to enter the Chamber thanks to those rules, they also weakened in the long run the prospects for established opposition parties to win single-member districts. The rules for the translation of votes into seats were first changed in 1963, when so-called 'party deputies' were first introduced (see Table 2). The mixed system was established with the 1977 electoral reform, which greatly reduced the barriers to entry of new parties into the system. The reform drew up 300 single-member districts plus 100 compensatory seats, distributed in a rather proportional manner to minority parties only, namely those winning less than 60 single-member districts.

The 1986 reform increased the number of seats coming from multi-member districts to 200 and these were to be assigned to any party obtaining between 1.5 percent and less than 50 percent of the vote. In addition, the 1986 established a so-called 'governance clause', which automatically gave the largest party the majority of seats if its vote was above 35 percent but below 51 percent. The rule also established an upper bound of 350 seats to the largest party. But the most long lasting change of the 1986 reform supporting PRI dominance was to establish that voters could cast only one vote in the single-member district races that would automatically be counted for the allocation of seats coming from the regional multi-member

districts. Thus, split-ticketing voting was no longer possible, which had momentous implications for the coordination of the opposition. Rules for the translation of votes into seats were changed again in 1989 and 1993. It should be noted that the PAN voted, together with the PRI, to approve these last electoral reforms.

While there are several accounts of the electoral reforms and their effects, particularly focusing on the rules to manufacture majorities when in case a party fell short of them, in this section we highlight three issues that have received less attention. First, notwithstanding the controversies they generated at the time they were established, the rules to manufacture majorities were actually not used, because the PRI had the necessary majority in both votes and single-member district victories to retain control of the Chamber of Deputies. Second, although the overall degree of disproportionality in the system was not significantly different from that of democratic systems, it systematically benefited the party more capable of winning in single-member races, which happened to be the PRI, and punished the second largest party in those races, namely the PAN. Third the system created strong incentives for opposition parties not to coordinate to credibly challenge the PRI in the single-member races.

In this respect, the prohibition to divide votes among the single-member and multi-member races is particularly important. Through the prohibiting of split-ticketing, the rules significantly increased the coordination costs among the opposition since electors can no longer strategically cast a vote for the strongest contender to the PRI in single-member district races without, at the same time, sacrificing a vote for their most preferred alternative in the multi-member races. The result is an utter lack of opposition coordination in the single-member district races.

Table 5 analyzes the effects of the rules of the lower chamber on its composition. The third column presents a measure of the magnitude of over-representation obtained by the PRI in the Lower Chamber of Deputies, namely the difference between seat share and vote share. The rules have resulted in the over-representation of the PRI. However, that over-representation has been generally quite low. In 1960, its over-representation was 6 percent, a rather low number considering that the system was purely majoritarian. This reflects the degree to which the system was hegemonic: only the PRI got votes, thus it was not utterly over-represented, despite controlling virtually all the Chamber's seats. Through the introduction of party deputies, the PRI was actually 'giving away' seats to some parties that, at least with the official vote tally, could not surpass the vote thresholds required by the legislation, let alone win single-member races.

In fact, between 1964 and 1976, the PRI was slightly under-represented in three out of the five elections despite controlling virtually all the seats in the Chamber. After the mixed system was introduced in 1977, the tendency

has been to continue to over-represent the PRI, though not by a large margin. Of noticeable importance are the figures for the 1994 and 1997 elections. Over-representation became closer to the two-digit range, reflecting the inelasticities of the most recent electoral formulas. It is important to notice that as elections became more competitive, the electoral rules have tended to over-represent this party more. Another important point is that, as other analyses have revealed, the second largest party, the PAN, is generally under-represented. However, as rules for multi-member seat allocation changed and elections became more competitive, under-representation of the PAN has been reduced or even reversed. This implies that between 1960 and 1985, the electoral rules originally benefited the PRI and small parties at the expense of the second largest party, increasing the incentives for the opposition to fragmentation. Since 1988, when the left consolidated and the elections became competitive, the PAN has fared much better in the system and it is not systematically punished to the benefit of the tiny parties; i.e. between 1988 and 1997, that is, the electoral rules benefited the PRI at the expense of all the opposition parties.

