

AN ELECTORATE ADRIFT?

Public Opinion and the Quality of Democracy in Mexico*

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Abstract: When citizens lack stable political attitudes, leaders cannot easily be held accountable for their record in office, party system consolidation becomes more difficult, and public opinion is unable to offer much substantive guidance about policy-making. Ultimately, democratic governance is likely to suffer. In this article, we analyze a recent four-wave panel survey to assess the stability of political attitudes in Mexico. We find that the degree of attitude stability in Mexico varies across different types of dispositions. Although citizens hold reasonably firm views about the country's main political actors, preferences over issues are less consistent. These findings suggest both possibilities and constraints for democratic governance.

INTRODUCTION

When citizens lack firm, enduring dispositions to guide their thinking about politics, it is difficult for them to hold leaders accountable or to offer much guidance about policy. Assessments of incumbent office holders are a key ingredient in models of "retrospective voting," in which officials in a democracy are held accountable for actions and decisions. If public attitudes towards the president and other central political figures fluctuate widely from month to month, leaders will not be judged

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on their overall record in government. Likewise, fairly stable party identifications are essential if partisan blocs are to become consolidated as mass-based organizations, to mobilize effectively during political campaigns, and to tie together diverse interests in the policy-making process. Finally, democratic representation is more feasible where citizens are able to express consistent preferences regarding policy issues.

In this article, we analyze a recent four-wave panel study to examine patterns of attitude stability and change during Mexico's 2000 presidential race. We find that the degree of attitude stability in Mexico depends heavily on the type of dispositions under consideration: presidential approval, partisan self-identification, ideology, or opinions about salient public issues. Citizens held much firmer attitudes about the main parties and the president than they did about ideology and policies, at least in the beginning of the campaign. Overall, though, Mexican public opinion is well formed enough on key dimensions for citizens to play the role of partisan actors and political protagonists. Our findings thus offer grounds for moderate optimism about the potential for popular accountability and representation in Mexico.

The first section of this article recapitulates long-standing arguments about the role of public opinion in democratic governance, showing how they are relevant to Mexico and other emerging democracies today. The second section discusses how Mexico's transition to multi-party electoral competition might have a disorienting effect on public opinion, and to what degree opinion might be expected to solidify during the 2000 presidential campaign. The third section reports aggregate-level results across different types of dispositions during the campaign. Although the campaign clearly affected certain attitudes—for instance, tending to increase identification with the Christian Democratic-oriented National Action Party (PAN)—little overall change was noted on most dimensions. Mexican public opinion thus appears firm and stable in the aggregate.

The fourth section of the article draws on data from the Mexico 2000 Panel Study to analyze attitude stability at the individual level. Here, the results prove quite different from those suggested by aggregate-level data, with the degree of consistency over time varying substantially across different dispositions. Citizens' attitudes toward the main political actors in Mexico—the president and the three leading parties—were quite stable. Although less well entrenched than in the United States and Western Europe, these dispositions nevertheless provide the basis for enduring views about political issues. Ideological predispositions (on a Left-Right scale) proved less consistent, although the stability of ideology toward the end of the campaign approached levels found in the United States. Similar results emerged with attitudes toward crime control and privatization.

The fifth section repeats our analysis for respondents with different levels of education. Once the unreliability of survey responses is taken into account, these sub-segments of the population appear to hold similarly stable (or unstable) views. With the exception of ideological self-identification, more educated Mexicans remained equally susceptible to short-term influences. Thus Mexico's changing political context appears to have exercised the same sort of effects on citizens with very different backgrounds. The final section of the article discusses the implications of our findings for democratic governance in Mexico and possibly other developing democracies.

MASS BELIEF SYSTEMS AND THE QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY

Political scientists have long since argued that the quality of democratic governance depends in part on the quality of citizens' judgments. Ignorant, myopic, indifferent, or "corrupt" populations are unlikely to sustain stable, democratic government; educated, engaged and "virtuous" societies, by contrast, are better able to ensure that public administration reflects popular preferences (Machiavelli [1531] 1979, 218–28; Almond and Verba 1962). To the extent that citizens can actively monitor elected officials, the argument goes, democracy will work admirably well; otherwise, it is likely to work poorly or even break down.

Research in the United States and other established democracies, however, has amply documented the gap between the idealized citizens of democratic theory and the real-world denizens of democratic societies (Lippmann [1922] 1998, [1927] 1993; Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1970). Relatively few people pay close attention to politics; fewer still can speak authoritatively about public affairs or grasp the intricacies of policy-making processes (Kohut, Toth, and Bowman 1994; Butler and Stokes 1969; Converse and Dupeux 1962; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). These findings have led some scholars to conclude that most public opinion is essentially non-opinion, and that ordinary citizens cannot be expected to play an active or meaningful role in shaping policy (Lippmann [1927] 1993).

Public opinion in Mexico is clearly not immune to these sorts of criticisms. Like most people in other countries, Mexicans know of and care little about politics. For instance, in February 2000 only 28 percent of Mexican adults could name all three branches of government, and less than 3 percent could correctly recall the number of seats in Mexico's lower house of Congress (500). Moreover, only 7 percent of citizens reported being "very interested" in politics; 30 percent reported having no interest at all in politics. Approximately 57 percent talked about politics rarely or never.¹ These figures improved somewhat over the course

1. Data are taken from the first wave of the Mexico 2000 Panel Study.

of the 2000 campaign, but not dramatically. Just after the election in July 2000, 61 percent of citizens still could not name all three branches of government, and 95 percent could not correctly recall the number of representatives in the Chamber of Deputies. Less than 13 percent reported being "very interested" in politics (with 17 percent not at all interested). Perhaps most remarkably, though, 46 percent still admitted to discussing politics only rarely or not at all.² At a pivotal point in Mexico's democratic transition, then, vast numbers of Mexicans remained ill informed about and disengaged from politics.

