

## Mexico's PRI

### *The Resilience of an Authoritarian Successor Party and Its Consequences for Democracy*

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Between 1929 and 2000, Mexico was an authoritarian regime.<sup>1</sup> During this time, elections were held regularly, but because of fraud, coercion, and the massive abuse of state resources, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) won virtually every election. It held onto the presidency until 2000, Congress until 1997, and did not even lose a gubernatorial election until 1989. While the regime preferred to co-opt its opponents, it could also engage in harsh repression, as when it massacred hundreds of university students in 1968. The formula was effective: the regime survived for seventy-one years, making it one of the most durable authoritarian regimes ever and leading the Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa to describe it as “the perfect dictatorship.” By 2000, however, the regime came to an end when the PRI lost the presidency. Mexico became a democracy, and the PRI made the transition from authoritarian *ruling* party to authoritarian *successor* party. Yet the PRI did not disappear. It continued to be the largest party in Congress and in the states, and it was voted back into the presidency in 2012. This electoral performance has made the PRI one of the world's most resilient authoritarian successor parties. What explains its resilience?

The chapter is divided into four main sections. The first one introduces the authoritarian regime of which the PRI was a central part, presents an overview of the democratic transition, and shows the PRI's electoral performance over time. The second provides an explanation for the resilience of the PRI since the transition, emphasizing three main factors: the party's continuous control over state resources at the subnational level; the democratic governments' failure to alter the nature of state–society relations that supported the authoritarian regime; and the mediocre performance of other parties in office after 2000.

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The third section discusses how the PRI's resilience has undermined the quality of Mexico's democracy. The fourth section concludes.

## 8.1 MEXICO'S PRI

The PRI was the heir to the winning factions of the Mexican Revolution – a bloody, ten-year civil conflict that began in 1910. Although the conflict started as a pro-democracy movement – motivated by the constant reelection of dictator Porfirio Díaz – along the way the adoption of progressive social policies on behalf of workers and peasants became a central part of the revolutionary governments' program. In 1929, after stepping down as president, Plutarco Elías Calles (1924–1928) founded the National Revolutionary Party (PNR) in an attempt to pacify and bring together different revolutionary factions. Organized according to a territorial structure, the PNR became an umbrella for the different revolutionary strongmen to advance their political goals peacefully. As a way to undermine the power of Calles, who was angling to maintain control over the presidency even after the end of his term in what became known as “El Maximato,” President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940) restructured the party in 1938. Cárdenas changed the name to the Party of the Mexican Revolution (PRM) and reorganized it along corporatist lines. Rather than state-led organizations, the party's structure would rest on four main occupation-related sectors: workers, peasants, popular (commercial and professional), and military. Eight years later, President Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940–1946) would give the party its current name, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), as the party launched the candidacy of Miguel Alemán Valdés in the 1946 presidential election. The election of Alemán Valdés (1946–1952) marked the end of the military presidents (previous presidents had all participated militarily in the Mexican Revolution) and the beginning of a civilian tradition within the party.

The regime that emerged out of the Mexican Revolution enjoyed strong legitimacy among a broad cross-section of society for decades and had four key characteristics: it was authoritarian, hyper-presidentialist, corporatist, and nationalist. First, it was authoritarian because, although elections were held at regular intervals and multiple parties were allowed to participate, the cards were heavily stacked against the opposition to deny it electoral victories (Greene 2007; Levitsky and Way 2010: 149–161; Magaloni 2006). The government manipulated electoral outcomes (Schedler 2002). Opposition leaders were arrested, harassed, or killed. The media was either bought off or harassed into submission by the government.

The government also maintained several small “satellite” parties, such as the Authentic Party of the Mexican Revolution (PARM) and the Popular Socialist Party (PPS), whose share of the vote was always minimal, but which provided a dose of legitimacy to the electoral process by giving the illusion of a multiparty democracy. The only real opposition party was the National Action Party

(PAN), a conservative Catholic party founded in 1939 (Loaeza 1999). However, the PAN never received more than 17 percent of the vote prior to the beginning of the transition in the 1990s.

A no-reelection principle guaranteed elite turnover and granted the authoritarian regime a façade of liberal democracy that was instrumental in isolating opposition groups and maintaining legitimacy abroad (Lawson 2000: 270). However, unlike most of the military regimes that prevailed in Latin America during the twentieth century, the PRI's authoritarianism was based more on co-optation than open repression.

Second, throughout most of the twentieth century, power was highly concentrated in the presidency to the point where the president was often referred to as *Tlatoani* – a reference to the powerful rulers of the Aztec empire in precolonial times. Not only did presidents control elections, but they had de facto control over all policy spheres, and a rubber-stamp Congress ensured that the president's legislative initiatives would always pass. Because of the constitutional prohibition on reelection, presidents could not stay in power beyond a single six-year term. However, an informal institution known as the *dedazo* (choosing with the finger) allowed the president to handpick his own successor (Langston 2006b). The president could also handpick candidates for all elected offices (including executives and legislators at all levels of government), as well as the party's leadership and justices throughout the judicial system. If the president changed his mind, he could remove government officials, both elected and unelected, at will (González Oropeza 1983).

Third, corporatism was the currency of state–society relations. The PRI organized its membership along sectoral lines. Labor and peasant organizations provided mass support for the party for decades. This was critical for the long-term stability of the regime. Because unions and peasants supported the PRI, there was no social base for the left, and because of the PRI's cozy relations with business, there was also no basis for the emergence of a strong conservative party. The PRI became an all-encompassing centrist party, with room for all groups of society, as long as they became formally affiliated with one of the party's corporatist sectors.

Fourth, having emerged out of a social revolution, the PRI followed economic nationalism for most of the twentieth century – until the mid-1980s, when governments adopted market-oriented policies. The PRI generally favored domestic industry in exchange for resources and compliance from business groups (Alba Vega 2006). This marriage resulted in stable economic growth and an attractive investment climate. Whenever the government needed to adopt austerity measures, unions and peasant organizations generally went along.<sup>2</sup> This cooperation laid the foundations for a long period of economic growth during the 1950s and 1960s known as

<sup>2</sup> Labor's support for austerity was not automatic, however, and real bargaining often took place between the government and labor. For an analysis of state–labor relations, see Middlebrook (1995).

“Mexico’s Stabilizing Development.” During this period Mexico’s economy expanded at a rate of 6 percent annually – the fastest growth in Latin America – and inflation was among the lowest in the region. This sustained economic expansion provided the government with both legitimacy and resources to co-opt dissidents. Eventually, however, the regime became, as Lawson (2000: 270) puts it, a “gigantic, pork-barreling political machine, soaking the bulk of the population and selectively rewarding its leaders and adherents.”

Overall, this was an “authoritarian regime with pretty features”:<sup>3</sup> it was a civilian regime that held regular elections, enjoyed revolutionary legitimacy, co-opted the country’s main interest groups, and performed relatively well economically until the 1982 debt crisis. For these reasons, the regime was remarkably stable and the PRI went virtually unchallenged for seventy-one years, winning eleven consecutive presidential elections.

### 8.1.1 Mexico’s Democratic Transition

Although the PRI governments had been effective in political and economic terms, two major factors eventually contributed to the erosion of the regime (Lawson 2000). On the one hand, its economic success led to the emergence of social sectors whose interests were different from those of the main beneficiaries of PRI rule, especially small and medium business groups and middle-class professionals (González 2008: 21). These sectors were also less easily manipulated than the peasants and blue-collar workers that had constituted the foundation of the PRI’s electoral support in the early and mid twentieth century. On the other hand, the series of economic crises in the 1980s and 1990s – including Mexico’s default on its foreign debt in 1982 and the so-called “Peso Crisis” of 1994 – plunged the country into severe recessions and undermined the regime’s legitimacy. The nationalist model of import substitution industrialization that had worked well for most of the twentieth century ran out of steam due to corruption, lack of competitiveness, and a bloated, ineffective state. The crisis strained the government’s ability to distribute spoils in the form of subsidies, patronage, and pork.