Despite the PRI's over-representation, the existing mixed system has been better for the opposition than a purely majoritarian system. The fourth column in Table 5 reports the expected deviation from proportional representation under a single-member plurality system. It tells of the magnitude of over-representation the ruling party would obtain had a mixed system not been introduced, namely the difference between percentage of seats from single-member races won by the ruling party minus its total vote share. Clearly, all of the reforms significantly reduced entry cost to opposition parties. The reason is that, as the second column shows, the opposition has been extremely unsuccessful at winning single-member races. Throughout this period, the PRI won the overwhelming majority of plurality races, the only exceptions being 1988 and 1997, when it won 75 percent and 68 percent of the seats coming from the single-member districts. Thus, in the short-term, the mixed electoral system has significantly reduced entry costs to opposition parties. But the existing system, we argue, created perverse incentives in the longer-term, since it discouraged coordination among these parties. Coordination, as shown in the previous section, had been the most efficient way to dislodge the ruling party in state and municipal races.

The reason why the existing system discourages coordination can further be explored by analyzing which effect dominates in the mixed electoral system, the majoritarian or the PR one. Presumably, if the majoritarian effect is clearly dominant, opposition parties would face stronger incentives to coordinate. We follow Taagapera and Shugart (1989), who argue that when the number of compensatory seats is smaller than the expected deviation from proportionality, the majoritarian effect dominates over the PR

**Table 5.** Effect of Electoral Rules on Representation

	PRI % votes A	Majoritarian districts			Compens. seats E	Effects C-E F	PAN s-v G	Total bias H
		PRI seats B	PRI s-v C	PRI Dev. D				
1961	90.65	172 of 178	6.0	6.0	0.0	6.0	-4.8	6.0
1964	87.77	178 of 178	-1.6	13.6	15.2	-1.6	-3.0	4.6
1967	83.50	175 of 177	-0.6	15.4	16.1	-0.7	-2.8	3.4
1970	85.09	178 of 178	0.2	16.6	16.4	0.2	-4.8	4.8
1973	77.59	192 of 194	5.5	21.4	16.0	5.4	-6.4	6.4
1976	87.84	193 of 194	-3.0	14.3	17.4	-3.1	-0.5	3.5
1979	74.09	296 of 300	-6.6	24.6	31.6	-7.0	-1.5	8.1
1982	68.43	299 of 300	5.4	30.4	25.1	5.3	-4.7	7.7
1985	68.10	289 of 300	4.2	28.2	25.0	3.2	-6.1	6.7
1988	50.71	223 of 300	0.9	26.6	34.6	-8.0	2.2	3.1
1991	61.46	290 of 300	2.5	35.2	34.0	1.2	0.1	4.4
1994	48.77	274 of 300	9.9	41.0	34.6	6.4	-2.0	9.9
1997	42.05	164 of 300	5.6	15.9	25.2	-9.7	-1.2	5.6

*Source:* Own calculations from Gomez Tagle, 1997 (correcting double accounting in Cuadro 8). For 1997, Instituto Federal Electoral.

*Notes:* A, % PRI vote; B, total number of seats won by the PRI in single-member races; C, PRI over-representation (seat share – vote share); D, PRI deviation from proportionality in majoritarian districts (percentage seats won – vote share); E, Effective compensatory seats (non-plurality seats occupied by opposition as percentage of total seats); F, majoritarian\* vis-a-vis proportional effects (C-E); a positive sign means the majoritarian effect dominates; G, PAN over-representation (seat share – vote share); H, total bias (sum of absolute value of

one. Table 5 reports, in the sixth column, the effective number of compensatory seats occupied by the opposition, namely its total number of seats not coming from single-member races over the total number of seats. This number must be subtracted from the number in the second column to assess which effect dominates in the system. A positive sign means the majoritarian effect overshadows the PR one. A striking result, as reported in the fourth column, is that Mexico's mixed electoral rules are quite balanced: in some years the majoritarian effect dominates over the PR one or the other way around but in no year did one effect overshadow the other one by a large margin.