Yet despite their informational shortcomings and lack of interest, ordinary citizens may still hold a core set of stable political beliefs. In the United States and other established democracies, decades of behavioral research have demonstrated that such beliefs play a crucial role in orienting public opinion. Chief among these core dispositions are partisan preferences (Campbell et al. 1960; Schickler and Green 1997; Dalton 2002), left-right ideological orientations, and commitments to particular values (Krosnick 1991; Page and Shapiro 1992; Kaase, Newton, and Scarbrough 1997; Feldman 1988). To one degree or another, these are the foundations upon which mass belief systems are built. They offer citizens a way to understand politics and to make meaningful electoral choices, even if information is scarce, expensive, or murky (Key 1966; Popkin 1991, 44–71; Sniderman, Tetlock, and Brody 1991; Sniderman et al. 1995, 1986). Poorly informed voters can thus play the role of political protagonists, choosing between well-defined, familiar alternatives in ways that theoretically reflect their underlying interests and values.

In theory, citizens' views and votes become important inputs in political organizing and policy-making. From public opinion polls and election results, politicians can glean useful information about which parties command the largest followings, which measures citizens will favor and, perhaps more importantly, which they will not tolerate. Armed with this information, election-seeking politicians can anticipate voters' reactions, craft platforms, mobilize constituencies, and formulate public policies (Ferejohn 1999; see also Herbst 1998). In a stable institutional and attitudinal context, then, citizen preferences can find reflection in public policy. Despite generally low levels of political knowledge and engagement, democracy can actually work.

Recent scholarship has paid relatively less attention to public opinion in the context of political transition. If political alternatives are unfamiliar, or if the institutional setting that normally frames choices for voters is itself unstable, ordinary citizens may lack the familiar reference points that enable them to make sense of politics. In that case, their opinions are likely to be less consistent and more susceptible to short-

2. Data are taken from the post-electoral cross-section of the Mexico 2000 Panel Study.

term stimuli. And if public opinion has little underlying consistency, the prospects for party-system consolidation, popular representation, and governmental accountability would be grim. In that case, the skepticism about participatory government that Walter Lippmann famously expressed almost eighty years ago might well prove justified (Lippmann 1993 [1927]).

Hoary debates about the nature of public opinion reemerge in the context of the political transitions that have swept Mexico and other countries over the last two decades. As authoritarian structures give way to freely contested elections, much more is expected from citizens. People who have not traditionally been active in politics or thought much about it must now arrive at stable, sensible, and meaningful judgments about political issues and alternatives. If partisan attachments are only loosely held, or if ideologies, issue positions, and evaluations of leaders are ephemeral, the quality of democratic governance is likely to suffer. If the public reacts overwhelmingly to short-term stimuli, government officials will have an incentive to engage in risky gambits and short-term fixes to gain support from a volatile electorate. If these gambits do not produce quick results, politicians will then have incentives to undertake radical swings in policy.

Usually made implicit, assumptions about the nature of public opinion often underlie scholarly research and reasoning on the quality of democracy in Latin America. For instance, "delegative democracy" (O'Donnell 1994) may result from a lack of constitutional checks on the chief executive, but it may also result from a citizenry that is cognitively incapable of doing more than affirming or rejecting the political alternatives placed before it by rival elites. Although such a system may be democratic in the sense that leaders are chosen by citizens via elections, the scope for leaders' discretion will be extreme, and accountability correspondingly low. The opposite sorts of assumptions underlie scholarship on "direct democracy" and "participatory democracy." In these systems, ordinary citizens are presumed to have enduring and possibly even intense views on specific matters of policy. The existence of such clear beliefs makes citizens' active, vigorous involvement in the policy-making process both feasible and valuable, improving the quality of democratic governance.

To be sure, many factors affect the quality of democracy in a given society: the existence of a functioning state apparatus, civilian control over the security forces, legal restraints on government officials, the breadth and depth of mobilized civic organizations, the independence of the mass media, and so on. Without these institutions, democracy may not even survive, much less function well. The nature of public opinion, however, also affects the nature and extent of popular representation. At the very least the absence of stable dispositions severely

limits the degree to which citizens can guide the actions of leaders, even if the institutions through which they might do so have already been consolidated.

POLITICAL TRANSITION AND PUBLIC OPINION IN MEXICO

In the past twenty years, Mexico has undergone a transition from hegemonic rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) to multi-party electoral democracy (Cornelius 1996; Camp 1996; Lawson 2000; Bruhn, Levy, and Zepadúa 2001, 66–148). Since the late 1980s opposition parties like the PAN and the leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) have consistently claimed over half of the votes in national elections—a trend that culminated in Vicente Fox's July 2000 victory. Although these changes have opened up new possibilities for voters, they have also created a more complex and confusing political context.