The PRI governments of the 1980s and 1990s embraced market-oriented measures to address these crises. As a result of both an ideological shift and the new economic reality, slowly but surely the regime began to shed some of the sectors that had formed its support coalition, including labor, peasant organizations, bureaucrats, and even some business sectors. The ideological shift prompted a schism with the nationalist wing of the party in 1987. This led to the formation of a broad coalition of parties under the label of the National Democratic Front (FDN), led by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the son of former PRI president Lázaro Cárdenas. The FDN, which would become the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) in 1989, lost to the PRI candidate Carlos Salinas

<sup>3</sup> I owe this phrase to Steven Levitsky.

de Gortari (1988–1994) in the most contested presidential election in decades amid widespread allegations of fraud. The fraud allegations triggered nationwide mass protests, which shook the regime for weeks and dealt a harsh blow to its legitimacy.

With the regime's legitimacy severely compromised, Salinas reached an agreement with the leadership of the PAN to gain recognition of his government in exchange for electoral concessions. The year after the presidential election, the PRI government began to gradually and selectively recognize PAN victories in a few gubernatorial elections. In 1989, for the first time, the government recognized a PAN victory in the governor's race in the northern state of Baja California. Over the next few years, the PAN won a handful of other governorships.

Responding to social pressure, in 1990 the government created a new authority to oversee elections, the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE). The IFE became a respected institution, and additional reforms in 1993 and 1994 contributed to making elections cleaner. Although the PRI continued to dominate media access, the 1994 presidential election was deemed cleaner than any in Mexico's modern history (Magaloni 2005: 123).

Shortly after the election of PRI candidate Ernesto Zedillo (1994–2000) in 1994, the Peso Crisis further contributed to the regime's legitimacy crisis. If one justification for the lack of democracy had been economic prosperity, that pillar of the regime had crumbled. With mounting social pressure, in 1996 the government engaged in additional electoral reforms, including the granting of autonomy to the IFE and the Federal Electoral Tribunal, whose members would now have to be elected by a two-thirds majority (González 2015).

In the 1997 legislative elections, the first under the autonomous electoral authority, the PRI lost its majority in Congress for the first time, and Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas was elected mayor of Mexico City. Many analysts consider this year the turning point in Mexico's democratic transition (Magaloni 2005: 122). In 2000, the PRI was voted out of the presidency. In an election broadly recognized as free and fair, PAN candidate Vicente Fox (2000–2006), a former Coca-Cola executive, defeated PRI candidate Francisco Labastida, ending seventy-one years of hegemonic party rule and marking the beginning of a twelve-year period of PAN governments.

The turnover at the national level capped Mexico's long march toward democracy. Since the fraudulent election of 1988, several important changes had taken place, including the emergence of a more independent media, the emergence of a multi-party system, the erosion of hyper-presidentialism, and the decentralization and fragmentation of power. Not only had Congress and the courts become more independent, but state governments had also emerged as important political actors.

### 8.1.2 The PRI after the Transition

Although the PRI *regime* came to an end in 2000, the PRI as a *party* did not disappear. On the contrary, the PRI made a relatively smooth transition from authoritarian ruling party to authoritarian successor party. It not only managed to survive democratization, but remained a powerful political force. As Figure 8.1 shows, the PRI continued to dominate Congress, dipping below 40 percent of seats only briefly (three years for the lower house and six years for the Senate). While this was far from the two-thirds majorities that the PRI used to enjoy, it allowed the party to pass bills requiring a simple majority because of coalitions it forged with small parties that depended on its coattails for survival, such as the Mexican Green Ecologist Party (PVEM) and the New Alliance Party (PANAL). Finally, in 2012, after spending just twelve years out of power, the PRI was elected back to the presidency. Its candidate, Enrique Peña Nieto, the telegenic young PRI governor of Mexico State, won a 38 percent plurality. Although a shadow of the overwhelming victories that the PRI used to win under authoritarianism, this share of the vote was enough to beat the 32 and 26 percent garnered by the PRD and PAN candidates, respectively.

Figure 8.1 also shows that the PRI's electoral fortunes have declined considerably since 1985. The decline in share of the vote and seats was especially steep during the transition to democracy in the 1990s, but has plateaued since the PRI lost the presidency in 2000. Nevertheless, the PRI's

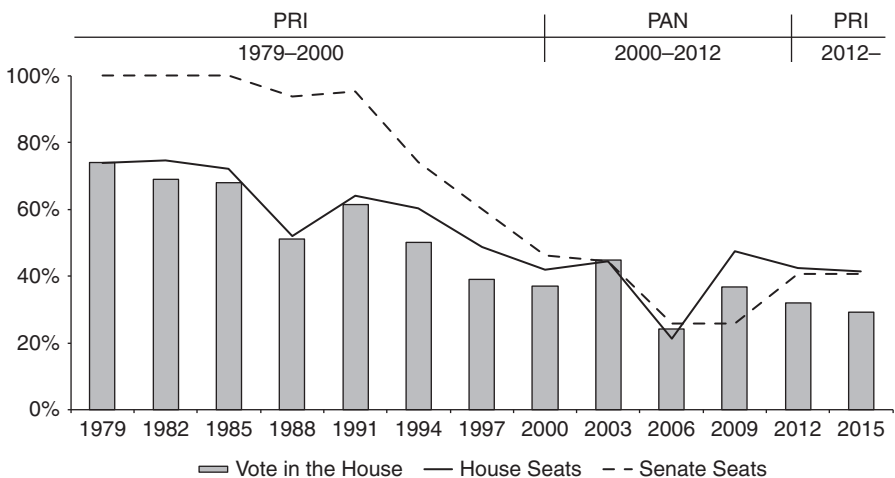


FIGURE 8.1 PRI performance in congress, 1979–2015

Note: Bars and lines are expressed as a share of total seats and total valid votes.

Source: INE (2016).

ability to remain a major player in Mexican politics and return to the presidency so quickly is remarkable. How did a party so negatively associated with authoritarian practices, electoral fraud, and economic mishandling manage to outperform its rivals in a democratic context?

## 8.2 EXPLAINING THE PRI'S RESILIENCE

In the remainder of the chapter, I highlight three main factors that explain the PRI's resilience in the aftermath of the transition: the PRI's control over government resources at the subnational level, the post-2000 democratic governments' failure to dismantle key institutions inherited from the authoritarian regime, and voters' dissatisfaction with the mediocre performance of the PRI's competitors.

### 8.2.1 Continuing Control over Subnational Government Resources

The first factor was the PRI's continuing ability to leverage government resources for electoral ends. The PAN's victory in the 2000 election removed the PRI from the presidency, but only partially undermined the PRI's ability to leverage resources at the state and local levels. Although the party's loss of the presidency was a major setback, the more decentralized nature of the political system that emerged after the transition proved to be favorable toward the PRI.

One of the consequences of the transition was the end of the hyper-presidentialist system, in which the president controlled everything from his own successor to the fate of elected government officials at all levels (Greene 2007). Before 2000, incumbency advantages were significant because of the PRI's control over most governments at all levels, the country's large public sector, and the lack of independent local electoral authorities to prevent the diversion of public resources – both human and material – for electoral use (Díaz Jiménez 2014: 24; Greene 2007).

The system that emerged after the transition saw a steady strengthening of state and local governments in Mexico's federal system. This was due to a number of factors, including opposition parties' efforts to empower state and local offices as a means of counterbalancing the power of the president, fiscal reforms that channeled oil surpluses to state and local coffers, and electoral reforms that curbed the informal prerogatives of the president. Concern over the PRI presidents' absolutist past and the PAN's historical commitment to the principle of subsidiarity – devolution of government responsibilities to local communities – further contributed to this trend between 2000 and 2012. Whereas fiscal decentralization reforms adopted in 1997 and 1999 under President Ernesto Zedillo (1994–2000) were an important step in transferring a majority of fiscal revenue toward the states and municipalities (Díaz-Cayeros 2006; Merino 2001: 150), additional reforms in 2003 and 2007 – which set rules for the distribution of oil revenue – further

strengthened the fiscal positions of subnational units. Currently, for every peso collected, the federal government keeps only 33 cents (Giraudy 2015: 67).

Additionally, the fragmentation of the political system has made it harder for presidents to govern (Béjar Alagazi 2014), which has made governors increasingly important (Do Vale 2016; Hernández-Rodríguez 2003). In fact, studies suggest that gubernatorial coattails are now more important than presidential coattails in elections (Magar 2012), and that governors are increasingly influential in terms of congressional voting behavior (Cantú and Desposato 2012; Rosas and Langston 2011).