Interestingly, in the most competitive elections – 1988 and 1997 – the PR effect tended to dominate, which implies that the payoffs not to coordinate have been highest precisely when the vote for the PRI fell the most. This utter lack of coordination is also exhibited in the SF ratios for the Congressional races since 1988.

The persistence of this pattern of non-coordination suggests that this is not just an instance of an out-of-equilibrium outcome, but that the current

mixed system provides incentives for small parties to care more about victories in multi-member districts, where the incentives for fragmentation are stronger, than single member ones. The composition of the chamber gives a greater weight (three-fifths) to single-member districts, and votes cast on those races anyway count towards the allocation of multi-member seats. This implies that when the margin of victory is slim, the value of a vote cast for a candidate in a single-member district is greater than the value of a partisan vote in any district, since the single-member district vote still counts for the multi-member ones.

If all parties have equal chances of winning the congressional elections, they should devote most of their efforts to the single-member district races. But the fact is that they do not. The PRI devotes significant financial and political resources to single-member districts, while the PAN and the PRD only do so in specific regions. While the PRI could arguably benefit from some incumbency advantage, the fact that there is no immediate re-election suggests that this is not the reason why opposition parties abandon races where that party has won in the past.

The reasons why opposition parties have failed to coordinate have varied across time, depending on their electoral strength and rules of the game. Originally, the most important issue for opposition parties was not so much winning control of the chamber, which was not really an imaginable prospect at the time, but to be players in the political arena, to enter the system. So the first priority was to obtain enough votes so as to be above the electoral threshold, and hence retain the official registry. Winning a single-member district implied concentrating resources in obtaining a payoff of, let us say, 51 percent of the vote in one out of 300 of the races. Following such strategy, 10 deputies could be obtained with 1.66 percent of the national vote concentrated in 10 districts. However, those same 10 deputies could be obtained having only 1.8 percent of the vote in all 300 races. Since party registration laws already required that parties had activists regionally scattered all over the country, concentrating activity in the multi-member districts was an easier strategy. A national campaign emphasizing visibility to the party label was thus preferred over 300 localist-candidate centered races.

The resulting equilibrium was one where opposition parties were extremely unsuccessful at winning single-member races, which count the most in the distribution of assembly seats. Winning more single-member races would require coordination. If opposition parties were regionally specialized in such a way that they did not have overlapping areas of support, an arrangement of coordination could presumably be possible to achieve – although with high transaction costs. But this is not the case – there is considerable regional overlap between the PAN and the PRD vote. While each party tends to specialize in some regions, the former being



more popular in the North and the Bajío region, and the latter in the South, both are equally strong in the more populous states of the Center, in the metropolitan area around Mexico City, and in the relatively urban and modern districts. A coordination dilemma hence emerges: there is no side payment that a party can give to another party's candidate to bow out in a single-member district, so as to get support for its lists or candidate in another district. It should be noted, moreover, that unlike the Canadian case, coordination failure at the national level does not stem from local bi-partyisms, which once aggregated, produce a three-party national race.

Existing rules thus facilitated the entry of opposition parties, but made it hard for the PRI's dominance to be seriously challenged. The opposition parties entered and established themselves as relevant institutional players; they failed for a long time at producing an alternative majoritarian alliance to defeat the PRI. We want to highlight that the PRI actually did not need to use the 'safety thresholds' discussed earlier to 'manufacture' its majority control of the Chamber between 1960 and 1994. The ruling party's share of the vote and its total number of single-member districts were above 50 percent in all those years – in fact, much above such threshold with the only exception being 1988. Not until the 1997 mid-term elections did the PRI's vote share fall below 50 percent and, paradoxically, the rules failed to manufacture a majority for this party.