One example concerns the figure of the president, for decades the symbol of Mexico's old regime. Not surprisingly, attitudes toward the president have traditionally correlated well with attitudes toward the ruling party and the political system. In other systems, such as the United States, presidential approval might best be conceived as a sort of running tally on the chief executive's performance in office. In the Mexican context, however, presidential approval has also contained a heavy inertial component, based on attitudes toward the political system (Domínguez and Poiré 1999; Domínguez and McCann 1996). In the absence of profound economic shocks, dramatic scandals, or the like, evaluations of the president should be expected to remain quite constant.

The political changes that swept Mexico during the late 1990s, however, complicated assessments of the president. Presidential power eroded during Ernesto Zedillo's term (1994–2000), and Zedillo himself backed a number of crucial political reforms (Rubio 1998; Lawson 2000; Bruhn, Levy, and Zepadúa 2001, 131–36). Consequently, it became more difficult to equate attitudes toward the president with opinions of the regime itself. Should one evaluate Zedillo based on his job performance, as with any other democratically elected chief executive, or based on one's more enduring attitudes toward the political system? If the latter, should one view Zedillo as yet another representative of the old regime or as a reformer dedicated to changing that regime?

Democratic transition also introduced complexities into assessments of the main political parties. Before the emergence of two large opposition blocs, Mexicans could simply view elections as referenda on the regime. Even after both the PAN and the PRD became national players, voting could still be thought of as a two-step process, in which citizens first decided whether or not to support the ruling party and only subsequently determined which of the two opposition factions to support

(Domínguez and McCann 1995, 1996). At an even more primitive and simplistic level, voters could interpret the party system in terms of a single issue-dimension, with the PRD representing intense rejection of the regime and the PAN representing moderate opposition. In fact most Mexicans tended to think of “Left” and “Right” as indicating evaluations of the regime, rather than preferences over economic redistribution or social policy. Thus “leftists” were especially hostile to the PRI, the president, and other pillars of the old regime; “rightists” were most supportive of these institutions. From this perspective the PRI was generally regarded as rightist, the PRD as leftist, and the PAN as located in the center-right (Moreno 1998; Lawson 1999).³ Using this heuristic, Mexican voters could still act as political protagonists by casting their votes according to the intensity of their dislike for the regime.

Unfortunately for voters, this sort of heuristic lost much of its utility as democratization progressed. After a series of political reforms in the mid-1990s, regime-type issues began to diminish in relevance and salience (Moreno 1998). Consequently, attitudes that divided the PRD from the PAN (such as social issues, economic policy, and the role of the Church) began to loom larger. Thus, ideology became an increasingly muddled concept, representing an uncertain amalgam of classic “left-right” issues, cultural values, and attitudes toward the old political establishment (Zechmeister 2002; Moreno 1998).

Candidate appeals during the 2000 race itself did little to clear up this muddle. In that contest voters were confronted with a ruling party nominee (Francisco Labastida) who criticized “the old PRI,” distanced himself from the sitting president, and chose “change” as a central theme of his campaign (Domínguez and Lawson forthcoming). Meanwhile the normally conservative PAN selected a feisty candidate (Vicente Fox) who described himself as “a man of the center-left” and made broadsides against Mexico’s political establishment the centerpiece of his campaign. By contrast Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas of the “leftist” PRD (which remained leftist in the typical, non-Mexican sense) de-emphasized the traditional cleavage between regime supporters and opponents in an attempt to prevent strategic voting for Fox. In such a context it seems likely that mass attitudes about ideology and partisan positions might well be confused.

How Mexico’s transition might have affected attitudes toward specific policy measures is not immediately apparent. The once-nationalistic PRI introduced sweeping economic reforms during the 1980s and 1990s, which presumably divided its base of voters (Klesner 1994, 1993).

3. This trend persisted through the 2000 election, with Mexicans placing the PRD at 3.6, the PAN at 5.8, and the PRI at 6.3 on an 0–10 ideological scale, from left to right (Mexico 2000 Panel Study, post-electoral cross-section). Average placement in February was similar.

Although the positions of the PRD and PAN on most issues were more consistent, both parties had moved substantially toward the center during the 1990s. Despite the potent consequences that economic reform and other policies had for citizens' lives, it is not clear how well-formed citizens' attitudes about these issues might have been in 2000, nor are the likely effects of the 2000 campaign obvious. On the one hand campaign appeals during the 2000 race gave relatively little play to "positional" issues, focusing instead on candidate traits and "valence" issues (Magaloni and Poiré forthcoming).⁴ Although topics like privatization of the energy sector and public safety were mentioned in debates and televised advertisements, these issues never dominated the campaign. On the other hand the high-intensity nature of the 2000 race may have helped to stabilize attitudes. Mexico's two main television networks devoted over seventy-three hours of free airtime to the three major candidates between 1 January and 28 June 2000; the major radio networks collectively offered more than five times that amount (over 446 hours), and the main presidential candidates bombarded their potential constituents with approximately twenty-five hours of paid television spots.⁵ Meanwhile candidates barnstormed the country, and their activists fanned out across Mexico to court and cajole potential voters. All told, the three main candidates spent over 200 million dollars in public funds and possibly that much again in other funds (Grayson 2000, 25, 62). Given such a saturation of exposure, people might well have acquired firmer views over the course of the campaign.

