
RESEARCH REPORTS AND NOTES

ELECTORAL COMPETITION, LEGISLATIVE PLURALISM, AND INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT: Evidence from Mexico's States*

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Abstract: In presidential systems such as those of Latin America, the institutionalization of legislatures as autonomous representative bodies able to constrain executives and check abuses of power is an important aspect of democratization. Drawing on the experiences of Mexico's state governments, this paper seeks to explain differences in legislative institutionalization. It argues that pluralism within the legislature, rather than electoral competition in itself, provides the best explanation for institutionalization. A process-tracing analysis of the state legislature of Michoacán supports this argument, and a statistical analysis of Mexico's thirty-one states confirms that pluralism in the electorate does shape legislative pluralism—and so indirectly the extent of pressures for institutionalization—but reveals that differences in state electoral laws also play an important role.

* I would like to thank Evelyne Huber, Lars Schoultz, and John Stephens as well as the LARR editors and reviewers for their helpful comments on this work. My thanks also to the Graduate School of the University of North Carolina and the Institute of International Education for research support. I am especially grateful to Juan and Rosita Campo; their friendship made the completion of this work possible.

Latin American Research Review, Vol. 39, No. 1, February 2004
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PLURALISM AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION IN LEGISLATURES:
THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Recent scholarship has refocused attention on the long-standing idea that a division of powers is necessary to provide checks against governmental abuse of power. Horizontal accountability, as opposed to the vertical accountability of elected officials to citizens at the ballot box, requires, according to Guillermo O'Donnell (1999, 39), "state agencies that are authorized and willing to oversee, control, redress, and/or sanction unlawful actions of other state agencies," most fundamentally (although not exclusively) separate and autonomous executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government.

Problems in establishing and maintaining a separation of powers most frequently consist of the tendency of executives to view themselves as the embodiment of the electorate's will, singularly entitled to govern without interference for the duration of their elected terms. Legislatures, however, are also elected and so are similarly entitled by democratic principles to influence government policy (Linz 1990). In many new democracies, however, legislatures cede their lawmaking function to chief executives by routinely approving all executive initiatives or, equivalently, acceding to lawmaking by executive decree (O'Donnell 1994). Such less-institutionalized legislatures also frequently fail to provide oversight of executive-branch actions, thus granting executives less formal means of making and remaking the law. More institutionalized legislatures, by retaining primary responsibility for making laws, can constrain the executive from simply taking whatever action he or she deems appropriate, and measures that are approved independently by two elected branches of government are more likely to be representative of citizens' preferences. The policymaking process slows, but the loss of the decisiveness enjoyed by unconstrained executives also tends to result in policies "vaccinated against gross mistakes" (O'Donnell 1994, 62). Further, more institutionalized legislatures maintain oversight that allows them to hold officials of the executive branch accountable for abusing their power. Better-institutionalized legislatures therefore act to make governments more responsive and effective as well as more likely to protect citizens' civil and political rights, that is, to make them higher-quality democracies. The encroachment of executive power into responsibilities of the legislature, on the other hand, works to erode the concept of democratic representation and, eventually, democratic government.

The causes of legislative institutionalization, defined as the process by which legislatures become autonomous lawmaking bodies able to constrain executives and check abuses of power, are therefore a fundamental component of understanding the sources of the quality of new democracies. In an early attempt to address this question in the context of Mexico,

Caroline Beer (2001) built on studies of the institutionalization of legislatures in the United States to contend that increased electoral competition generated greater legislative institutionalization in Mexico's states. In this research note I argue that her explanation is incomplete: competition yields greater institutionalization only to the extent that it is translated into more pluralistic legislatures. This view provides a better explanation for the experiences of the three states that Beer examined, and a process-tracing account of the development of the legislature in the state of Michoacán also supports the argument. Although electoral competition shapes legislative pluralism, differences in the Mexican states' electoral laws—the laws that specify how votes are converted into seats—are also critical to determining the amount of pluralism in a legislature and therefore the extent of pressure for its institutionalization.