### *3.2 How to Retain Veto Power if You Lose the Majority: The Senate*

It does not come as a surprise that the PRI still controls the majority of seats in the Senate. What is striking, however, is that through the careful crafting of the electoral rules for the filling of seats in the Senate, the PRI managed to simultaneously reduce entry costs for the opposition parties, increase coordination dilemmas among them, and protect its majority, even as its electoral support fell. Even in well-established democracies, upper chambers are often used for the entrenchment of traditional or authoritarian traits inherited from the past. Mexico's Senate seems to be no exception. Reforms for the composition of the Senate highlight, more than any other, the logic of institutional design explicitly directed at dividing opposition parties in Mexico. Originally, two senators were elected from each state and the Federal District under a binomial formula in statewide plurality elections with only one vote cast. The rule disproportionately rewarded majority parties, namely the PRI. In fact, the ruling party had virtually won 100 percent of senatorial seats until 1988, when the PRD won four seats in Mexico City and Michoacán.

The 1993 reform doubled the size of the assembly, creating four seats for each state, three coming from a trinomial formula in statewide plurality

races with only one vote cast and the fourth seat being given to the first minority party in the state. The electoral reform was specifically designed to benefit the PAN over the PRD, opening up a political space that had been virtually closed, but without risking the PRI's control of the assembly. Despite its increasing electoral strength, the PAN had only won one senatorial seat in the 1991 elections. The reform gave 24 senators to this party in the 1994 race. This meant that the formula ensured, in each state, 75 percent of the seats to the party coming first place and 25 percent for that coming second. This was consistent with the idea of 'governance' similar to that previously discussed for the Chamber of Deputies, in which the winner was over-represented, although not as much as under a purely majoritarian system.

The rules implied an unambiguous punishment for the third party and a reward to parties winning a state but remaining below the 75 percent threshold. For the second-place party, the reward or punishment depended upon whether they were above or below a 25 percent threshold. Thus, the formula generated strong incentives for the two major opposition parties to compete against each other for the second place, especially in states where they were unable to win a plurality of the vote.

A second reform took place in 1996. It returned to the binomial formula, kept the first minority seat and established 32 seats by principle of proportional representation. This reform meant that the thresholds for over- or under-representation were now 66.6 and 33.3 percent for the first and second place party respectively, rather than 75 and 25 percent. Hence, the system was meant to become more proportional. The electoral reform was meant to benefit the PRD. It introduced the principle of proportional representation (PR), only for one-quarter of the Chamber. This meant that, in the short run, the majority of the PRI was safe, even if the party had received no single vote in that election. The reform yielded an average district magnitude ( $M$ ) of 1.97, which ensured the survival of  $M+1=3$  parties, according to the generalization of Duverger's law. The PRD was sure to have a significant presence in the Senate, even if it was weaker than the PRI or the PRD.

During the 1997 elections, only PR Senators were at stake, since the majority and first-minority Senators had already been elected in 1994, and in 1997 only 32 seats would be vacated upon the end of the staggered terms of Senators elected in 1991 through the short-lived reform that had renewed the upper chamber by halves. No electoral result had actually tested the new rules and how the PRI fared under them until the 2000 elections. The results of 1997 can be used, however, to see what could have happened with the Senate composition, had the full chamber been renewed.

To understand the likely effect of these reforms on each party tone needs to distinguish in how many states a party came first, second or third in each

state. Table 6 provides that information, revealing that the PRI never came third, and came first in the majority of the states. These victories and second places, coupled with a third of the PR Senators would have been enough to ensure a majority of the chamber for that party. The table also reports the average effective number of parties calculated for the states that were carried by each party, and the prize the winner obtained, in terms of a greater representation than the percentage vote (66.6 percent vote). The PRD seems to do better under multi-party competition, and hence the prize it receives from winning a majoritarian district is larger. Table 6 also shows the prize a party obtains in those districts where it won the first-minority (33.3 percent vote). The PAN seems to get the smallest prize, which is attributable to the fact that this party is closer to one-third of the votes in those states where it came second. Finally, the last column shows that the average over (under)-representation of each party, taking into account the wasted votes for the third place that receives no electoral reward, is highest for the PRI. The PRD, since it comes in third place in most races seems under-represented, at least with this measure.

