AP Comparative Government and Politics

Unit Six: Political Violence and the United Mexican States

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- Essentials of Comparative Politics with Cases, Patrick H. O'Neil, Karl Fields, and Don Share

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The nature of patrimonialism in Syria helps us understand why the regime did not give way as it did in places like Tunisia or Egypt. Events in Syria began with a protest movement not unlike those occurring elsewhere in the region; it was catalyzed by the torture of several young men who were caught writing antigovernment graffiti in the city of Daraa. In response, in March 2011 protesters held a “day of dignity” protest in several Syrian cities, calling for a peaceful liberalization of the regime. Given the Assad history of repression, it is not surprising that the regime opted to respond with deadly force. In response, citizens began to take up weapons to overthrow the regime.

Within this struggle, new factors began to emerge. First, the ongoing conflict radicalized some Syrians, who rejected the original call for secular democracy, in favor of a theocratic regime. They were soon joined by fighters from outside the country (including Europe and North America) whose objectives were less about the Assad regime than creating a new Islamic state across the region. Such groups were more willing to embrace terrorism as a means to destroy both the Syrian state and rival guerrilla groups. The most extreme of these groups has been the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS). First organized as a branch of Al Qaeda against the United States in Iraq, following the Arab Spring they began to expand into Syria through a mixture of guerrilla warfare (attacking the state) and terrorism (attacking civilians). Where ISIS has gained power, it has laid the groundwork for its own state, including a severe religious law. Can this group build and institutionalize its own sovereign political system out of the wreckage of Syria and Iraq? And will ISIS forces become the next wave of international terrorists, seeking to spread their revolution across the globe, as they have claimed? If so, the Arab Spring will have far greater consequences than anyone had previously imagined.

**Learning Objectives**

- Define political violence, and explain the factors that contribute to it.
- Compare revolution and terrorism as forms of political violence.
- Explain how religion and political violence sometimes become linked.
- Analyze the connections between state power and political violence.
In previous chapters, we identified various institutions that define states, societies, and types of economic structures and regimes. We also saw how these institutions are constructed and function in different parts of the world. Power and legitimacy rest in these institutions, to varying degrees, but what happens when they lose power altogether or when people seek to take them down by force?

This chapter will shed some light on this complex question, providing ways to think about political violence and its implications. We begin by defining our terms: what do we mean by political violence, and how does it relate to the political institutions we have already covered? Next, we will look at some of the motivations of political violence, examining the different (and often conflicting) explanations for why such violence occurs. We will then concentrate on two important forms of political violence: revolution and terrorism. Each form is a phenomenon that can threaten governments, regimes, and states. Each form is also a loaded political term that stirs emotional responses, complicating analysis. We will look at some of the different ways revolution and terrorism can be defined and understood. In addition, we will explore the extent to which the two are related—how terrorism is often justified as a tool to achieve revolution. Once we have these concepts and arguments before us, we will look at them in the contemporary context of political violence motivated by religion. Finally, we will conclude with a discussion of how states and societies prevent or manage political violence and what this means for freedom and equality.

What Is Political Violence?

This textbook began with a focus on the state. This institution is the cornerstone of modern politics, one that we defined in its most basic terms as the monopoly of violence or force over a territory. Across human history, centralized political authority has been a part of this monopoly whereby states vanquish their domestic rivals, defend themselves from external threats, and establish order and security at home. This process has been described as the shift from “private war” to “public war,” meaning that individuals lose the freedom to use violence against one another, turning that right over to the state. This right is exchanged for a greater sense of security for all.

Of course, the state’s monopoly of violence is never perfect or complete. Other states always represent a potential threat, given their own capacity for violence. Even at the domestic level, violence persists in such forms as murder and armed robbery. In many countries, such problems, though persistent, are manageable and do not threaten the stability and security of the state, society, or economy. But under certain conditions, this may not be true. Public violence may grow so pervasive or destructive that the state loses its control. Governments, regimes, states, and individuals are subject to attack, and sovereignty is weakened or lost. We have already seen this in some detail in our discussion of ethnic and national conflict in Chapter 3.

Political violence, or politically motivated violence outside of state control, is the focus of this chapter. Some political scientists see much of this political violence as part of a larger category of “contentious politics,” or collective political struggle. This can include such things as revolutions, civil war, riots, and strikes, but it also includes more-peaceful protest movements, some of which we will consider at the end of the chapter. In the case of political violence, we are speaking of a phenomenon that operates beyond state sovereignty, neither war nor crime, and that seeks to achieve some political objective through the use of force. Such definitions are always cleaner in theory than in reality, of course. The lines between domestic and international and between war, crime, and contentious politics are often quite blurry.

Why Political Violence?