AGGREGATE-LEVEL CHANGES IN ATTITUDES

With this backdrop in mind, we turn to attitude change during the 2000 campaign. We rely for data on the 2000 Mexico Panel Study, currently the only source of four-wave panel data in an emerging democracy. The first wave of this study was administered in February 2000 to a randomly selected national sample of approximately 2,400 Mexicans. The second wave ($N=952$) was conducted in late April and early May, involving a randomly selected subset of the 2,400 respondents from the first wave. In early June with just four weeks left in the campaign, a third questionnaire was administered to a randomly chosen group of participants from the second wave plus all available respondents from the initial sample who had not been interviewed in the second round (a

4. Positional issues are those for which people might express different views (e.g., imposing the death penalty). Valence issues are those for which there is consensus about the goal of policy (e.g., reducing crime).

5. Data are taken from *Reforma* newspaper's media monitoring effort. For further detail, see Moreno (forthcoming).

total of 974 individuals). Finally, after the 2 July election, interviewers polled as many respondents as possible from the first wave ($N=1,254$).

The Mexico 2000 Panel Study included repeated measures of certain key dispositions, which can be used to assess the stability of political attitudes. For presidential approval, the survey employed a branched scale, with a separate coding for (spontaneous) expressions of neutrality toward the president, Ernesto Zedillo. Measurements for partisan identification relied on a two-step branching measure similar to the ones employed in American, Canadian, and European national election studies:⁶

Presidential approval: "In general, do you approve or disapprove of how Ernesto Zedillo is doing his job as president?" Respondents who indicated either approval or disapproval were then asked: "A lot or somewhat?" [The result was a five-point scale: 1=strong approval, 2=weak approval, 3=neutral, 4=weak disapproval, and 5=strong disapproval.]

Partisan self-identification: "Generally speaking, do you consider yourself a *priísta*, *panísta*, or *perredísta* (a supporter of the PRI, a supporter of the PAN, or a supporter of the PRD)? Those who expressed a partisan preference were then asked: "Would you say that you are very *priísta/panísta/perredísta* or somewhat *priísta/panísta/perredísta*?" Those who did not express a partisan preference were asked: "With which party do you sympathize most?" [These items were combined to produce a four-point scale for each party: 3=strong identifier, 2=weak identifier, 1=leaner, 0=non-identifier.]

The panel also included several items designed to tap general ideological dispositions on a left-right scale, as well as attitudes toward two salient policy issues—crime control and privatization. If Mexican citizens possess "core dispositions" about policy, these attitudes would undoubtedly be among the most deeply held.

Left-Right ideological self-placement: "In politics people often speak of 'left' and 'right.' On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is 'left' and 10 is 'right,' where would you place yourself?"

Crime control: "On this card are two ways of dealing with crime—1 signifies that you agree with one position, and 10 means that you agree with the other. Please tell me the point on the scale where you would place yourself." The respondent was then shown a card with a scale. Next to 1 was the statement, "We should fight crime by creating jobs and opportunities for people." Next to 10 was the statement, "We should fight crime with a firm hand and tougher penalties for criminals." [In the February wave, this item was posed as a dichotomous choice between the two alternatives.]

Privatization: "On this card are two ways of dealing with the electrical industry in our country—1 signifies that you agree with one position, and 10 means that you agree with the other. Please tell me the point on the scale where you would place yourself." The respondent was then shown a card showing a scale. Next

6. Our substantive results change little if party identification is measured using a dummy coding (Schickler and Green 1997).

Table 1 Political Dispositions During the 2000 Mexican Presidential Campaign: Means and Standard Errors (in parentheses)

	February	April/May	June	July
Party Identification				
PRI	.93 (.02)	.95 (.04)	.90 (.04)	.83 (.02)
PAN	.56 (.02)	.57 (.03)	.64 (.03)	.76 (.03)
PRD	.22 (.01)	.28 (.02)	.25 (.02)	.23 (.02)
Presidential Approval	2.64 (.03)	2.64 (.04)	2.67 (.04)	2.28 (.03)
Left-Right Self-Placement	6.41 (.08)	6.52 (.12)	6.72 (.12)	6.22 (.11)
Issue Positions				
Crime Control	5.39 (.10)	5.59 (.13)	5.10 (.13)	4.96 (.11)
Privatization	4.41 (.10)	3.70 (.12)	3.92 (.12)	3.45 (.10)
Lowest N	1,694	758	755	1,020

Source: Mexico 2000 Panel Study.

NOTE: Party identification was measured using a four-point scale (strong identifiers were coded 3, weak identifiers 2, leaning identifiers 1, and those who did not identify with the party were scored 0). Left-right self-placement was based on an eleven-point scale (0=left, 10=right). Issue positions were measured on a ten-point scale. The items on privatization and crime control did not appear in comparable form or coding in the February wave; data here represent recoding from the original dichotomous response options.

to 1 was the statement "The electrical industry should be completely in the hands of the government." Next to 10 was the statement "The electric industry should be completely in the hands of private investors." [In the February wave, this item was posed as a dichotomous choice between the two alternatives.]

Shifts in these attitudes are shown in table 1, which provides mean scores and standard errors for each survey wave. As the table indicates, aggregate-level evaluations of the president changed little over the course of the campaign. Zedillo's approval ratings remained blandly positive (with 3.0 representing neutrality) through early June. Only after Fox's victory—and Zedillo's early recognition of that victory—did his approval ratings increase somewhat (approximately 0.4 points on a five-point scale). Although this increase is statistically significant, it is not particularly dramatic.