It is important to highlight that the formula not only discourages coordination, it further encourages competition between the two major opposition parties. The electoral rule for the Senate implies that voters should mainly focus on electing two slots, a binomial formula and a third senator belonging to the first minority.

It will hence get ever more difficult for the opposition to dislodge the PRI from the Senate: if the opposition fails to coordinate, the PRI will very likely win the overwhelming majority of the plurality binomial races and majority control of the upper Chamber. However, the PAN and the PRD approved the new rules because they significantly reduced entry costs compared to the former purely majoritarian system. Thus the logic of institutional design: reward the existing incumbent majority, reduce entry costs to the opposition and, in doing so, inhibiting opposition coordination. To highlight this logic, Table 7 presents counterfactual scenarios of the electoral fortunes of each party under alternative electoral rules. The first scenario is a pure PR system, where there would be a single national district,

**Table 6.** Characteristics of Senate races, by Party (1997)

	First place	Second place	Third place	Number parties	Prize winner	Prize first minority	Average over/under representation
PRI	22	10	0	2.97	20.41	14.9	+13.40
PAN	7	12	13	2.89	22.16	7.05	+0.03
PRD	3	10	19	3.22	24.16	10.92	-6.18

*Source:* Authors' calculations with Instituto Federal Electoral data.

**Table 7.** Counterfactual Scenarios of Senate Composition with 1997 Election

Seats				Percentages			Number parties
PAN	PRI	PRD	Total	PAN	PRI	PRD	
PR, 5% threshold							
38	54	36	128	29.5	42.2	28.3	2.90
Trinomial Second Minority							
33	76	19	128	25.8	59.4	14.8	2.27
Binomial Second Minority, PR							
35	68	25	128	27.7	53.1	19.6	2.52
Binomial							
14	44	6	64	21.9	68.8	9.4	1.89

*Source:* Diaz-Cayeros (1998).

and it assumes a 5 percent threshold, in order to eliminate from the analysis the other two minor parties in the Senate. We use data from the 1997 elections.

Under PR the PRI would not have controlled the Senate, since it would have obtained a very similar result to that of the Chamber of Deputies. Under this scenario, the Senate would have become, under this scenario, in Lijphart's terms, almost completely congruent with the lower house, so that bicameralism would have become 'insignificant'. This insignificance would have been compounded by the asymmetry between both chambers, since the Senate does not have authority for voting the budget (see Diaz-Cayeros, 1998).

The last line in Table 7 shows, in contrast, shows what a pure majoritarian system would have produced. It is clear that the PRI would have done best under this system, but no opposition party would have agreed to retain the current status quo, once the agenda was opened up at the end of the 1980s of the need to make reforms in the Senate. Hence, it comes as no surprise that intermediate mixed systems were created, which tempered the majoritarian effects of winner-takes-all districts, but ensured the PRI a comfortable majority.

The effect of the trinomial second-minority system created by the 1993 reform is shown in the second column. Apart from the binomial system existing before, this is the system under which the PRI does best and the PRD fares worst. The fourth line shows the system currently in place, in which the PRD does better than under any other alternative, except PR. Under the current system, the PAN does slightly better than with the system it accepted in 1993. Hence, the introduction of the PR principle, although making the upper chamber more congruent, was well liked by both opposition parties. Compared to the status quo, however, there is no doubt that

this last reform was meant to bring in the PRD. Coincidentally, it is the first time ever that this party approved an electoral reform.

