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# THE REPRESENTATIONAL FAULT LINE: CANDIDATES AND VOTERS IN MEXICO'S 2006 ELECTIONS

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**EVEN BEFORE THE 2006 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION** dissolved into a nasty street battle, it was widely perceived as strongly polarized. The two leading candidates, Felipe Calderón of the conservative National Action Party (PAN) and Andrés Manuel

López Obrador of the left-wing Party of the Demo-

cratic Revolution (PRD), staked out starkly different positions on key economic issues. Calderón promised continuity with free-market reforms, focusing on investment as the engine of growth. López Obrador argued that the neoliberal strategy would benefit only a few, and he promised to alleviate poverty through state spending on infrastructure and social welfare. Unlike in prior presidential elections where the PAN and PRD candidates downplayed their differences to challenge the dominant PRI with broad pro-democracy appeals, in this first post-transition election, the candidates made their differences clear.

The dust usually settles and even the most polarized campaigns typically yield to institutionalized opposition after Election Day. But in this case, the razor-thin margin of victory for Calderón at just 0.57% cast doubt on the outcome and led to increasing polarization. López Obrador rejected the official results, escalated his confrontation with the state well beyond what most had expected—from marches and blockades of major streets, to efforts to paralyze the Congress and plans to establish a parallel government—and he easily secured the loyal support of top PRD leaders and the active participation of hundreds of thousands of Mexican citizens. Faced with crowds in the capital, flaring tempers,

and statements like “to hell with the institutions,” some commentators rang the alarm bell. Was the hard-fought campaign the tip of an iceberg that runs cold and deep between polarized camps in society? Could Mexico’s democratic train be running off the rails, guiding it not toward the station of stable institutions found in the United States and Western Europe but toward the wreckage of instability found in other Latin American nations?

We suggest a more optimistic reading. Although ideological polarization goes well beyond the polemical campaigns of the presidential candidates and extends to the PAN and PRD’s congressional candidates, it does not extend to the voters. The voters were in fact surprisingly immune to campaigns that attempted to draw them into partisan battles, and in the post-electoral period their influence may put the brakes on political conflict. If party elites pay attention to the issue mandates given by their supporters, then they will find ways to avoid legislative gridlock in the 2006–2009 Congress.

Our analysis is based on two unique surveys that give us an extraordinary view of both elite and mass opinion. The first is the Mexico 2006 Candidate and Party Leader Survey of congressional candidates for plurality district races that we conducted in the three weeks leading up to the election.<sup>2</sup> The PAN and PRD generously furnished us with contact information for their candidates, without which we could not have accomplished the study. Unfortunately, the PRI refused to participate. However, prior work shows that although the PRI has a wide range of internal opinion at the elite level, it is relatively centrist in

the aggregate. Thus, since we are primarily interested in the degree of polarization between the two most distant parties on the left and the right, polling just PRD and PAN candidates fits our need nicely. The second survey is a more ambitious project called the Mexico 2006 Panel Survey that includes nationwide samples of voters at three points in time during the campaign.<sup>3</sup> For this analysis, we use data from the May 2006 pre-electoral wave and the July 2006 post-electoral wave. Since we both participated in the design of the voter and candidate surveys, we were able to use the same questions for candidates and voters, and this correspondence improves our confidence about the findings.

### Polarized Congressional Candidates

Congressional candidates from both parties agree on the key problems facing Mexico. When we asked them to name the most important problem, they spontaneously identified “jobs and unemployment” most frequently, followed by “crime and public security.” PRD candidates were more likely to name poverty first, but poverty was still the fourth most frequently cited problem among PAN candidates. Another open-ended question asked candidates to identify the theme they personally emphasized in their congressional campaigns. Again, candidates from both parties named jobs and employment as their principal focus, followed by education, health, and social spending.

Consensus about Mexico’s major problems is where agreement ends. The candidates disagreed so substantially about solutions that they represent distinct worldviews. When we asked whether the government or individuals should be responsible for citizens’ personal economic welfare, 75% of PAN candidates opted for personal responsibility, while 68% of PRD candidates stated that the government should be partly or even fully responsible for citizens’ welfare.

A question about the appropriate size of government generated fascinating responses. We took a risk by constructing a potentially double-barreled question in an attempt to force a trade-off. Specifically, we asked if candidates preferred a government with fewer services and lower taxes or one with more services and higher taxes. Fifty-six percent of PAN candidates opted for a smaller government compared to just 11.7% of PRD candidates. However, only 40% of the PRD candidates openly chose the bigger state/more taxes option. Instead, a high percentage (48.1%) apparently insisted to survey interviewers that they wanted lower taxes and more services. Their position may simply reflect the official position of their presidential candidate that he could pay for his new social programs by cutting government waste. Yet the spontaneous refusal to recognize a trade-off between spending and taxing despite question wording designed to straitjacket their answers gives us strong evidence of their economic policy leanings. It is also, of course, precisely what had the PAN as well as many domestic and international capital-holders so worried about a López Obrador presidency.