To be sure, the PAN and the PRD have made substantial progress in winning state and local elections. State governments have been particularly valuable because they concentrate important resources in their public budgets. States receive about two-thirds of the yearly federal budget, have bureaucracies of their own to dole out patronage positions, select companies for government procurement and infrastructure contracts, and provide visibility to elected officials through public relations budgets and daily official activities.

However, this devolution of power to the state level has benefited the PRI more than other parties. This is because, until 2016, *the PRI never held less than half of all state governments* – despite losing power at the national level in 2000.<sup>4</sup> Figure 8.2 illustrates the PRI's control of state governments since 1989. Between 1989, when the PRI recognized the PAN's victory in Baja California, and 1997, when it lost control of the lower house of Congress, the PRI allowed for a very gradual turnover in state governments. During this period, the PAN never controlled more than 10 percent of the thirty-two state governor races.<sup>5</sup> Between 1997 and 2002, the PRI's control of state governments declined significantly, to the point where it only controlled seventeen of thirty-two states.<sup>6</sup> Between 2002 and 2015, however, the PRI's position stabilized, with the PRI's control oscillating between sixteen and twenty states, or 50 and 63 percent of the total.<sup>7</sup>

In short, with the exception of the sudden decline between 1997 and 2002, due to changes in the electoral rules promoting transparency, the PRI has enjoyed a sizable and fairly stable resource base at the subnational level. Not only did it control between half and two-thirds of all states between 2000 and 2016, but in nine states (28 percent of the total),<sup>8</sup> it had never lost a gubernatorial election

<sup>4</sup> In 2016, the number of PRI-led state governments dipped to slightly less than half, or fifteen out of thirty-two.

<sup>5</sup> This includes the Federal District, now Mexico City.

<sup>6</sup> During this period, the PRD won the Mexico City government, and the PAN won the government of the northern industrial state of Nuevo León. This gave the opposition control of the two wealthiest jurisdictions.

<sup>7</sup> Since 2002, the PAN and PRD also maintained a roughly constant trend, although other parties have begun to win state elections, such as the Citizens' Movement (MC) in Oaxaca in 2010 and the PVEM in Chiapas in 2012.

<sup>8</sup> These are Campeche, Coahuila, Colima, Durango, Hidalgo, the State of Mexico, Quintana Roo, Tamaulipas, and Veracruz.



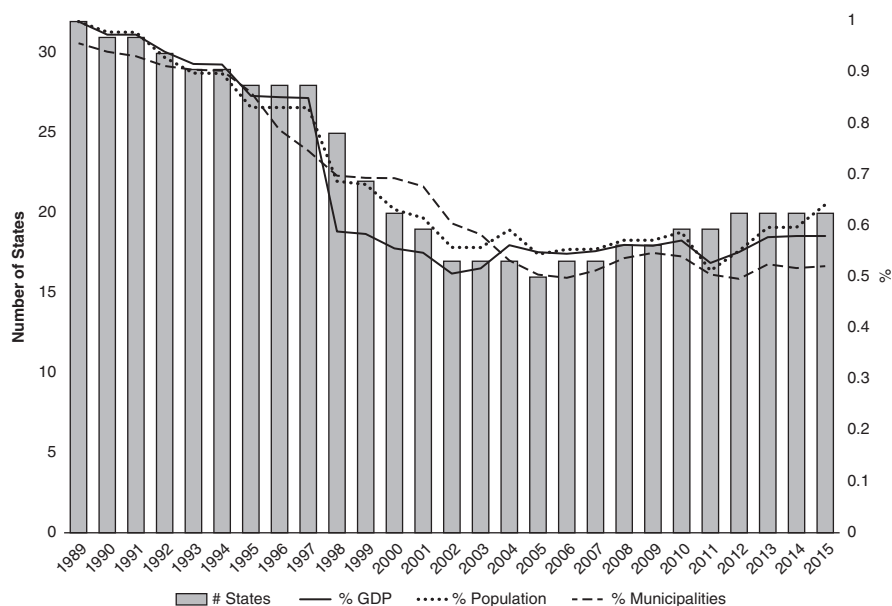


FIGURE 8.2 States, GDP, population, and municipalities governed by the PRI, 1989–2015

Notes: Number of states corresponds to the left axis. Percentages correspond to the right axis.

Source: INE (2016) and INEGI (2017).

before 2016.<sup>9</sup> These states represent about a third of Mexico's population and GDP. If we take into account the states where the PRI had been out of the governor's mansion for one term only (e.g., Chihuahua, Nayarit, Nuevo León [until 2015], Puebla, San Luis Potosí, Tabasco, Yucatán), the PRI commanded state government resources with little or no interruption in sixteen of thirty-two states. As Figure 8.2 shows, at no point before 2016 did the PRI govern over less than half of the country's population and GDP, even after losing the Federal District (Mexico City), which represents almost a fifth of the country's GDP, to the PRD in 1997.

Figure 8.2 shows that the PRI also maintained control over roughly the same proportion of municipal governments. Control over sizable resources at the municipal level has similarly contributed to the PRI's ability to dole out patronage and maintain clientelistic networks. The uninterrupted availability of resources at the subnational level has allowed the PRI to maintain a territorial organization unrivaled by the country's other political parties.

<sup>9</sup> In 2016, the PRI lost in the states of Durango, Quintana Roo, Tamaulipas, and Veracruz.

In short, the PRI's control of subnational governments is one of the major reasons why it has managed to thrive under democracy as an authoritarian successor party. This is consistent with Timothy Power's argument (Chapter 7, this volume) about the importance of access to state resources for the rise and fall of the Liberal Front Party (PFL)/Democrats (DEM) in Brazil. Both of these cases suggest the importance of a form of authoritarian inheritance underemphasized by Loxton in the Introduction (this volume): continuing access to state resources, particularly at the subnational level.

### **8.2.2 Democratic Governments' Failure to Dismantle Key Institutions Inherited from the Authoritarian Regime**

A second factor that helped the PRI was the failure of post-2000 governments to alter the nature of relations between the state and some of the social sectors that had served as pillars of the old regime. The two PAN governments of Vicente Fox (2000–2006) and Felipe Calderón (2006–2012) failed to dismantle key institutions upon which the PRI had built decades of electoral dominance. These included corporatism and crony capitalist relations with business, especially with regard to the media.<sup>10</sup> The failure to dismantle these institutions was the result of both the inability and unwillingness of the two PAN governments. Many important changes, especially those requiring a modification of the Constitution, required a two-thirds majority in Congress, which the PAN did not have. However, in areas of executive authority, where the PAN could have acted on its own, the PAN administrations sometimes deemed it politically advantageous to preserve the status quo inherited from the old regime and thus did not carry out transformations of the existing institutional framework.

### **8.2.3 Unions**

An important pillar of the old PRI regime was corporatist relations between the state and labor unions. Unions were instrumental as a mechanism of control and co-optation. Control over unions allowed the PRI to adopt policies that at times contradicted workers' interests, provided mobilizational muscle for the regime, and translated into electoral support. In exchange, PRI governments gave prerogatives to union leaders, including patronage positions in the government bureaucracy and legislative positions at all levels (Cook 1996, 2007; Murillo 2001). The Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), for example, dominated labor representation from the 1940s onwards and guaranteed large numbers of supporters at political rallies and millions of

<sup>10</sup> Although the media is often considered “the fourth estate,” in Mexico it is also a highly concentrated, influential, and profitable business. See, for example, Lawson (2002).

votes on election day.<sup>11</sup> Its leader for more than five decades, Fidel Velázquez, was a PRI senator on two occasions and remained one of the party's most influential members until his death in 1997.<sup>12</sup>

Although the strength of unions declined during the period of economic and democratic transition in the 1980s and 1990s, they remained an important political ally for the regime. Structural reforms – especially the privatization of state-owned enterprises and the interruption of subsidies and other benefits to state employees – affected unions' ability to distribute jobs and grant prerogatives (Madrid 2003; Murillo 2001). The process of democratization also contributed to weakening unions. With the opening of spaces for the opposition, the legislative seats and other government positions historically available to union leaders decreased.