Greater legislative pluralism can be expected to change both the internal dynamics of legislatures and the electoral incentives of parties in ways that facilitate legislative institutionalization.¹ Low levels of legislative pluralism ensure that one party will have a majority of legislative seats. A majority party has the ability to dominate resources and decision-making power within the legislature and has little reason not to do so. When the majority party in the legislature also holds the executive's office, simply enacting the executive's initiatives or even granting extensive decree powers is a potentially viable strategy for party leaders seeking to maintain electoral support (Jones 1995, 40). In this case, independent initiatives are unnecessary for the majority party. For a party that controls a majority in the legislature but not the executive, on the other hand, simply blocking the executive's proposals may be viewed as sufficient to win votes in the future. In both cases, minority parties can have little hope of passing a law and gaining credit at the polls for a legislative success. Rather than introducing their own initiatives, therefore, minority parties are likely to rely more on the missteps of the majority to gain support in coming elections.

As legislative pluralism increases and more parties gain significant representation in a legislature, on the other hand, power and resources are necessarily dispersed. In the absence of a majority party, passing legislation becomes a realistic possibility for more parties, and lawmaking initiative therefore becomes a viable means for parties to distinguish themselves for their opponents. The decentralization of decision-

1. Mexico bars immediate reelection to any political post, and therefore electoral pressures provide incentives directly only to parties, not individual politicians. However, the rule against reelection also makes politicians dependent on their parties to further their careers, thereby reestablishing their incentive to act in a manner consistent with electoral considerations.

making and resources in the legislature's leadership and committee structure allows greater specialization and further encourages legislative activity. Dispersed decision-making also generates increased oversight: the executive's party does not have the power needed to unilaterally overlook executive abuses, and most opposition parties will have little inclination to do so. As pluralism increases in legislatures, therefore, legislators can be expected to be more active in making laws and more vigilant of executive attempts to circumvent the law, with the end result being higher-quality democracy.

LEGISLATIVE INSTITUTIONALIZATION IN MEXICO'S STATES

Echoing the extreme presidentialism of the federal government, Mexico's states have a long history of executive dominance. Traditionally, governors within the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) were given a free hand over local affairs, including the manner in which federal policies were implemented, so long as they avoided truly spectacular instances of corruption or repression that embarrassed the president, and their states continued to support the PRI at the ballot box (Cornelius 1999). Governors who failed to respect these boundaries, however, were subject to removal by the president. Except for the no-reelection clause, there was little potential for checks to a governor's power; state legislatures and judiciaries rarely, if ever, opposed the executive's will (Rodríguez 1997). Governors grew even more powerful in the course of the 1990s, as President Ernesto Zedillo's commitment to federalism provided additional resources and policy autonomy to state governments while, for the most part, eliminating the threat of forced removal that previously provided some constraints on governors' actions (Cornelius 1999). In this context of increased responsibility, some governors assented to a new role for their states' legislatures, but there was "considerable variation in the style and apparent willingness to 'let go' on the part of the state executive" (Ward and Rodríguez 1999, 690).

The source of this variation, I contend, is differences in the composition of the state legislatures: legislatures that were more pluralistic became more institutionalized. In her recent study, Beer pointed to variation in electoral competition as the origin of differences in the pressure for legislative institutionalization in the three states she examined. Beer found that the average margin of victory across legislative districts for Guanajuato (13.82%), San Luis Potosí (15.03%), and Hidalgo (39.81%) matched the order of the states in terms of institutionalization: Guanajuato had the most institutionalized legislature, and Hidalgo's legislature was the least institutionalized. These levels of competition, however, also suggest that the legislature in San Luis Potosí should be nearly as institutionalized as that of Guanajuato. However, her detailed

examination of the three state legislatures reveals that it fell at best roughly midway between the well-institutionalized body of Guanajuato and the rubber-stamp congress of Hidalgo, and in most respects was more similar to that of Hidalgo.