On the critical question of commercial relations with the United States, differences were less stark. Virtually all PAN candidates (95%) preferred expanding commercial ties. Despite rhetoric by López Obrador that NAFTA should be renegotiated in some areas, only 22% of the party’s congressional candidates wanted to maintain commercial ties at current levels or reduce them. While significantly distinct from the PAN’s view, this finding suggests important limits on the PRD’s leftism (especially when compared to some South American

counterparts), as well as broad recognition among elites that Mexico’s economic performance depends heavily on continued integration with the United States.

Important differences also emerged over the question of political openness. PAN candidates were significantly more likely to respond that “Mexico today is a democracy,” to anticipate that elections in their district would be clean, and to express confidence in the Federal Electoral Institute that administers federal elections. PRD candidates perceived that Mexico was less democratic and its elections less fair. These pre-election judgments not only help explain PRD support for López Obrador’s quixotic campaign and aggressive post-election protest, but also suggest differences between the two parties in terms of their levels of political trust.

For two questions—abortion and privatization of the electricity sector—we asked respondents to locate not only their own personal position, but also that of their rival party. PRD candidates are pro-choice and oppose privatization while PAN candidates line up on the opposite side as pro-life and in favor of privatization. In addition, each group of candidates views the rival party’s position as more extreme than it actually is; however, this projection appears somewhat smaller than observers of Mexican politics might expect. In-depth interviews often suggest that rival candidates believe their opponents are extremist to the point of stretching credibility. Our data paint a different picture. We find general agreement about the amount of disagreement. This means that despite some projection that could complicate good faith negotiations in Congress, the perceptions are not so outlandish that the two delegations should be unable to communicate.

All of this evidence indicates that ideological polarization extends beyond the presidential candidates at least to congressional candidates in the PAN and the PRD who are spread throughout the country. In both parties, legislative candidates were mostly drawn from the local political elite. They had resided in their districts for about thirty years on average, and they were more likely to have served as municipal or state party leaders than national ones. As a result, the differences we document are not limited to a potentially insular Mexico City elite, but represent real, substantive, and widespread ideological differences between these two parties both nationally and locally.

### Moderate Voters

Elite polarization on the issues should have sent clear cues to the voters, potentially drawing them into highly charged partisan battles and cementing walls of difference between social groups. But voters by and large did not respond. Even with respect to their own partisan voters, candidates were more extreme on the issues of privatization, abortion, and social welfare. They were even more clearly out-of-step with independents and with the electorate in general. Since candidate-voter comparisons are so easily communicated graphically, we show alignments on four of the main issues in Figure 1.

PAN and PRD candidates endorse very different positions on the question of privatization of the electricity sector, but the voters are clustered fairly close together toward the center and against privatization. This creates a strikingly large distance between PAN candidates who appear as radical privatizers out-of-tune with a tepid base. On this issue, PRD candidates are much closer to the average voter, as well as to their own constituency.