#### **4. Final Remarks**

Party dominance was a difficult behavioural equilibrium to change, and it is important to understand why. The PRI did not remain in power against the will of the voters or exercising political force. It remained in power because opposition forces were unable to craft a majoritarian alternative. But the PRI played an active role in this incapacity, by repeatedly tinkering with the institutions determining the distribution of seats in the legislature. We have argued that the prevailing rules of the game drove the existing non-coordinating equilibrium. These rules were not imposed through undemocratic means. Quite often, one of the major opposition parties agreed to them. In particular, the PRI followed a divide-and-rule strategy, offering short-term electoral benefits to a fraction of the opposition, in exchange for rules that would eventually make the incumbent party even more difficult to dislodge. In doing so, the PRI could successfully discourage opposition parties coming together behind an overarching agenda of institutional reform. Electoral reforms in Mexico consisted of piecemeal changes to validate the existing balance of forces: the dominance of the PRI and an ever-growing opposition camp. In the long process of bargains over institutions, the strongest tension was between disproportionately rewarding the existing majority, on the one hand, and making the rules more proportional, on the other. The rules of the game transited from a truly majoritarian all single-member district system, to a mixed plurality single-member-PR system that has significantly reduced entry costs for the opposition. The existing system still disproportionately rewards the existing incumbent majority, but its most significant effect is that it prevents potential opposition majorities from forming.

The PRI's success at crafting institutions to its advantage sharply contrasts with the failures at entrenchment and the common miscalculations at institutional design that characterized communist parties in Eastern Europe. We believe that the difference is explained by the very fact that the Mexican transition has been so slow. Through repeated electoral rounds, uncertainty about voters' preferences and the likely consequences of different electoral rules was minimized. This sharply contrasts with the situation of most authoritarian incumbents seeking to craft rules to their advantage in the process of democratization. Without electoral experience, authoritarian incumbents in Eastern Europe were unable to assess the likely effects of the electoral institutions they were choosing. The shrewd man-euvering and strategic use of institutional choice by the PRI was the consequence of the enormous amount of electoral information (about both the PRI's

strength and the opposition parties) that repeated electoral rounds provided to that party, coupled with hegemony or party dominance itself. In a dominant party system, challengers have good reasons to believe that the incumbent will keep on winning, or even use illegal means in order to not recognize defeat, so challengers settle for short-term concessions in the hope that those concessions will eventually lead to a greater political opening. The PAN will not be able to use institutional rules to its advantage after the victory of Vicente Fox in the 2000 elections, the way the PRI did, simply because it is not a dominant party.

The results discussed in this paper can also be cast into a comparative context. Recent work by Boix (1999) has studied the choice of electoral systems in advanced industrial democracies. In his account, when strong new parties enter the electoral arena, a shift from a majoritarian/plurality system to proportional representation is carried out if the old party is not dominant. When new entrants are weak, or if the old party is dominant, the majoritarian system is kept in place. The PRI was clearly a dominant party, and, at least during the last decade, the opposition created a real threat, as reflected in municipal and gubernatorial races. Opposition parties were indeed strong parties in Mexico. Given the electoral threats, the PRI strategy was, however, mixed: it kept the majoritarian system in place, as the Boix hypothesis would maintain, but also created a second tier of proportionality, weakening opposition parties which now found themselves in coordination dilemmas. This second tier became the object of repeated changes, while the majoritarian element remained untouched, guaranteeing, until recently, comfortable congressional majorities.

Two hypotheses emerge from our analysis regarding the logic of institutional design. First, the higher the degree of uncertainty there is regarding voters' preferences and the existing balance of forces, the higher the possibility to miscalculate the likely effects of different electoral rules. In the Mexican case, there is only one important instance of miscalculation that represents the exception to the logic of institutional design in favor of preserving the existing balance of forces: the loss by the PRI of its majority in the Lower Chamber of Deputies in 1997 produced by an unexpected change of voters' preferences, which fell below the 'safety threshold' above which a majority for the PRI could have been legally manufactured. The second hypothesis is that only if an incumbent seriously calculates that it might become a minority electoral force in the short-run, it will have a preference for more proportional electoral rules so as to minimize the risk of losing it all. As long as the incumbent has certainty over its majoritarian support, rules will be designed so as to protect it.

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