However, although unions were weaker by the time the PAN won the presidency than during their heyday of the 1960s and 1970s, they still represented a force to be reckoned with (Bensusán and Middlebrook 2013: 18). By 2000, unionized workers still accounted for about 10 percent of the working-age population, or about 4 million people. By 2012, when the PRI returned to the presidency, an estimated 8.8 percent belonged to unions, or about 4.3 million people (Bensusán and Middlebrook 2013: 54; Castañeda and Aguilar Camín 2009). Because of the size of their membership, organizational capacity, and resources, unions could mobilize popular support during campaigns, contribute money and activists, and drum up votes for the PRI through the use of both sticks (e.g., threat of dismissal) and carrots (e.g., salary bonuses).

When the PRI lost the presidency in 2000, there were great expectations that the PAN government would democratize and bring transparency to government–labor relations, as this had been one of Fox's campaign promises. Instead, the PAN administrations shied away from reforming the old corporatist structures and making them accountable. They did little to upend the highly restrictive mechanisms of control regarding the formation and recognition of unions, wage negotiations, collective bargaining, and the right to strike. Additionally, they proved unwilling or unable to pursue high-level corruption cases involving a number of unions.<sup>13</sup> The few corruption investigations pursued by the administration tended to end without significant legal consequences for those involved.

In part, the lack of change was due to concerns over the stability of the young democracy. After all, when Fox promised during his campaign to democratize

<sup>11</sup> By the late 1970s, about 16.3 percent (3.5 million people) of the working-age population was unionized (Bensusán and Middlebrook 2013: 54).

<sup>12</sup> Fidel Velázquez is remembered for the phrase "*el que se mueve no sale en la foto*" (literally, "if you move you won't appear in the picture"), meaning that one had to show obedience toward the PRI to succeed professionally.

<sup>13</sup> Pastor and Wise (2005) have characterized Fox's six-year presidential term as the "lost sexenio."

unions, the CTM threatened to call for a general strike if he were elected. But Fox's inaction was also the product of convenience, since the status quo was compatible with the PAN's economic program. In line with the economic policies that the PRI had been pursuing since the 1980s, the PAN's economic policies sought to keep labor costs down to remain competitive internationally.<sup>14</sup> Fox realized that in order to maintain control over unions and curb demands for improved wages and living conditions, he would need to depend on the same union leaders that he had so vehemently vowed to change before 2000 (Bensusán and Middlebrook 2013: 49).

Rather than making internal life democratic or promoting the independence of unions, the PAN administrations engaged in selective confrontation, undermining unions – even those with democratically elected leaders, such as the mining union and the electricians' union – when they interfered with business interests (Bensusán and Middlebrook 2013: 27). They also turned a blind eye to accusations of fraud, such as those over commissioned union representatives who collected a check without working (Cuenca 2010; Tuckman 2011). In return, many unions did not oppose the PAN's economic liberalization policies. In the end, the PAN administrations not only preserved the corporatist framework for government–labor relations that had existed under the authoritarian regime, but even replaced their former criticism of union leaders with praise and incorporated them into important positions in the federal government, giving them access to resources, patronage, and the ability to set policy.

The examples of Mexico's teachers' union, the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE), and the oil workers' union, the Union of Oil Workers of the Mexican Republic (STPRM), illustrate how the preservation of inherited corporatist structures contributed to the PRI's electoral success – as a source of both clientelism and financial resources. Since its foundation in 1943, the SNTE has held a grip over education workers as the only officially sanctioned teachers' union. As the largest union in Latin America, it has enjoyed considerable political influence and prerogatives, including legislative seats, influential positions in the executive branch at all levels of government, and resources (Cook 1996).

The PAN administrations embraced the SNTE and allowed it to thrive after 2000. They incorporated union leaders into important positions in the federal government, including the directors of the agency that administers health care and social security for federal employees (ISSSTE), the National Lottery (LN), and the executive secretariat of the National Public Safety System (SNSP). President Calderón (2006–2012) even appointed the son-in-law of Elba Esther Gordillo – the head of the union – to serve as the Deputy Secretary for Primary Education in the Ministry of Education (Aguayo and Serdán 2009; Bensusán and Middlebrook 2013: 82). Similarly, rather than looking into the

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, real minimum wages continued to decrease during the PAN administrations.

large personal fortune amassed by Gordillo, Fox turned a blind eye and Calderón struck an electoral alliance with her. This may have allowed the PAN to edge out the PRD in 2006, but the failure to make unions more accountable and transparent left intact an important source of resources and cadres for the PRI.

The thriving of the SNTE after 2000 provided a lifeline for PRI governments at the local level, allowing them to maintain their prerogatives in exchange for mobilizing votes. Cantú (2009) provides an account of the influence of the SNTE on local governments. Estimating the SNTE's mobilization capacity at about 1.2 million teachers, and based on a study by the transparency-promoting NGO Alianza Cívica,<sup>15</sup> he lists union leaders' mechanisms of control as follows: discretionary control over tenured lines (*plazas*), bonuses, awards, and other incentives – including preferential credit, medical services, retirement benefits, legal protection, and geographic relocation. This is due, in part, to the union's success in embedding its leaders into education-related government positions, including the secretaries of education in eleven of the thirty-two state governments, more than fifty deputy secretaries at the state level, hundreds of mid-level bureaucrats in states' education departments, and 100 percent of inspectors and supervisors of school zones and directors of schools across the country (Cantú 2009).

The SNTE's ability to leverage these resources for clientelistic purposes after the transition has been well documented. The government treasury deposits 1 percent of teachers' wages into the SNTE's central account, and the leadership then distributes it to the regional offices on a discretionary basis (Raphael 2007: 107). Conservative estimates put the union's financial resources at US\$6.5 billion per year (Aguayo and Serdán 2009; Bensúsán and Tapia 2011: 26). Raphael (2007: 245) also documents the SNTE's use of hundreds of millions of dollars from discretionary government resources toward the fund for the teachers' housing program *Vivienda Magisterial*. Additionally, an estimated 16,000 members of the SNTE are commissioned to local governments and receive additional salary and prerogatives from these governments. In theory, this is because they are liaisons between governments and the SNTE. In reality, however, many are on the payroll without ever showing up for work.

Control over these clientelistic networks has been a significant electoral asset for the PRI. The SNTE mobilizes not only teachers but also parents via those teachers. Because of the power they have over children, teachers often have parents participate in pyramid schemes, in which every teacher commits to securing ten votes and parents in turn must do the same (Avilés 2012; Cantú 2009; Larreguy, Montiel, and Querubín 2016).

<sup>15</sup> For similar estimates, see Bensúsán and Tapia (2011: 25), although the Ministry of Education is opaque about this number as well as the union's total resources.

In 2005, the SNTE officially created a political arm in the form of the New Alliance Party (PANAL). This gave the SNTE access not only to public funds for electoral campaigns but also to the voter registration lists with voters' pictures. It is now able to maintain a legally sanctioned presence at the polling stations on election day. Although ballots are secret, the ability to monitor turnout based on the voter registry with pictures – which all parties receive – and the presence of a well-identified union affiliate as party representative at the polling station play important roles in exercising pressure to turn out and vote for a particular candidate (Mercado Gasca 2013; Raphael 2007). Although PANAL has not always supported the PRI for the presidency – it supported the PAN's Calderón in 2006 – it tends to support the PRI candidates at the local level (Paoli Bolio 2012). It threw its weight behind Peña Nieto's candidacy in 2012 and has provided – along with the PVEM – the votes in Congress necessary for the PRI to govern with a simple majority.

The case of the oil workers' union of Mexico's state-owned petroleum company, Pemex, also illustrates how unions have remained electorally instrumental for the PRI. As part of Latin America's second largest company based on revenue, the union has channeled financial resources toward the PRI's coffers. In what became known as the “Pemexgate” scandal, for instance, the union was caught funneling almost US\$50 million illegally into the PRI's 2000 campaign coffers. Although the funds benefited the PRI presidential candidate's campaign, union leaders were absolved and the PRI got off with a fine. The PRI rewarded these same union leaders (Carlos Romero Deschamps, the head of the union, and Ricardo Aldana, the treasurer) with seats in both houses of Congress through the party lists. The offices of senator and congressman, respectively, provided them with immunity from prosecution.

Although the electoral authority fined the PRI for the Pemexgate scandal, the punishment for electoral offenses came after the damage was done, i.e., after the resources funneled illegally out of Pemex had already helped the party's candidates perform well in the elections. The party may be fined *ex post*, but its candidates' victories are rarely reversed. With the union leaders solidly in the PRI's camp, and Pemex classifying millions of dollars funneled toward the union's coffers as “donations,” the oil workers' union has been an important source of resources.