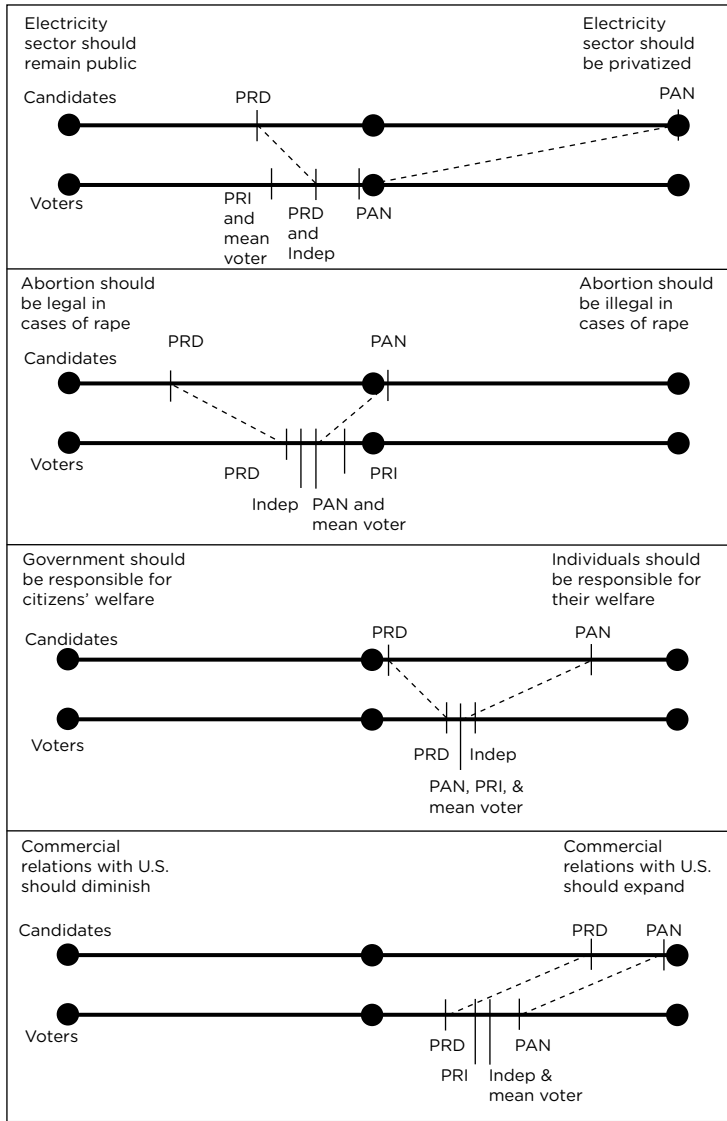


Figure 1. Candidate and Voter Preferences on Four Major Issues

Similar dissonance between candidates and voters appears on the issue of abortion in the case of rape. The PAN is closer to the voters in general, but finds itself on the opposite side of the issue. Perhaps the biggest surprise is that PRD candidates are much more in favor of legality than their own core voters. While these differences are important for policymaking and may inform debates in Congress, they probably did not matter much in the election since the abortion question has never been as politically mobilized in Mexico as in other countries, including the United States.

Social welfare again divides the candidates more than the voters. PAN candidates are much more in favor of individual responsibility for citizens' social welfare than are their own constituents who want some level of government

assistance. The bigger surprise, however, is that PRD candidates are in fact more in favor of government assistance than their core voters. We would typically expect voters to place more demands on government and for prospective legislators to hold back, knowing the real constraints on government spending. Not only does this not appear to be the case, but the rightward skew in preferences suggests that Calderón's campaign for jobs may have resonated more broadly than AMLO's call for poverty alleviation.

We found much more consensus between congressional candidates over the question of commercial relations with the United States, but this consensus put the PRD group in conflict with its presidential candidate and both groups in conflict with the voters.

Unsurprisingly, PAN candidates were uniformly in favor of expanded commercial relations with the United States; however, PRD candidates were almost as enthusiastic. Neither party's voters moved with them. Not only were PRD voters in favor of economic openness, but PAN voters were only somewhat more in favor of ties to the United States. Both findings are somewhat surprising. We would have expected PRD voters to be more opposed since they are drawn more heavily from the ranks of the poor and those in the south who have benefited less from free trade. We also would have expected PAN voters, often thought to draw from middle and upper class voters as well as northerners who benefit from free trade, to be more favorably disposed. This pattern casts some doubt on the productiveness of congressional campaigns that raised the issue of economic openness and indicates that López Obrador's campaign message that questioned close economic relations with the United States may have put him in conflict with most voters.

We also explored opinions about how clean respondents thought the July election would be when we interviewed the voters in May and the candidates in June. For space considerations, we do not represent these responses graphically. In this instance, candidates were much closer to each other than the voters. PRI and PRD voters were the most skeptical that the elections would be clean, while PAN voters apparently trusted in the elections much more than the political elites they supported. The level of skepticism about clean elections needs to be underscored here, given that analysts roundly applauded the non-partisan Federal Electoral Institute as a shining example of how new democracies should run elections. Yet substantial segments of the political class and voters did not agree. The polarization among voters, coupled with the post-electoral mobilization that has undoubtedly brought PRD candidates further to the left, indicate that the question of institutional reform will likely be an important political cleavage moving forward.

Finally, elite polarization and mass moderation were reflected in self-placements on the more abstract left-right scale that we show in Figure 2. As on the issues, candidates from the PRD place themselves on the left and those from the PAN place themselves on the right; they are clearly not self-identified "centrists." In contrast, voter placements are more diffuse and spread across the left-right dimension.