A focus on the actual amount of pluralism found in the three legislatures helps to explain this pattern. Legislative pluralism is measured here by reference to the effective number of parties, which provides a count of the parties in the legislature that weights each by its relative size.² In Guanajuato, the center-right PAN was the largest party in the legislature, but no party controlled a majority. The effective number of parties represented was 3.03. In Hidalgo, the long-ruling PRI maintained its majority with two-thirds of the legislative seats; the effective number of parties was 2.04. In San Luis Potosí, the PRI clung to its legislative majority with fourteen of twenty-seven seats; the effective number of parties was 2.42. This comparison suggests that San Luis Potosí was more similar to Hidalgo in terms of legislative institutionalization because it was more like Hidalgo in terms of pluralism. Tracing the process by which greater pluralism in legislatures leads to more institutionalization would, however, provide more convincing evidence. The sharp increase in the pluralism of Michoacán's legislature after the 2001 state election—an election in which electoral competition actually declined—provides an ideal case for demonstrating the effect of pluralism on legislative institutionalization.

PLURALISM AND THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF A STATE LEGISLATURE: THE CASE OF MICHOACÁN

Elections held on 11 November 2001 in Michoacán resulted in the most pluralistic legislature in the state's history. For the first time, no party held a majority: the PRI and the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) won seventeen seats each, the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) five seats, and the Partido del Trabajo (PT) one. The resulting effective number of parties in the legislature is 2.64, up from 2.29 in the preceding congress, and the highest ever. Competition in the electorate actually declined; the effective number of parties in the vote was 3.15 in 1998, but only 2.88 in 2001.³

2. The effective number of parties, N_s , is calculated as follows: $N_s = 1 / p_i^2$ with p_i representing the fraction of legislative seats held by party i . If two parties each hold half a legislature's seats, N_s equals two, three equally sized parties yield an N_s of three, and so on, but as the parties' seat shares diverge from equality, the effective number of parties declines.

3. The effective number of parties in the vote, N_v , is similar to the effective number of legislative parties but is calculated using each party's share of the vote rather than its share of legislative seats.

This increased pluralism rapidly led to greater institutionalization. Improvements in decentralized decision-making, autonomy, resources, and activity were easily observable within the first months of the new legislature. Pluralism led to decentralized decision-making structures in the congress in terms of both internal leadership structure and committees' composition and leadership. In Michoacán's previous legislatures, the congress was directed formally by a grand committee and, in practice, by the committee's president. The president of the grand committee dictated committee assignments, distributed staff and other resources among legislators, and set the legislature's agenda. The PRI, moreover, held the chair and a majority of the members in every committee.

After the new legislature took office, however, no party had the support needed to name the new grand committee president. Nine days after being sworn in, the legislators agreed to abandon the grand committee in favor of a coordination council on which the PRD, PRI, PAN, and PT each would hold a seat, with each party's vote weighted to match its representation in the legislature. The parties also agreed to a rotating presidency: the PRD was to hold the position for sixteen months, followed by the PAN for four months, and then by the PRI for the final sixteen months of the legislature's three-year term. This change was a direct result of increased legislative pluralism. In the words of one legislator, the opposition had advocated reform for years, but "once no party had a majority, there was no choice but to eliminate the grand committee."⁴ Legislative committee assignments are now distributed proportionally as well: the PRD heads eleven of the congress's twenty-four committees, the PRI ten, the PAN two, and even the lone PT member presides over one committee. The PRI and PRD hold the majority of members in six committees each; no party has a majority in the remaining twelve.

The autonomy of Michoacán's new legislature grew dramatically, particularly in the crucial arena of oversight of public finance. In 2001 and before, the PRI controlled both the executive branch and the legislative committees responsible for government oversight. In the legislature that began its three-year term on 15 January 2002, however, the PRI, PRD, and PAN are equally represented on the legislature's two oversight committees. Moreover, although the PRD now holds the governor's office, a PAN representative heads the Inspection and Auditing Committee, which is responsible for overseeing the executive branch. This multiparty control of oversight was agreed upon specifically to augment the legislature's ability to check executive abuses.⁵ "It's the pluralism in this legislature

4. Interview with Diputado/Coordinador Francisco Morelos Borja (PAN, Michoacán), Morelia, 4 February 2002.

5. Interviews with Diputado/Coordinador Francisco Morelos Borja (PAN, Michoacán), Morelia, 4 February 2002; Diputado/Coordinador Juan Iriarte Méndez, (PRD,

that gave us this opportunity to reform how the government works," the new chair of the Inspection and Auditing Committee maintains.⁶