Other cases of illegal use of resources at the local level are well documented, as well. For example, in Tabasco, a state continually governed by the PRI until 2013, leaders of the regional office of the oil workers' union were able to avoid charges of illegally channeling hundreds of millions of dollars of Pemex funds toward the PRI campaigns due to the immunity from prosecution granted by the PRI's nomination of them to the local legislature through the party lists (Vázquez Rosas 2012: 29). These practices are not uncommon in other unions, such as the National Union of Social Security Workers (SNTSS) or the Federation of Unions for Workers Employed by the State (FSTSE), which also

receive millions of dollars every year in opaque and discretionary funding, and have been historically aligned with the PRI.

In addition to benefiting the PRI electorally at the local level, the corporatist infrastructure became instrumental again for the return of the PRI to the presidency. In 2012, the PRI benefited from the fact that the old system of government control of unions remained largely untouched. For example, the SNTE supported Peña Nieto, the PRI presidential candidate, and contributed to his electoral victory (Larreguy et al. 2016).<sup>16</sup> Not surprisingly, Peña Nieto has pursued measures to preserve the old system of control, such as putting Elba Esther Gordillo, the leader of the SNTE who explored alliances with other parties, in jail (the charge was amassing a fortune she could not justify with her salary) in order to elicit unconditional discipline from the teachers' union, which is once again aligned with the PRI.<sup>17</sup>

#### 8.2.4 Business Sectors

Under the old PRI regime, many of Mexico's main business conglomerates emerged not out of market competition but out of crony capitalism, i.e., preferential treatment resulting from political connections (Alba Vega 2006). The PRI governments organized business sectors into business associations (Schneider 2002), and loyalty to the regime had its benefits: alignment with the PRI resulted in business opportunities and legal advantages. Those against the regime faced various forms of harassment.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Mexico's period of stabilizing development – the period of high growth rates and low inflation – benefited business through a model of import substitution industrialization. This model relied on domestic markets for growth and heavy state involvement in the economy. It shielded domestic industries from external competition and provided subsidies and preferential credit. It also made many business sectors dependent on the government and generated a high concentration of business ownership. Many companies emerged and survived because of government prerogatives and corruption. Licenses and concessions were given to PRI politicians as a reward for loyalty.

Whereas the period of structural reforms in the 1980s and 1990s reduced the degree of state intervention in the economy, the privatization of state-owned enterprises presented another opportunity for cronyism. Many state-owned

<sup>16</sup> Aguayo and Serdán (2009) estimate the number of votes that the SNTE commands at around 1 million.

<sup>17</sup> This strategy of selective jailing of union leaders early in the presidency to make clear who is in charge is not new. Carlos Salinas (1988–1994), for example, imprisoned Joaquín Hernández Galicia, “La Quina,” the head of the Pemex union, not for corruption, but for illegal possession of weapons at home. La Quina had opposed the liberalization policies of the PRI governments at the time and was suspected of having provided votes to the leftist opposition candidate, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, in 1988.

companies were sold below market value to party loyalists who did not necessarily have a successful business record or proven financial means to purchase the company. During this period, major companies, such as Telmex, TV Azteca, and other media concessions, were turned over to the private sector, not following an economic logic, but often a political one (Fernández Jilberto and Hogenboom 2007: 145).

The reprivatization of the banking industry after its nationalization in 1982 is illustrative. The government sold state-owned banks to individuals without experience in the sector, but with political connections to the PRI. For example, Ángel Isidoro Rodríguez, “El Divino,” whose father loaned the buses from his transportation company to PRI candidates and was an important donor to the party in the late 1980s, was rewarded with service contracts from Pemex and the ability to open a stock brokerage firm, Mexival (González Amador 1998). He later purchased Banpaís, one of the country’s state-owned banks, and was eventually accused – along with others in similar situations, such as Jorge Lankenau (Banca Confía) and Carlos Cabal Peniche (Banca Cremi and Banca Unión) – of lending money to themselves with no collateral for the loan, which helped precipitate the collapse of Mexico’s banking sector in 1995. The government eventually bailed out the banks through the Fund for Bank Savings Protection (FOBAPRA) at the cost of a whopping \$65 billion to society (De la Garza 1998). Earlier, however, some of the bad loans had been channeled to the PRI coffers to finance Ernesto Zedillo’s 1994 presidential campaign (González Amador 2004).

The high concentration of business ownership did not change with the democratic transition. As Castañeda and Aguilar Camín (2009) argue, Mexico is a country where a handful of corporate empires enjoy almost total control over entire industries: the degree of concentration in the telephone sector is 81.4 percent, mobile phones 74 percent, TV audience 68 percent, cement 49 percent, retail 54 percent, and corn flour 93 percent. Many of the country’s main holding companies are family-owned rather than having a corporate structure.

To be sure, with the electoral reforms of the 1990s and the increase in political competition, many businesspeople began to openly support other parties (Schneider 2002). The PAN’s economic policies, in particular, were ideologically compatible with the demands of parts of the business sector. The PRD, in turn, with its more statist and pro-labor platform, appealed to businesspeople with nationalist views or who benefited from protectionist policies. However, the PAN governments generally balked at leveling the playing field for business and undermining the power of groups that owed their wealth to the PRI. The links between the PRI and business groups were not transformed between 2000 and 2012. Instead, business groups have remained very involved in the party’s campaigns and policy making (Alba Vega 2006).



The influence of the two national television networks is a case in point. For decades prior to the transition to democracy, mass media openly served the interests of the PRI and was instrumental in helping it hold on to power. Most media outlets depended on government advertising and subsidies (Huerta-Wong and Gómez García 2013; Rodríguez Castañeda 1993). Concessions were given to PRI loyalists, and Emilio Azcárraga Milmo, the owner of the main media conglomerate, Televisa, even declared himself – publicly and unabashedly – a “soldier” of the PRI.

Between 1972 and 1993, Televisa was the only privately owned TV consortium, operating three national channels (2, 5, and 9) and a metropolitan (4) one.<sup>18</sup> The PRI and Televisa forged a symbiotic relationship during these years: Televisa not only refrained from criticizing government policies but also provided the kind of overwhelmingly positive coverage often associated with state-owned media. Opposition parties were ignored or vilified, whereas the PRI candidates were treated with admiration and enthusiasm (Hughes and Lawson 2004: 85).

In exchange, Televisa received a range of special prerogatives that allowed Azcárraga Milmo to become one of the wealthiest people in Latin America. These included the unchecked proliferation of concessions that expanded profits (Trejo 1988), subsidized access to communications infrastructure, preferential tax treatment, and protection from commercial competition (Hughes and Lawson 2004: 85). The favorable terms for business allowed Televisa to invest in different sectors of the media industry. They also enabled it to integrate vertically across segments of the TV business, from content production to distribution, becoming the largest media company in Spanish-speaking television (Huerta-Wong and Gómez García 2013: 121).

In 1993, the government privatized the state-owned network Imevisión, which became TV Azteca. As Figure 8.3 shows, although the privatization introduced competition and reduced somewhat Televisa's overwhelming share of the audience, from about 90 to 70 percent, the TV industry has remained highly concentrated in the hands of the two networks, and TV Azteca's coverage has resembled that of Televisa.<sup>19</sup> Televisa has remained the dominant player, with close to 70 percent, and TV Azteca's share has remained steady at about 30 percent since the transition (Huerta-Wong and Gómez García 2013: 122).

Democratization has not brought the dramatic change in media coverage many expected. The two networks that owed their concessions to the PRI governments concentrate 95 percent of all TV stations, 99 percent of all advertising, and 98 percent of total audience (CIDE and COFETEL 2011: 10). Both Televisa and TV Azteca continue to play an important role in

<sup>18</sup> During this time, the only other option was the state-owned Channel 13 – with three channels (7, 13, and 22) – beginning in 1982.

<sup>19</sup> Television concentration in Mexico is considerably greater than in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, not to mention other OECD countries (CIDE and COFETEL 2011).