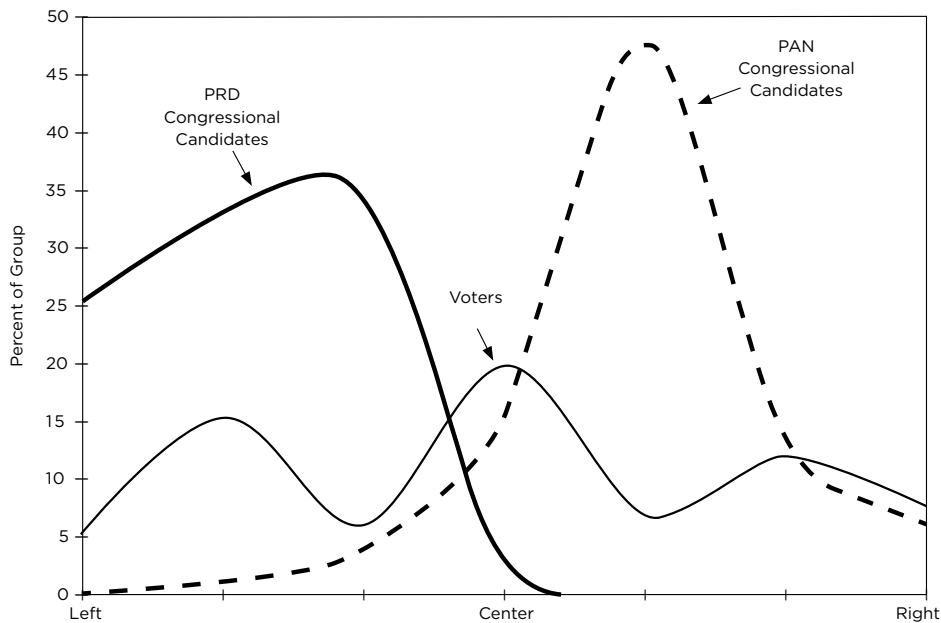


Figure 2. Candidate and Voter Positions on the Left-Right Dimension

There are important groups of voters who place themselves on the left and the right; yet, by far the largest group is centrist. We make no claims about the particular meaning of “left” and “right” in these data and want to draw attention to the fact that 27.5% of voters either could not place themselves on the scale or responded that they had no position. Nevertheless, those who do identify a position are far less polarized than candidates.

### Conclusion

Mexico’s political class is deeply divided over ideology and major issues of national importance. These divisions extend beyond the rhetorical campaigns of the presidential candidates and to elites in both parties. Candidates from the PAN combine fiscal and social conservatism, much like Republicans in the United States. They are pro-life, favor privatization of the electricity sector and expanded commercial relations with the United States, and believe in investment and individual responsibility to reduce poverty. PRD candidates sharply disagree. They are pro-choice, want to maintain public ownership over the electricity sector, and endorse an expanded social safety net with greater government responsibility in providing for the poor. They also are more skeptical about the benefits of commercial ties with the United States, although this difference was much more muted than we expected. One might have expected these relatively clear positions to give voters strong signals that would

help structure voting choices along ideological lines. Nevertheless, polarization does not extend to the mass level at present. Voters who identify with the PRD and the PAN agree with the candidates on some issues, but in general they cluster around the average voter that is generally quite centrist.

We draw three main conclusions from this examination of party-voter alignments. First, polarization is limited to the political elite and does not feed off deep political divisions in the electorate. This implies that despite the important transition from authoritarian rule under the PRI to competitive democratic politics by 2000, Mexico has not yet undergone a partisan realignment. It also implies that voters are strikingly resilient to ideological overtures by candidates who have tried and failed to “mobilize bias” on the most salient political issues.

Second, the type of representation in government we can expect from PAN and PRD candidates is one of “acting for” rather than “standing for.” Instead of striving to represent the average voter or even their slightly more polarized identified voters, the PAN and PRD seek to lead public opinion on the issues. While these elite divisions give voters clearly distinguished partisan options, they also yield parties that are out-of-step with the electorate and in some sense seek to contravene the public will.

Finally, the lack of severe polarization among the voters makes us cautiously optimistic about

the prospects for passing legislation on contentious issues. Although Mexico’s combination of presidentialism with a multi-party Congress could continue to yield the kind of gridlock that plagued the Fox administration, the mandate from the voters would appear to underwrite compromise. Much will depend on legislators’ responsiveness. To be sure, the prohibition on re-election diminishes incentives for constituency representation; however, unless the PAN and PRD can claim the middle ground and prove able custodians of the public will, voters may reject their brand of politics and return to the centrist party that quietly waits out the storm in control of more Mexican governorships than any other party: the PRI.

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### Notes

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- 3 ) Senior Project Personnel include (in alphabetical order): Andy Baker, Kathleen Bruhn, Roderic Camp, Wayne Cornelius, Jorge Domínguez, Kenneth Greene, Joseph Klesner, Chappell Lawson (Principal Investigator), Beatriz Magaloni, James McCann, Alejandro Moreno (Pollster), Alejandro Poiré, and David Shirk. Funding for the surveys was provided by the National Science Foundation (SES-0517971) and *Reforma* newspaper. See <http://web.mit.edu/polisci/research/mexico06/index.htm>. ☀