In the case of party identifications, average attachments to the PRI and PRD did not fluctuate very much between February and June. To be sure, the election itself brought about a noticeable drop in identification with the PRI, but the difference between June and July means is not large—0.90 before election day, and 0.83 afterwards. Even though the ruling party lost, it retained a wider mass following than the PAN in

July. That said, the slight but steady increase in PAN identification between February and June foreshadows the Fox victory. At the start of the campaign, the electorate was decidedly more inclined to identify with the PRI; the same cannot be said for the July wave. On the whole it appears that partisanship in Mexico was somewhat more sensitive to short-term campaign stimuli than it tends to be in established democracies. Nevertheless there seems to be a great deal of inertia at the aggregate-level.

Some limited change is also apparent for ideology, with the most noteworthy shifts taking place between June and July. In the case of left-right self-placements, the electorate appears to have moved to the right during the first three panel waves. After Fox's victory on 2 July, however, this trend was reversed; in the fourth wave of the panel, the mean tilted a half-point toward the left. If one conceives of ideology in terms of attitudes toward economic policy, this change represents a shift away from the PRD and toward Fox during the campaign. On the other hand if ideology is understood with reference to the political system (as most Mexicans appear to understand it), then this change hardly anticipates Fox's triumph. None of these changes, however, was particularly great; the salient finding in table 1 is stability of ideological predispositions at the aggregate level.

With regard to specific policies, most changes also remained modest. Citizens seem to have become slightly more hard-nosed with regard to crime control during the first half of the race, but this effect was not long-lasting. In the latter two waves, respondents on average were less committed to a 'firm hand' than in February. Attitudes towards management of the electrical power industry were subject to somewhat greater change. Between the first and second survey waves, respondents became less supportive of privatization. By June sentiments tilted slightly more in its favor (a position for which Fox showed somewhat more sympathy than his two main rivals). The electorate then reversed itself in July, moving nearly a half-point towards the left. In all periods, however, the public as a whole remained favorably disposed toward continued state control.

Overall the findings suggest that the 2000 race shaped public opinion somewhat on certain dimensions. Yet even in this period of intense campaigning, recurring tendencies emerged. The PRI attracted the largest number of identifiers, the PAN placed second, and the PRD was a distant third in all waves of the panel. Ideologically, the Mexican electorate over this five-month period could be characterized as centrist to conservative on the issue of political reform but generally "leftist" in terms of support for state-owned industries (see Domínguez and McCann 1996). This mix of attitudes did not change dramatically during the 2000 campaign.

INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL CHANGES

Aggregate data often mask a great deal of opinion switching among individual citizens, as those who switch from one position to another tend to cancel each other out (Inglehart 1985; Finkel 1995). The extent of this switching becomes clear when we consider individual-level data over the course of the campaign. For instance the simple correlation between presidential approval measured in the second and third panel waves is only .59; for ideology, privatization, and crime control, that same figure is .52, .44, and .43, respectively. During that same period, 17 percent of those who identified with the PRI in the April/May wave switched their partisan identification, along with 29 percent of original PAN identifiers, and 30 percent of PRD original identifiers.

Simple correlation coefficients and percentage changes, however, may not accurately capture the stability of attitudes. As a number of authors have noted, many of the survey items commonly used in studies of political behavior are measured with less than perfect reliability. If unchecked, such measurement error can make it look as though attitudes change more than they actually do (Asher 1974; Achen 1975; Green and Palmquist 1990; Alwin and Krosnick 1991). For this reason we explicitly take into account the unreliability of survey responses by distinguishing between latent attitude distributions in a given wave and raw survey responses. We fit a first-order autoregressive model on each of the attitudes, similar to the specifications employed in developed countries (Inglehart 1985; Green and Palmquist 1990; Schickler and Green 1997). Attitude positions at a given time period are specified as a function of lagged values of each item plus a contemporaneous disturbance term: $\text{Attitude}_i = \beta \text{Attitude}_{i-1} + \text{Residual}_i$.⁷ Attitudes are thus assumed to be a function of previous dispositions plus changes in response to short-term stimuli, which could include both new cues and changes in real-world circumstances, with random noise being factored out. This specification is shown in figure 1. Because each variable was measured at four points in time, it is possible to obtain both stability and measurement reliability parameters, with two degrees of freedom left to assess the validity of our specifications. In general, our specifications perform well.⁸

7. Following Wiley and Wiley (1970), we assume that: (a) the residual term in a particular regression is not correlated with residuals in any other wave, the latent attitude variables, or any measurement errors in the survey instruments, (b) measurement error variance is constant for each item throughout the panel, and (c) these errors in measurement are not correlated with latent attitudes or measurement errors for survey items in any other panel wave. This is not the only way to approach the question of stability in public opinion (see, e.g., Green and Yoon 2002; Stimson 1991; Page and Shapiro 1992, chapter 2). However, from our theoretical standpoint and with the data at hand, the formulation in figure 1 is most appropriate.