Resources for the congress also increased. After the new legislators were sworn in, the legislature's building was renovated to provide offices and telephones for each member. Unlike in previous legislatures, when the majority PRI monopolized staff and other resources, these are now distributed among the parties in proportion to their representation. Finally, the legislature is now considerably more active. In the first year of the previous assembly, only one measure—an amendment of two paragraphs of the civil code—was introduced by a legislator. In the same period, eleven initiatives of the governor were presented, all of which passed. In the 1995–98 congress, "the governor proposed measures, and we in the legislature approved them. We did not think of how to improve things ourselves then," recalled one repeat PRI representative.⁷ By contrast, the current legislature set out an agenda of ten measures to consider in its first year: "There is an enthusiasm among legislators to take on the state's problems that is new to the congress," a repeat PAN legislator observed.⁸ This activity has drawn attention; the work of the legislature and its committees now frequently garner extensive coverage and even front-page mentions in one or more of Michoacán's three daily newspapers, and legislative sessions are regularly covered by the local television news programs.

Since taking office, Michoacán's new legislature has made important strides toward its institutionalization as a representative body strong enough to hold the governor accountable and prevent executive abuses of power. This rapid advance occurred immediately after the new, pluralistic legislature was installed, and the legislators themselves attribute the changes to the greater pluralism in the chamber. Michoacán's experience lends strong support to the view that legislative pluralism generates more institutionalized legislatures—and, in at least some cases, does so quite swiftly.

ELECTORAL LAW: THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN COMPETITION AND PLURALISM

The experiences of the Mexican states described above provide support for the view that legislative institutionalization depends not upon

Michoacán), Morelia, 4 February 2002; and Diputado/Coordinador Mario Magaña Juárez (PRI, Michoacán), Morelia, 14 February 2002.

6. Interview with Diputado José Leonardo Vallejo Rojas (PAN, Michoacán), Morelia, 13 February 2002.

7. Interview with Diputado/Coordinador Mario Magaña Juárez (PRI, Michoacán), Morelia, 14 February 2002.

8. Interview with Diputado Juan Rafael Castelazo Mendoza (PAN, Michoacán), Morelia, 12 February 2002.

electoral competition in itself, but on the pluralism among the parties represented in the legislature that competition tends to generate. These experiences, however, raise the question of why more competitive electorates sometimes fail to create more pluralistic legislatures. The answer is found in the rules that electoral officials apply to determine the winners of legislative seats from the vote totals. The electorates of Guanajuato and San Luis Potosí may have displayed similar amounts of competition in the two states' 1997 elections, but the applicable laws differed greatly. In Guanajuato the state electoral code entitles every party that gains at least 3 percent of the vote at least one seat in the legislature, and each party's seat share is made as proportional as possible to its share of the vote. In San Luis Potosí, on the other hand, the party with the most votes is entitled by law to a legislative majority no matter how divided the electorate. At similar levels of electoral competition, the more proportional electoral system of Guanajuato will always yield more representation for opposition parties and so greater pressure for legislative institutionalization. In Michoacán a new, more proportional electoral code was enacted in February 2001; if the election had been held under the old law, the PRD, by virtue of its twelve victories in the state's twenty-four single-member districts, would have automatically gained twenty-one of forty congressional seats, leaving the PRI with sixteen and the PAN three. The effective number of parties in the legislature then would have been 2.26, roughly similar to that of the previous legislature; under those circumstances, as several legislators observed, the rapid institutionalization of the legislature likely would not have occurred.⁹

Although often overlooked, differences in state electoral laws explain much of the variation in the number of parties that have achieved representation across all of Mexico's state legislatures.¹⁰ At first glance, state

9. The experience of Jalisco's legislature from 1995 to 1998 provides support for these legislators' view: institutionalization does not arise merely from the loss of a majority by the long-ruling PRI or the election of an opposition governor. With low legislative pluralism, just 1.9 effective parties, little or no institutionalization occurred, despite the PRI's losses. The PAN majority assigned itself a majority of members in every committee. It did grant the PRI and PRD the chairs of a few minor committees, but retained twenty-eight of thirty-three committee chairs, including those of the committees charged with overseeing the newly elected *panista* governor. According to Jalisco's *Diario de los Debates*, the record of daily activity of the state legislature, not a single legislative initiative was introduced by a legislator during the congress's first year in office.