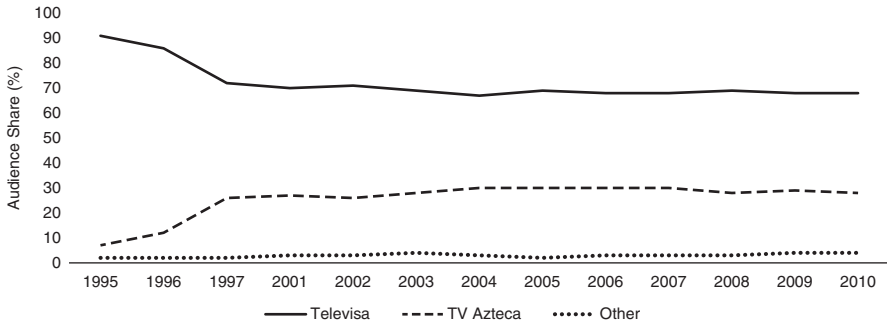


FIGURE 8.3 Network average prime-time audience share (%)

Source: Reproduced from Figure 1 in Huerta-Wong and Gómez García (2013: 122).

making or breaking candidates as a result of their industry dominance and selective coverage.

To be sure, the degree of media bias in favor of the PRI has decreased considerably since the transition to democracy. Most importantly, electoral reforms were instrumental in distributing airtime more evenly across parties. The death of Emilio Azcárraga Milmo in 1997 also contributed to a change in coverage, since his son and new owner, Emilio Azcárraga Jean, saw himself more as a businessperson than a partisan. Additionally, the creation of TV Azteca helped to introduce competition-oriented incentives.

However, considerable partisan biases have remained in the media (Lawson 2008). For example, based on a sample of programs monitored by the IFE for the 2000 presidential election, Hughes and Lawson (2004: 87) find that the PRI received as much coverage as all of the opposition combined. Coverage for the PAN was much lower than was warranted based on opinion polls before the election and the actual electoral results.<sup>20</sup> Hughes and Lawson (2004) also find that media bias has been especially pronounced in local stations. In Tabasco, Channel 9, a private local channel, was reportedly founded by the family of a state governor in 1979 and then sold to a businessperson who “speaks openly of his willingness to use his media empire to support politicians he favors” (Hughes and Lawson 2004: 92). During the presidential race in 2000, the PRI received about 72 percent of all electoral coverage in the state, and bias against the opposition was mandated from the top: Channel 9 journalists were not allowed to give any coverage to the PRD or those associated with it, because “the government’s advertising purchases were enough to cover the payroll and thus justified favorable coverage” (Hughes and Lawson 2004: 93). In Baja California, in spite of 11 years of continued

<sup>20</sup> The PAN-led Alliance for Change received 24 percent of the coverage, but 42 percent of the vote for president. By contrast, the PRI received 42 percent of coverage, but 36 percent of the vote.

PAN governments at the state level by 2000, coverage by Channel 66 – part of a family-owned network of concessions granted in 1979 and 1993 – also favored the PRI, due to early partisan affinities and economic incentives, all under the guise of “journalistic norms of fairness and balance” (Hughes and Lawson 2004: 94).

Whereas the IFE's oversight of media coverage in national electoral processes has helped to curb these practices,<sup>21</sup> there has been considerable variation in the quality and integrity of the electoral authorities at the state level. In states where the PRI has never lost control of the government, electoral authorities have been much less vigilant about uneven access to the media and campaign finance irregularities. Indeed, Hughes and Lawson (2004) find that a significant predictor of media coverage is not previous electoral results, but whether a PRI governor was in office. Further, even if the electoral authority's oversight at the national level has reduced the room for overt bias in terms of airtime, there continues to be evidence of partisan bias in terms of content. Examples include investigative reports that suggest the PRI paid Televisa for favorable coverage (Tuckman 2012) and studies pointing to the systematically negative portrayal of civil society groups opposed to the PRI, such as the student movement #Yosoy132 (Ruiz 2015).

In short, many of the players who benefited from the authoritarian PRI regime, and who continue to have a stake in maintaining the party in office, are still significant power brokers. The transition produced alternation in the presidency beginning in 2000, but important pillars of the previous authoritarian regime remain in place. Key actors who supported the PRI before the transition are still in positions of power, and the party continues to reward them. These include not only union and business leaders but also judges who are supposed to serve as impartial arbiters in a democracy. Examples abound at the subnational level, in particular, such as the case of Jalisco's Supreme Court Justice Leonel Sandoval Figueroa. He was caught on tape encouraging government employees to violate electoral laws and reassuring them that the state's Electoral Tribunal, Electoral Institute, and governor – who happened to be his son – would provide cover for their wrongdoings and protect them. Indeed, many of the inherited clientelistic and patronage networks have been kept alive with resources from state governments, and through the collusion of certain business sectors and unions.<sup>22</sup> As several authors have suggested (Cornelius 2002; Do Vale 2016; Gibson 2012; Snyder 1999), democratization has been highly uneven across Mexico, and there is evidence that many institutions and practices left over from the old regime persist in the form of “subnational authoritarianism.”

<sup>21</sup> In 2014, the IFE became the National Electoral Institute.

<sup>22</sup> For work on the decline of vote buying effectiveness for the PRI, see Cornelius (2000).

### 8.2.5 Mediocre Performance of Other Parties in Government

The third factor is related to the lackluster performance of other parties in office and their inability to organize against the PRI. This mediocre performance has contributed to the fragmentation of the party system that emerged during the transition and has ultimately benefited the PRI. Contrary to the pre-democratization notion that the PRI held the monopoly over corrupt or incompetent practices, government officials from the other parties have engaged in their fair share of corruption and incompetence (Giraudy 2015: 42; Serra 2013: 140), which has affected their electoral prospects.

Rather than breaking with the mediocre economic performance of the PRI governments since the 1980s, economic growth during the PAN administrations was similarly modest – an average of about 0.7 percent per capita per year (World Bank 2016). This mediocre economic performance during the twelve years in which the right-of-center PAN held the presidency prompted voters to search for an alternative. Although the Fox and Calderón administrations kept inflation under control and avoided financial crises of the sort that had plagued Mexico in the 1980s and 1990s, they proved unable to meet the high expectations generated by the transition to democracy in 2000.

Beyond the economy, Fox was largely seen as a weak and ineffective president, and Calderón presided over a sharp escalation of violence after 2006. Whereas violent crime had been steadily declining for decades – with the homicide rate reaching as low as 8.4 per 100,000 people in 2007 – during Calderón's term the rate tripled to 24 and more than 60,000 homicides were recorded (INEGI 2016). Kidnappings and extortion also increased steadily. This gruesome violence left many voters longing for the relative peace of the old PRI regime. As Romero, Magaloni, and Díaz-Cayeros (2016) have shown, public safety has been an important factor influencing Mexican voters.

The disenchantment with the PAN and PRD has come at all levels of government. The PAN faced corruption scandals with former governor of Sonora Guillermo Padrés (2009–2015), who was accused of receiving US\$ 3.3 million from companies awarded state government contracts (De Córdoba 2015). Among the most prominent PRD corruption scandals are videos taken during Andrés Manuel López Obrador's administration as mayor of Mexico City (2000–2005). In one, the leader of the PRD's local legislators is shown taking swaths of cash from a businessperson, and in another, the city's finance minister is shown gambling amounts of money he could not justify in Las Vegas. The governorship of Juan Sabines Guerrero (PRD) in the state of Chiapas resulted in exorbitant debt and embezzlement charges against members of his administration. Also, PRD congressperson Julio César Godoy Toscano is wanted for ties to organized crime and remains at large.

Scholars have found that retrospective voting has been prevalent in Mexico since elections became competitive (Domínguez and McCann 1996; Klesner

1993; Magaloni 2006; McCann 2015; Singer 2009). This is an important factor for explaining disenchantment with the PAN, given the high expectations generated by the transition. Retrospective voting has provided an opportunity for PRI candidates to win elections in places where the opposition has not performed well in office. This has occurred at all levels, including the presidency. As McCann (2015: 88) has found, by the time of the 2012 election, 40 percent of survey respondents “believed that times were indeed better when a single party was in control, and Peña Nieto and the PRI benefited from this judgment.”

To be sure, the PRI has not been immune to scandals related to corruption and incompetence. However, the fact that the PRI's preexisting baseline of support was higher has allowed it to weather these scandals better than the other parties. Given that the PRI emerged from the transition with a larger electoral base than the PAN and PRD, the disenchantment has been more consequential for these two parties. Whereas 40 percent of respondents longed for a return to the PRI years, those who disagreed were split roughly equally between the PAN and the PRD (McCann 2015: 96).