8. We gauge the plausibility of our models via goodness of fit diagnostics. The Chi-

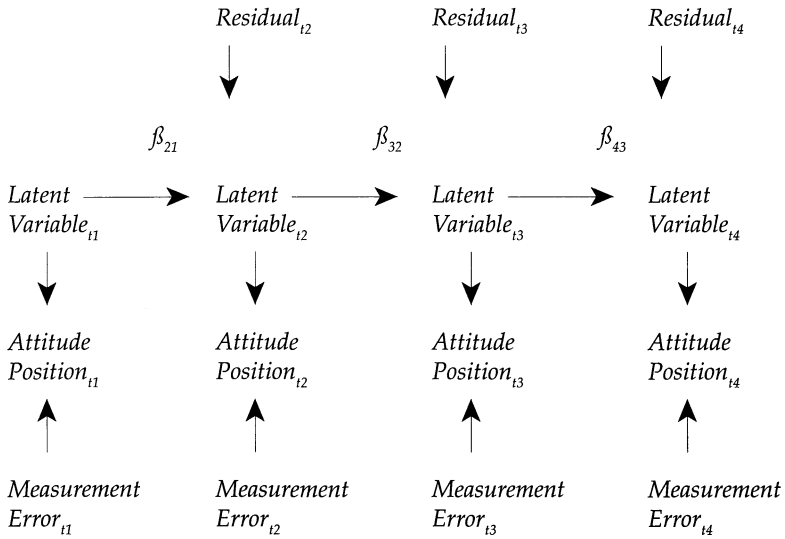


Figure 1 Modeling attitude changes and measurement unreliability with repeated measures

Table 2 reports the stability coefficients for political dispositions when error attributable to measurement unreliability is explicitly taken into account. The entries in table 2 represent unstandardized regression coefficients (with standard errors in parentheses). Here, slopes at or near 1.0 indicate that attitude distributions were quite consistent over a given time interval. Coefficients above 1.0 suggest increasing polarization over time—e.g., that those who rated Zedillo highly in one wave tended to rate him even more highly in the subsequent wave, while those who disapproved of his performance tended to disapprove of him even more in later waves. Negative coefficients would indicate the opposite—namely, a regression over time towards the middle of the distribution.

As table 2 shows, presidential approval remained relatively stable during the campaign. We find that approximately one-half of the variation in responses can be attributed to unreliable measurement—a substantial amount, but not markedly different from the level of instrumentation error estimated in U.S. surveys for comparable items

square values with 2 degrees of freedom were: 4.49 (PRI identification), 4.39 (PAN), 8.84 (PRD), 4.33 (presidential approval), 1.43 for left-right placement, 2.16 (crime control), and .49 (privatization). The Chi-squared cutoff (at the 5 percent level) is approximately 6.0, meaning that six out of seven specifications do not deviate significantly from the observed covariance matrices upon which the models are based. (The exception is opinion of the PRD.) As we would expect that one in twenty models would be significantly different based simply on random chance, we are satisfied with the overall fit of our specifications; for the sake of consistency, we retain the same setup for all attitude dimensions.

Table 2 Stability of Political Dispositions in Mexico, Controlling for Measurement Unreliability

	b_{21}	b_{32}	b_{43}	Average Item Reliability
	Feb.– April/May	April/May– June	June– July	
Party Identification				
PRI	.81 (.03)	1.00 (.03)	.89 (.03)	.79
PAN	.93 (.04)	.96 (.04)	.98 (.04)	.74
PRD	.93 (.04)	.95 (.04)	.81 (.03)	.76
Presidential Approval	1.09 (.09)	.94 (.06)	.64 (.05)	.51
Political Ideology				
Left-Right Self-Placement	.68 (.08)	1.00 (.10)	.80 (.08)	.54
Issue Positions				
Crime Control	.32 (.04)	1.01 (.12)	.82 (.09)	.44
Privatization	.33 (.04)	.89 (.10)	.74 (.08)	.51

Source: Mexico 2000 Panel Study.

NOTE: AMOS maximum likelihood structural equation software was used to compute these findings, with all available data being retained ($N = 2,355$). The amount of random measurement error for a given item was assumed to be constant over the course of the panel and to be uncorrelated with instrumentation error for other items, latent attitude dispositions, and residual terms for the regressions.

(Krosnick 1991). The regression slopes hover around 1 in the February-April/May and April/May-June periods, differences from 1.0 being not statistically significant. Paralleling the aggregate-level findings, however, substantial change in attitudes occurs after the election. As suggested above, shifts during this period appear to reflect increasing approval of the president from erstwhile detractors, following Zedillo's rapid and gracious acknowledgment of Fox's victory. Thus attitude instability during this period appears to be the product of sensible reappraisals of Mexico's president in light of significant changes in real-world political circumstances. In the absence of such changes, feelings about the president were remarkably consistent.

The coefficients for party identification present a slightly more mixed picture. In surveys conducted in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe, party identification typically surfaces as the most stable and most reliably measured political attitude, with continuities approaching 1.0 over the course of months and even years (Krosnick 1991; Schickler and Green 1997). In Mexico as well, partisanship comes out as one of the most stable of political dispositions. It was also the most reliably gauged,

with approximately 20–25 percent of the variation in responses attributable to measurement error.⁹ Yet the findings in table 2 also indicate that a substantial degree of shifting in partisan attitudes occurred over the course of the campaign. The continuity coefficient of .81 for PRI identification between the first and second waves—only a three-month period—is not particularly high; over the full four waves, the stability coefficient for identification with the PRI between February and July is just .72.¹⁰ A comparable degree of attitude change is seen for identification with the PRD, with PAN identifications being slightly more stable. Overall, the distributions of partisan affiliations were clearly susceptible to short-term influences. Although party identification appears fairly well grounded, it should not be cast as an “unmoved mover,” as it has been in the U.S. (Green and Palmquist 1990; Campbell et al. 1960).