Although defining political violence presents some challenges, a more controversial issue is why political violence occurs. What leads civilians to take up arms against a state or its citizens toward some political aim? Scholars have offered diverse reasons that have changed over time, but we can group them into three basic categories: institutional, ideological (based on ideas), and individual. These three explanations overlap to some degree; where one explanation ends and the other begins is not always clear. At the same time, such explanations are often debated by scholars or policy makers who tend to favor one explanation over others. We will examine each of these reasons generally before looking at how each one is used specifically in studies of revolution and terrorism. Each explanation seeks to answer the same questions. What motivates political violence, and toward what end is it perpetrated?

Institutional Explanations

Because we have covered institutions at length, what we mean by this term should be relatively clear; we are referring to self-perpetuating organizations or patterns
of activity that are valued for their own sake. Institutions define and shape human activity, and institutional explanations argue that their specific qualities or combination are essential to political violence. The emphasis can be on political institutions, such as states and regimes; economic institutions, such as capitalism; or societal institutions, such as culture and religion. Moreover, these explanations can be based on either a constraining or an enabling argument. It may be that institutions contain values or norms that implicitly or explicitly encourage political violence, or that they constrain human activity, thus provoking political violence.

In Chapter 6 on democratic institutions, we will cover variations in executive structures and electoral systems; as some have argued, the variants that reduce the opportunity for power sharing—versions that produce “winner-take-all outcomes,” like presidencies—increase the likelihood of marginalization and conflict. Under these conditions, political violence can be a logical reaction when other forms of participation are blocked. Institutional explanations can be seen as a quest for a “root source” for violence, a necessary condition for violent actions to take place, and a presumption that changes in the institutional structure would eliminate the motivation for this violence.

**Ideational Explanations**

If institutional explanations emphasize the impact of fixed organizations and patterns in fostering political violence, ideational explanations focus more on the rationale behind that violence. By *ideational*, we simply mean having to do with ideas. Ideas may be institutionalized—concepts rooted in some institution such as a political organization or a religion—but just as often they are uninstitutionalized, with no real organizational base. The argument here is that ideas play an important role in political violence in the way they set out a worldview, diagnose a set of problems, provide a resolution, and describe the means of getting there. Any or all of these elements can be bound up with a justification of violence. These ideational factors take us back to our discussion of political attitudes in Chapter 3. As we noted there, political violence is more likely to be associated with attitudes that are radical or reactionary, since each attitude views the current institutional order as bankrupt and beyond reform. Hence, it is not only the content of the ideas that matters but also their relation to the domestic political status quo. Ideas seen as conservative in one context may become a source of radicalism or reaction, and perhaps violence, elsewhere.

**Individual Explanations**

Finally, individual explanations center on those who carry out the violence. Here the scholarship emphasizes the personal motivations that lead people to contemplate and carry out violence toward political ends. Scholars who study individual explanations of political violence usually follow one of two paths. One emphasizes psychological factors, conditions that draw individuals toward violence. Such factors can be a function of individual experiences, or they may be shaped by broader conditions in society, such as levels of economic development or gender roles. Such an approach tends to concentrate on how people may be driven to violence as an expression of desperation, the desire for liberation, or social solidarity. For example, some scholars of religious violence emphasize the role of humiliation as a motivating force, a sense that an individual’s own beliefs are actively marginalized and denigrated by society. Revolutionaries or terrorists, in this view, see violence as a way to restore meaning to their lives and may be largely unconcerned with whether they are effectively achieving their goals.

A contrary approach, however, rejects this view, seeing political violence as a rational act, carried out by those who believe it to be an effective political tool. Strategy, rather than despair, drives these actions. Political violence is in this view not an expression of deviance but a strategy that is carefully wielded by those who understand its costs and potential benefits.
Comparing Explanations of Political Violence

One important element of comparison across these three explanations is how they approach free will—that is, to what extent people are the primary actors in political violence. Institutional explanations often are quite deterministic, seeing people as shaped and directed by larger structures that they do not control. An individual's response to violence is simply the final step in a much larger process. In contrast, individual explanations place their focus squarely on people; they are the primary makers of violence because they choose to be. Idealational explanations lie somewhere in between. Ideas are influenced by institutions but are also actively taken up and molded by individuals to justify political violence.

A second element of comparison concerns universal versus particularistic explanations. Institutional explanations tend to be more particularistic, stressing the unique combination and role of institutions in a given case that are not easily generalized and applied elsewhere. Individual explanations typically center on those personal or psychological attributes common to all humans that can lead to violence. Idealational explanations, again, lie somewhere in the middle, generalizing the importance of ideas while noting the distinct lessons that different ideas impart.