As Figure 8.4 shows, self-reported identification with the three main political parties has generally decreased over time, with almost half of respondents identifying as independents. Identification with the PRI has experienced the greatest decline – but it was also much greater than that for the other parties to

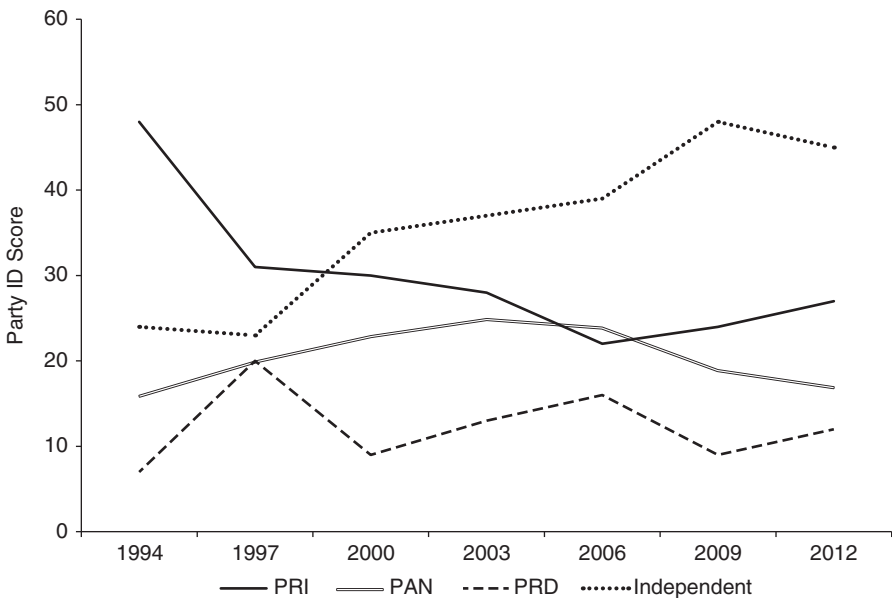


FIGURE 8.4 Party identification in Mexico, 1991–2012

Source: Moreno (2015).

begin with. Party ID has generally declined somewhat for the PAN and remained flat for the PRD, but their base of supporters remains smaller than that of the PRI. It is important to note that levels of party ID are likely lower because the figure reflects self-reported responses only of those who agreed to participate in the surveys. Further, party ID fluctuates considerably between election and nonelection years, and only about 16 percent of voters have effective party ID regardless of campaign effects (Greene 2015). Therefore, Figure 8.4 should be taken as an indication of general trends and relative strength rather than a reflection of actual levels of party ID in Mexican society, which are likely lower.

While lackluster governmental performance since democratization has taken a toll on party ID and vote shares across parties, this has made it especially difficult for the PAN and the PRD to establish a meaningful presence in states where they have not enjoyed traditional sources of support. Because of resource asymmetries, repression, and other barriers to institutional development in the early stages of the transition (Greene 2007), Mexico did not see the emergence of a straightforward national three-party system. Instead, two subnational two-party systems emerged: a PRI-PAN system in the north and a PRI-PRD system in the south (Baker 2009; Klesner 2005: 109).

This electoral geography has generated incentives for parties to prioritize the allocation of limited resources toward strengthening electorally competitive areas instead of trying to make inroads into new states where the cost of establishing a presence would be high (Díaz Jiménez 2014: 18; Harbers 2014). The consequence for national elections is that the PAN and the PRD enjoy limited, regional bases of core supporters for their campaigns. This means they are forced to rely more than the PRI on independents, who are less likely to support the party by donating their time canvassing, participating in get-out-the-vote operations, contributing financial resources, or even showing up to vote on election day. To the extent that the PAN and PRD have to rely more on votes from independents, they have to dedicate more resources toward courting them and fielding campaigns relying on fewer core partisan supporters.

The challenges of mediocre performance and regional fragmentation are compounded by the inability of the PAN and the PRD to form cohesive electoral alternatives (Flores-Macías 2016). The PRI has benefited from a major schism within the left and infighting within the right. A casualty of the Pact for Mexico (an agreement signed by the PRI, the PAN, and the PRD to advance a common set of structural reforms early in Peña Nieto's presidency), the left is now formally divided between those who favor working with the government to shape policy (the PRD) and those who reject any form of collaboration and broke away to form a new party (the National Regeneration Movement, MORENA).<sup>23</sup> Neither is likely to muster enough support to win the

<sup>23</sup> MORENA was created by Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the PRD's presidential candidate in 2006 and 2012.

presidency on its own, but the mistrust between them will make it difficult for them to form electoral coalitions in the future.

While the PAN has not suffered a formal fracture, it has had its fair share of infighting among different factions of the party. At times, party notables have called on the population to vote against the party's own candidate. For example, former president Fox explicitly called on voters not to support Josefina Vázquez Mota, the PAN's presidential candidate in 2012, but to vote instead for the PRI's candidate, Peña Nieto. Several groups within the party have also questioned the integrity and transparency of internal elections, and the leadership's inability to explain the sudden appearance of thousands of supporters in the lists on which internal party elections rely. These rifts have created headwinds for the PAN's electoral performance.

In short, retrospective voting on the opposition's mediocre performance and its inability to form cohesive alternatives have allowed the PRI to maintain or recapture executive offices at the state and national levels. However, although the PRI returned to the presidency in 2012, it has not been immune to the decline in voter identification with the largest political parties. However, the PRI's high starting point has allowed it to perform better in the face of declining party ID than other parties. In order to offset this decline, the PRI has increasingly relied on junior partners in electoral coalitions, such as the PVEM and PANAL, which have benefited from voters' discontent with the major parties.

### 8.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRACY

What are the consequences of the PRI's resilience for Mexico's democracy? In the Introduction of this volume, Loxton argues that authoritarian successor parties' effects on democracy are double-edged. On the negative side, they may trigger an authoritarian regression, prop up vestiges of authoritarianism, or hinder processes of transitional justice. On the positive side, they may contribute to the stability of democracy by promoting party system institutionalization, incorporating potential spoilers into the new democracy (see chapters by Slater and Wong, and Ziblatt), and even offer a model that encourages transitions to democracy elsewhere. In this section, I consider the purported benefits of authoritarian successor parties and find little evidence of these benefits in the case of Mexico. However, I *do* find considerable evidence of the PRI's harmful effects.

First, on the positive side, the resilience of the PRI in the electoral arena might have contributed to democratic governability. Although it is difficult to establish a counterfactual, it is conceivable that the PRI might have helped to incorporate potential spoilers into the democratic system. Given that important sectors of society had benefited from the old regime's prerogatives, some groups might have opted to destabilize the new regime in the absence of a party to represent them. Further, it can also be argued that the party's wealth of



experienced politicians with skills at reaching agreements and finding common ground – what Grzymala-Busse (2002) calls “portable skills” – meant that it was not necessary to reinvent the wheel of governing after the transition. After all, today’s PRI stalwarts are the heirs of the post-revolutionary project that built modern Mexico. In addition, whatever the flaws of the PRI, its survival made it possible for broad sectors of society that sympathized with its proposals to be represented in government.

However, if the resilience of the PRI has contributed to democracy in this fashion, that contribution has been much less straightforward than in some of the other cases examined in this volume. Rather than significantly lowering the “cost of toleration” among elites, as occurred with “old regime conservative parties” in first-wave Europe (Ziblatt, Chapter 10, this volume)<sup>24</sup> or “stabilizing democracy” (Slater and Wong, Chapter 9, this volume), as with parties such as the KMT in Taiwan, it is not clear that the PRI was really needed to carry out these functions. Many of the PRI’s policy proposals have been quite similar to those of the PAN from the 1980s onward, especially with respect to economic reforms. While a collapse of the PRI might have presented governability challenges, parts of the business community would have most likely found adequate representation through the PAN (Alba Vega 2006), and the military never showed any intention of breaking with the constitutional order in the event of an opposition victory (Camp 2005). If the PRI had collapsed, some voters might have found themselves without representation, but party ID for the PRI had already declined considerably by 2000. In short, it is unclear whether governability was really at stake in the aftermath of the transition – and thus whether the PRI was really necessary for democratic stability.