Substantially more change was estimated for ideological dispositions, at least in the first half of the campaign.¹¹ From the first to the second wave, stances on the left-right continuum proved to be extremely unsettled (as indicated by a continuity coefficient of .68). Yet Mexicans held substantially more consistent positions in the homestretch of the campaign; between April/May and June, no significant attitude change occurred for ideology. Intense political mobilization during the campaign thus helped to solidify ideological dispositions.

Unlike partisan identification, ideology was measured with substantial error; almost half of the variation in responses is attributable to survey mis-response. Given that the item involved terms with which many citizens were not familiar (“left” and “right”), this outcome is not altogether surprising. The scope of confusion, however, highlights the importance of controlling for measurement unreliability in survey data.

Attitudes toward the two policy issues—crime control and privatization of the electric power industry—show much the same story.

9. To simplify the presentation, we report average reliabilities rather than the reliability in each panel wave. Our specification allows variances for latent attitude dispositions to vary over time, which means that the reliability assessments can fluctuate. As a practical matter, however, there was scant variation across the four waves.

10. This effect is calculated by multiplying the three regression slopes for PRI identification between February and July (i.e., $.81 \times 1.00 \times .89 = .72$).

11. The time interval separating the first and second waves was approximately twice as long as the interval between the second and third survey waves. The contrast in stability coefficients for left-right ideological positioning over the course of the campaign (.68 versus 1.00) might therefore be due in part to this difference in timing; all else being equal, we would naturally expect more attitude change to occur over a longer period of time. By taking the square root of the b_{21} coefficient, we can get a sense of how stable opinion would be during a more comparable time interval in the early stage of the campaign (six weeks, rather than twelve). The square root of .68 is .82, which still falls markedly below the continuity estimate of 1.00 for b_{32} .

For the first half of the campaign (February to April/May), respondents remained uncertain as to how they felt about the fate of Mexico's electrical power industry and how to approach the pressing problem of public safety. Stands on these issues were clearly susceptible to short-term forces, perhaps even to the extent that they could be thought of as "nonattitudes" (Converse 1970). Consequently, the notion that citizens might base their voting decisions on candidates' issue positions seems implausible at best. In fact, policy makers and party strategists looking for guidance from Mexican voters on these topics during the first half of the campaign might well search in vain.

Toward the end of the race, however, public opinion about crime control and privatization firmed up. Presumably, the information that citizens received over the course of the campaign—including two televised debates and a slew of political advertisements—helped them to sort out their views. Despite the fact that the campaign was not particularly focused on positional issues, Mexicans did receive a healthy dose of issue-related information. In the end, the stability of opinion on these issues came to resemble that of other dispositions.¹²

All told, examination of individual-level change in public opinion paints an interesting picture of the Mexican electorate. When compared to consolidated democracies, the beliefs and sentiments of Mexicans appear more volatile. Party identifications in Mexico were, however, relatively firmly rooted, as were evaluations of the president. In addition ideological leanings and issue positions became more firmly held—and therefore less responsive to short-term stimuli—in the closing weeks of the campaign.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN ATTITUDE STABILITY

One corollary question is the extent to which different segments of the Mexican electorate held more stable views than others. In other words it may be that the electorate as a whole was still sorting out its views on policy and ideology during the presidential race but that certain sub-segments of the electorate began the campaign with much firmer dispositions. For instance Mexicans with higher levels of education might have

12. As noted earlier, policy attitudes in February were measured on a different scale than in May, June, and July (a dichotomous indicator in the first wave, and a ten-point continuum thereafter). This difference in coding might well have affected the estimation of attitude stability and measurement reliability over the course of the panel. To explore this possibility, we dropped the February responses from the models, fixed the reliability and stability parameters for the remaining three waves to the values reported in table 2, and computed Chi-square goodness of fit scores to test the plausibility of these coefficients. Fortunately, for both policy attitude models the Chi-squares were far from statistically significant—.95 for the crime item and .49 for privatization, with 3 d.f.—indicating an acceptable fit between the coefficients and data.

Table 3 *Stability of Political Dispositions from February to June, by Education Level, Controlling for Measurement Unreliability*

	Attitude stability		Item reliability	
	Low educ.	High educ.	Low educ.	High educ.
Party Identification				
PRI	.82	.74	.77	.84
PAN	.90	.90	.76	.70
PRD	.79	1.04	.73	.84
Presidential Approval	1.00	1.08	.51	.49
Political Ideology				
Left-Right Self-Placement	.47	.97	.52	.59
Issue Positions				
Crime Control	.31	.32	.41	.48
Privatization	.26	.32	.51	.55

NOTE: Respondents who had more than secondary-level schooling were placed in the "High Education" group.

more stable views (cf. Converse 1970), perhaps comparable in consistency to those held by citizens in developed democracies.

In order to examine the effects of education on attitude stability, we divided our respondents into two groups: those with at least a high school education ($N=741$) and the rest of the sample ($N=1,612$). For economy of presentation, we focus here on attitude change from the early campaign to late campaign period (i.e., from the first to third waves of the panel). These findings are presented in table 3.

As the data show, the two sub-segments showed similar levels of attitude stability over the course of the campaign. In terms of partisan identification, both groups held equally firm views of the PAN. Less-educated people were more likely to change their minds about the PRD, the least familiar of Mexico's three main parties—possibly because they simply knew less about it at the beginning of the campaign. But their attitudes toward the ruling party were more stable than those of educated respondents. Both groups held firm views of the president, and neither segment of the electorate could be relied on to hold stable opinions about salient policy issues during the first part of the campaign.