10. Even authors who take note of state electoral systems in Mexico have minimized or dismissed outright any differences among them. Several recent works on the politics of the thirty-one Mexican states accredit state electoral-system reform, in particular the addition of proportional-representation (PR) seats, with the increased representation of parties other than the long-dominant PRI in state legislatures (Crespo 1996; Lujambio 2000). Lujambio (2000, 54–62), however, made no distinctions among the state electoral systems of the last twenty years in his discussion of the increase in pluralism in state legislatures during this period. Beer (2001, 424) contended that the states' electoral

electoral systems in Mexico appear quite similar: all tend to mirror fairly closely the system of the lower chamber of the federal legislature, in which 60 percent of the seats are awarded to the candidate with the largest number of votes in a particular district (known as plurality or single-member-district seats) and the remaining 40 percent of the seats are divided among the parties in proportion to their share of the vote (known as proportional-representation, or PR seats). A close reading of state constitutions and electoral laws in effect in the late 1990s, however, reveals that important distinctions exist in how closely parties' seat shares match their vote shares. The effective district magnitude—the average number of seats elected from each district, adjusted to take into account the effect of specific electoral rules—varied from as low as one (in Hidalgo, San Luis Potosí, and Tlaxcala) to as high as 33.3 (in the state of Mexico). Higher district magnitudes indicate more proportional electoral systems, because as the number of seats elected from a single district rises, the precision with which seats can be matched to votes rises as well.

Table 1 below presents the results of a regression analysis of pluralism in the legislatures of the Mexican states in the late 1990s as a function of competition in the states' electorates and of the states' electoral systems. Although the distribution of votes across districts injects an element of chance that prevents these relationships from being deterministic, no other factors can logically directly affect legislative pluralism: electoral officials consult only the official vote totals and the applicable electoral law to determine which parties gain congressional representation and how much.¹¹

As expected, the fit of this model is quite good; the R^2 indicates that it accounts for nearly two-thirds of the variation in the number of legislative parties observed in the late 1990s. The effects of both competition in the electorate and differences in electoral systems are strong and consistent across cases. For each additional effective party in the vote, there were, on average, 0.566 additional effective parties in the legislature. Net of the effect of electoral laws, then, this result predicts that the difference between the state with most electoral competition, Morelos, where there were 3.63 effective parties in the vote, and the least, Guerrero, which had only 2.21 effective parties, would generate a difference of 0.80 effective parties in the legislature.

systems can play no role in explaining variation in the institutionalization of their legislatures without discussing differences in the systems. Even Crespo's (1996, 73) comprehensive survey of state electoral laws only notes the differences in how PR seats are assigned in passing and fails to analyze the relationship between electoral systems and the partisan composition of state legislatures.

11. As effective district magnitude is an imperfect means of condensing complex legal provisions into a single number, measurement error undoubtedly also adds to the error of the model of this hypothesis.

Table 1 *Predicting Legislative Pluralism in Mexico's States, 1996 to 1999*

	<i>Unstandardized Coefficient (Std. Error)</i>
Effective Number of Parties in the Vote	0.566*** (0.129)
Effective District Magnitude	0.021*** (0.006)
Constant	0.712*
R2	.630

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; one-tailed tests. The dependent variable is the effective number of parties in the thirty-one Mexican state legislatures elected between 1996 and 1999. Linear regression, OLS estimates.

The total effect of varying electoral laws is almost as great as that of differences in electoral competition. A one-point change in effective district magnitude increased the effective number of parties in the legislature by an average of 0.021 across the Mexican states in this cycle of elections. With equal levels of electoral pluralism, the difference between the most proportional state electoral system and the least proportional system would result, according to this analysis, in an average difference of 0.67 effective legislative parties. Although competition plays an important role in determining the extent of pluralism in legislatures, electoral laws also shape legislative pluralism and therefore the pressure within a legislature for its institutionalization.