Second, it is not clear whether the resilience of the PRI has contributed much to party system institutionalization. It is conceivable that the party system could have collapsed had the PRI disbanded, leading to turmoil. After all, party systems are much more difficult to institutionalize than to decay (Mainwaring 2018; Roberts 2015). Additionally, the PRI, as a centrist party, may have served as a bridge between the right-of-center PAN and the left-of-center PRD, bringing some moderation to the system. However, compared to the baseline at the time of the transition in 2000, it is not clear that the PRI has really contributed to party system institutionalization in the sense of promoting the routinization of democratic practices, developing roots in society, or preventing volatility (Mainwaring and Scully 1995). Instead, the PRI has embraced shady practices, its party ID has declined, and its share of the vote has decreased. It is a distinct possibility that, in the absence of the PRI, an institutionalized party system would have emerged regardless, anchored on the center-left by the PRD and the center-right by the PAN.

<sup>24</sup> According to Ziblatt (Chapter 10, this volume), “old regime conservative parties” were the first wave’s equivalent of authoritarian successor parties.



Finally, the PRI's resilience might have encouraged new transitions to democracy by having a demonstration effect. While the Mexican transition came late compared to most in the region, it could, conceivably, still serve this purpose in the future. However, given deteriorating attitudes about the country's democracy, it is unlikely to serve as an inspiration for other countries. According to *Latinobarómetro* (2016), Mexicans' views of the quality of their country's democracy were the region's lowest in 2015. Whereas 37 percent of Latin American respondents said that they felt somewhat or very satisfied with the quality of democracy in their own country, only 19 percent of Mexicans shared this view. Similarly, confidence in the country's future, while far from robust to begin with, has dropped even lower since the PRI returned to the presidency in 2012. In 2013, slightly more than a quarter (27 percent) of respondents felt confident that Mexico was moving in the right direction. Two years later, that share had dipped to less than a fifth (18 percent). The 2015 Latin American mean was 32 percent. Further, according to different surveys since the transition, more than half of Mexican respondents do not believe that the country's elections are clean – one of the worst rates in Latin America (Díaz Domínguez 2015; Ramos 2009).

In short, there is little evidence that the PRI has had a positive impact on Mexico's democracy. However, there is considerable evidence that the PRI has been *harmful* in various ways. One way is by propping up pockets of subnational authoritarianism. There seems to be something to Cornelius' (1999: 12) prediction that the fragmentation of the old PRI regime would lead to "a crazy quilt of increasingly competitive, pluralistic political spaces ... juxtaposed with hardened authoritarian enclaves." In a very real sense, Mexico is a case of an incomplete transition to democracy: there has been significant progress at the national level, but progress has been uneven at the subnational level (Gibson 2012; Giraudy 2015; Snyder 1999). Mexico's political actors operate at both the national and subnational levels, and as power shifted away from the president and toward state governments, the persistence of competitive authoritarian practices at the subnational level became increasingly apparent.

In addition to authoritarian practices at the subnational level, the resilience of the PRI has supported the continuation of the kinds of corrupt practices associated with the old days. During the PRI's two terms without the presidency (2000–2012), several PRI governors and other party notables continued to be associated with many of the practices that pro-democracy actors had hoped would disappear with the 2000 transition. For example, two former governors of the state of Tamaulipas – Tomás Yarrington (1999–2005) and Eugenio Hernández Flores (2005–2011) – are wanted for money laundering and drug trafficking at the time of this writing. Former governor of the state of Coahuila, Humberto Moreira (2005–2011), whose borrowing sent the state into a debt crisis, is accused of embezzlement and document falsification. The governor of Puebla, Mario Marín Torres (2005–2011), was caught on tape negotiating the incarceration and sexual abuse of a journalist who was pursuing an embarrassing story. Former

representative and now senator Emilio Gamboa Patrón was caught on tape peddling his influence to gambling interests in 2006.

As these examples suggest, corruption in the PRI after the transition has not been a matter of a few isolated incidents, nor has it failed to reach the highest echelons of the party. While these practices are by no means the exclusive domain of the PRI, the party has a record of protecting those facing charges of embezzlement and influence peddling (Flores-Macías 2013). After his term as governor of Coahuila, for example, Humberto Moreira became the president of the PRI. Oil workers' union leader Carlos Romero Deschamps became a senator and Emilio Gamboa Patrón is the leader of the PRI in the Senate. Rather than distancing itself from politicians who engage in dubious practices, the PRI has sheltered and even promoted such figures, rewarding them with congressional seats and legal immunity.

After the return of the PRI to the presidency in 2012, there is evidence that the government not only failed to rein in corruption across the bureaucracy, but that the president's inner circle itself was unable to lead by example. Rather than improving oversight, the Peña Nieto administration has been engulfed in a series of high-profile corruption scandals, which have involved the first lady and the finance minister, among others. These have remained unresolved and have tainted the credibility of the "new PRI" – the seemingly renovated party that had put behind the corrupt and undemocratic practices of the past – in the eyes of much of the population. This complicity in shielding corrupt officials from prosecution, though not identical, is analogous to other cases of authoritarian successor parties that have used their clout to impede processes of transitional justice.

Finally, although the country has made progress in terms of media pluralism and civic engagement, it has suffered important setbacks regarding freedom of the press and human rights (Flores-Macías 2016). The harassment of journalists critical of the government continues, as with the high-profile case of several MVS reporters forced to resign after breaking the story about potential conflict of interests involving the president's wife and a government contractor in 2014.<sup>25</sup> Especially worrisome are the murders of journalists critical of the government, such as the gruesome murder of a photojournalist who had fled the state of Veracruz to seek refuge in Mexico City. Additionally, since the return of the PRI to the presidency in 2012, it appears that human rights violations have worsened. In a scathing report, Human Rights Watch (2017: 427) claimed that torture is now "widely practiced in Mexico to obtain forced confessions and extract information."

This does not mean that Mexico will return to the kind of full-blown authoritarianism practiced by the PRI during the twentieth century, when coercion and co-optation ruled the day and elections were stolen in broad daylight. Meaningful checks and balances have emerged since, including an

<sup>25</sup> MVS is a Mexican media conglomerate.

independent electoral authority, a legislature that serves as a counterweight to the executive branch, a more independent judiciary, and a freer press. But if the record of the “new PRI” is any indication, the party is unlikely to contribute to Mexico’s further democratization.

#### 8.4 CONCLUSION

The PRI is undoubtedly one of the most electorally successful authoritarian successor parties in the world. It returned to the presidency after only two terms out of office, has remained a powerful force in Congress, has dominated politics at the subnational level, and commands the support of a sizable share of the electorate. To be sure, the electoral performance of the PRI has declined over time and continues to erode. This decline has not been smooth; instead, the electoral fortunes of the PRI have ebbed and flowed in a generalized downward trend. Nevertheless, seventeen years after Mexico’s transition to democracy, the PRI remains a powerful electoral force.

As the Introduction (Loxton, this volume) argues, what is remarkable about authoritarian successor parties is their ability to perform well *under free and fair conditions*. The Mexican case has been mixed in this regard, however. On the one hand, part of the PRI’s success is likely due to its inheritance of a strong party brand.<sup>26</sup> The PRI is the heir to the Mexican Revolution’s ideals and successes. Much like in the cases of Taiwan and South Korea (Cheng and Huang, Chapter 2, this volume), past PRI governments were responsible for many of the accomplishments that built modern Mexico, including the incorporation of the popular sectors into politics, sustained economic growth and development, and political stability. Although this legacy is less meaningful among the generations that came of age after the 1982 debt crisis, it has nevertheless bestowed the party with a recognizable brand (albeit one that has experienced considerable dilution over time) and other resources that have helped make its electoral performance impressive in comparative perspective.

On the other hand, part of the PRI’s strong electoral performance has been the product of undemocratic practices that, despite important progress made since 2000, have continued, especially at the subnational level. Clientelistic networks and vote buying have helped secure votes for the party. Media bias has given its candidates an edge in campaigns. Misappropriation of government funds has provided a source of party finance. Other parties have also employed such practices, and their own shortcomings in government have undermined their electoral support. However, the PRI’s privileged position at the time of the transition – due to its control of significant subnational government resources, corporatist relations, and crony capitalist ties to business – has resulted in a greater electoral payoff and has been crucial for this authoritarian successor party’s resilience.

<sup>26</sup> On party brands, see Lupu (2016).