The one striking exception to these trends is left-right self-placement. Well-educated Mexicans held clear and consistent ideological orientations, comparable in stability to attitudes toward the main parties and the president. For those without at least a high school education, however, ideology remained a slippery concept. Although less-educated citizens still held

consistent views toward Mexico's key actors, these views did not necessarily form part of a coherent belief system about politics—a result similar to findings in established democracies. Consequently, the vote preferences of less-educated citizens during the first months of the campaign were unlikely to be guided by a clear political world-view.

It is worth noting that the extent of measurement error on all items was roughly the same for both groups. In other words education level did not dramatically influence the extent to which respondents were able to understand and answer survey questions with some measure of consistency. All told, approximately half of the variation in responses to most items was attributable to random noise. Only with regard to partisan identification did raw polling data elicit a clear preponderance of "real" opinion.

In summary education failed to exercise a dramatic impact on the stability of most political beliefs.¹³ This finding is a normatively attractive one in many respects, because it suggests that the roots of attitude instability do not lie in factors that are unlikely to improve in the short run (such as education levels). Rather, Mexico's political context seems to have been disorienting for many voters, regardless of their educational background.

CONCLUSION

Obviously no clear formula for extrapolating from the quality of public opinion to the quality of democracy exists. That said, insights into the consistency of key attitudes allow us to assess political competencies within the mass public, which in turn shape the context in which elites operate. Stable opinions about the president and the ruling party, for instance, offer a foundation for simple retrospective voting on incumbent performance. Likewise, relatively stable attachments to the opposition parties provide information about which blocs of the electorate are available for partisan mobilization and which are open to competition. Finally, stable ideological positions offer leaders general guidance about policy matters, and stable attitudes about particular issues permit them to draw even more specific lessons.

Overall, Mexico does not appear to be consigned to a highly delegative form of democracy as a result of ill-formed and volatile public opinion.

13. We find similar results when we divide the sample according to levels of political engagement. The most attentive Mexicans, as indicated by their interest in politics and willingness to discuss the campaign with others, were generally as prone to change their minds about the president, the parties, and political issues as the less attentive. More engaged respondents did, however, have somewhat firmer attitudes with respect to political ideology. These additional findings are available upon request.

Mass attitudes towards the president and the main parties were generally stable between February and June 2000, as were left-right ideological dispositions for the more highly educated. This implies that politicians can expect to be held accountable for their performance in office, and that the main parties have acquired certain brand loyalties and bases of support. The electorate clearly was not adrift during the presidential campaign; it was anchored by partisan identifications and assessments of the current administration. One practical implication of this finding is that none of the country's major parties is likely to disappear, and Mexico will be left with a three-party system.

In contrast to presidential approval and partisan identification, ideological dispositions and preferences on the two specific policy issues were less consistent for much of the race. This suggests that party leaders and governing officials have some degree of latitude to experiment with alternative approaches to managing the economy and fighting crime. Yet stable positions can clearly surface even in these more challenging attitude domains. In the critical weeks before the election, a time of intense political mobilization, continuity coefficients firmed up considerably. One practical implication of this finding is that the electorate remains skeptical of privatization, and politicians who seek to reform Mexico's energy sector may expect to pay a political price.

If the Mexican electorate possesses the potential to arrive at clear and consistent political judgments in an absolute sense, how does it fare in a relative sense—i.e., compared to mass publics in other democracies? The extent of volatility across the six-month presidential campaign in Mexico was substantially greater than in most established democracies, where studies have documented little change in core attitude dimensions over substantially longer periods (Green and Palmquist 1990; Kaase, Newton, and Scarbrough 1997; Krosnick 1991; Schickler and Green 1997). Voters thus remain more susceptible to persuasive appeals during campaigns than their counterparts in more established democracies, and we would not expect public opinion to impose the same sort of policy constraints that it does there. To the extent that the quality of public opinion affects the quality of democratic governance, Mexico may not achieve the degree of representation and accountability found in countries like the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Germany, or Costa Rica.

Our ability to generalize beyond Mexico to other emerging democracies is limited by the paucity of panel data. As stable mass attitudes are the product of an enduring cleavage structure and a stable institutional environment, it is possible to speculate about the degree of attitude stability in other societies. Presumably, public opinion should be extremely solid in a new democracy like Chile, where the political spectrum is well established and clearly defined. Despite the interregnum of the Pinochet dictatorship, the left-right array of parties remains much the

same as it was three decades ago; indeed the fact that left-right cleavages now overlap with a democracy-autocracy cleavage may make political judgments even easier. Such a setting allows people to make sense of their political alternatives and choose accordingly, and thus for politicians to understand what signals the electorate is sending. Ultimately it offers the potential for effective political organizing and high-quality democratic governance.

By contrast the outlook is less promising in countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela. Here, party systems are weak or new, and institutional arrangements have not been especially stable. Consequently, retrospective voting on incumbent performance may be the best that can be expected. The "delegative" features of democracy are thus likely to be substantially more pronounced in these countries, regardless of any constitutional checks imposed on executive authority. Again these contentions are speculative; they require testing with individual-level data from future panel surveys. What is clear from our analysis is the potential for Mexico's new institutions and party system to behave in ways that are broadly representative of popular dispositions. Whether they actually do so depends on other factors, such as constitutional arrangements and political leadership. Should these institutions fail, though, it will be hard to blame the Mexican people.

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