CONCLUSIONS

Scholars of democratization have recently rediscovered the idea that by creating a balance of powers able to check executive abuses, more institutionalized legislatures are critical components of the quality of new democracies (O'Donnell 1994, 1999). Drawing on the U.S. experience, Beer (2001) argued that increased electoral competition provides the impetus for legislatures to institutionalize. Legislative pluralism, however, is a better explanation for the pattern of institutionalization Beer found across three central Mexican state legislatures, and the experience of Michoacán demonstrates how more pluralism in the legislature led to increased institutionalization even as competition in the electorate declined. The missing piece of Beer's argument is the role of electoral law in determining how a party's share of the votes at the polls is translated into its share of legislative seats. Although virtually all legislative elections in the United States have been held using only single-member districts, the state laws of Mexico display important variations. This paper has shown that these differences in electoral laws are roughly as important as electoral pluralism in determining the degree of pluralism in Mexico's state legislatures and so the extent of pressure for their institutionalization.

The findings presented here, however, stand in tension with some recent works on presidential democracy. Responding to the arguments of Juan Linz (1990, 1994) that presidential systems are more likely than parliamentary systems to suffer democratic breakdown, several scholars have argued that the perils of presidentialism are greatly exacerbated, if not caused entirely, by excessive legislative pluralism (Jones 1995; Mainwaring 1993; Shugart and Carey 1992). Mark Jones (1995), for example, argued that the stability of presidential democracies depends on the president's party holding a majority or nearly so in the legislature. He found that across Latin America as the effective number of legislative parties rose, the president's party's share of legislative seats fell, and executive-legislative conflict increased. Besides undermining democratic institutions, he reasoned that the increased conflict reduced the ability of the executive to act decisively to meet pressing problems and so further threatened the stability of democratic rule. On this basis, Jones advocated crafting electoral laws to minimize legislative pluralism and ensure majority support for the executive.

However, my own analysis presented here finds that such measures work against the development of more institutionalized legislatures. Legislatures dominated by the executive's party are indeed less likely to come into conflict with the executive, but they are also less likely to generate their own policy proposals, enjoy multiparty control of important internal positions and exercise appropriate oversight, or acquire the resources needed to take these steps.¹² In other words, such legislatures tend to be mere rubber stamps for the executive branch, rather than independent checks on its power. Because less-pluralistic legislatures fail to develop into effective institutions of horizontal accountability, lower-quality democracies result.

Despite these seemingly contradictory findings, it does not appear that there is a trade-off between the stability of a presidential democracy and its quality. More recent work suggests that the history of Latin American presidential democracies demonstrates that legislative pluralism endangers democratic stability only at quite high levels, over three-and-a-half or four effective parties (Mainwaring and Shugart 1997). According to these authors, although two-party systems and presidential majorities (or near majorities) are generally preferable, moderate amounts of legislative pluralism can be tolerated without threatening regime stability. The findings of this article extend the argument considerably: within the range of low to moderate legislative pluralism, more pluralism is not only tolerable, it actually results in higher-quality democracies.

12. Indeed, Jones's count of conflicts included such democracy-enhancing checks on executive power as legislative attempts to influence policy by modifying executive initiatives or to censure executive-branch officials for wrongdoing (Jones 1995, 197–98).

This conclusion has clear policy implications for electoral-system engineering. Where, as in the Mexican states, elections to executive office have been held on a plurality basis and concurrently with legislative elections, the effective number of legislative parties has only very rarely exceeded four, even when electoral systems with very high effective magnitudes were used (Jones 1995; Mainwaring and Shugart 1997). Such provisions for the timing and formula of executive elections should therefore be employed to mitigate the risks of regime instability that are associated with very high levels of legislative pluralism. To facilitate the institutionalization of legislatures as valuable checks on executive power, on the other hand, electoral systems with large effective magnitudes should be adopted so as to allow the election of relatively pluralistic legislatures. Rather than a compliant legislature controlled by their own parties, or a do-nothing legislature held by a stonewalling opposition, executives will then face a more active, more vigilant, and more nearly coequal branch of democratic government.

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