Which explanation is most convincing: institutional, idealational, or individual? These explanations are often placed in competition with one another, but they may work in conjunction. Institutional factors provide a context in which particular preconditions, problems, and conflicts may emerge. Idealational factors help describe the problems, ascribe blame, and provide solutions by calling for the transformation of the status quo. These ideas in turn influence and are shaped by individuals and groups that may already be prone to violent activity. Let's look at the case of the Basque independence group Euskadi-Tara Askatasuna (ETA) in Spain, which used violence as a political tool for several decades until finally swearing off violence in 2011. If we examine ETA, we can see institutional factors that include a long period of repression under authoritarian rule and its effects on the Basque region. There are idealational factors as well, such as a belief among ETA members and supporters that the Basque people face cultural extermination at the hands of the Spanish. Finally, individual factors include the role and motivations of many Basque youth in conducting “kale borrokua” (urban struggle) in their support for an independent, revolutionary Basque state. This example helps illustrate the interconnectedness of these three factors and why political violence is relatively unpredictable and has emerged in a variety of contexts. We will consider these various explanations next as we look at revolution and terrorism.

Forms of Political Violence

So far, we have spoken of political violence in general terms, defining it as violence that is outside state control and politically motivated. This definition encompasses many forms of political violence: assassinations, riots, rebellions, military coups, civil war, and ethnic conflict, to name a few. We will concentrate on two forms of political violence: revolution and terrorism. Revolution is important to study because of its profound effects. Revolutions have ushered in sweeping changes in modern politics, overturning old institutions and dramatically transforming domestic and international relations. Terrorism, while less sweeping, holds our attention as a similar challenge to modern political institutions, one whose impact on domestic and international politics has spiked in recent years. Both are forces that seek dramatic change. Yet in many ways, revolution and terrorism are opposites. Revolution is an uprising of the masses, who take to the streets, seize control of the state, and depose the old regime. In contrast, terrorism is much more secret and hidden, a conspiratorial action carried out by a small group, but there are similarities in their sources and goals. As we analyze and compare the dynamics of revolution and terrorism, we will draw out some of these elements and show how these seemingly disparate forms of political violence can be linked.

Revolution

The term revolution has many connotations. Although we speak of revolution as a form of political violence, the word is also used much more indiscriminately. Any kind of change that is dramatic is often described as revolutionary, whether the change is political or technological, and the term has a generally positive connotation, one that evokes progress. People speak of dramatic change as positive, so “counterrevolution” is seen as an attempt to turn back the clock to a darker time. None of this should be surprising; across much of the world, significant political change has been a result of revolution, and in countries where this is the case revolution is often associated with independence, sovereignty, and development. Thus revolution is a loaded term, albeit with mostly positive connotations.

For our purposes, we shall speak of revolution in a more limited manner. Revolution can be defined as a public seizure of the state in order to overturn the
existing government and regime. Several factors are at work here. First, revolutions involve some element of public participation. To be certain, revolutions typically have leaders, organizers, and instigators who play a key role. But unlike a coup d'état, in which elites overthrow the government, in a revolution the public plays an important role in seizing power. Russia is an interesting example. While we typically speak of communism's triumph in 1917 as a revolution, some scholars call it a coup because Lenin and a handful of followers seized power rather than being part of some mass action toppling the government.

Another factor in our definition of revolutions is that the people involved are working to gain control of the state. This objective distinguishes these actions from such violence as ethnic conflict, through which groups may gain local control or even seek independence but do not or cannot take over the entire state. Finally, the objective of revolution is not simply removing those in power but removing the entire regime. Protests or uprisings and other forms of contentious politics are meant to pressure a leader to leave office rather than-a necessarily revolutionary. At their core, revolutions seek to fundamentally remake the institutions of politics and often economic and societal institutions as well. As a result, scholars sometimes speak of "social revolutions" to indicate that they are referring to events that completely reshape society.

Must revolutions be violent? This is a tricky question. Given the dramatic goals of revolution, violence is often difficult to avoid. Governments who resist overthrow and such conflict, can often lead to the fragmentation of the monopoly of violence as parts of the state (such as elements of the military) often side with revolutionary forces. The aftermath of revolutions can also be very bloody—the losers may be killed or carry out a counterrevolutionary struggle against the new regime.

However, not all revolutions are violent. In 1989, communist regimes in Eastern Europe collapsed in the face of public pressure, sweeping away institutions that many thought immovable. In most cases, violence was limited; only Romania experienced a violent struggle between the communist regime and revolutionary forces led by reformers. Due to this absence of violence, many scholars have preferred calling the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe revolutionary, preferring instead to speak of these changes as political transitions. Yet, in most important ways, specifically in the overturning of the government and regime, these events did fulfill our definition of revolution. South Africa is another case of regime change, from apartheid to multiracial democracy, that many scholars are uncomfortable calling a revolution, because it was an elite-driven, largely nonviolent, and slowly negotiated process. As we see, one of the problems here is whether we believe that violence is a necessary component to revolutionary outcomes.

What causes revolution? There is no agreement on this question, and the consensus has changed over time. Scholars group studies of revolution into three phases. In the first phase, before World War II, scholars tended to describe rather than explain revolution. When causes were assigned, explanations were often unsystematic, blaming bad government policies or leaders. In the second phase, coinciding with the behavioral revolution of the 1950s and 1960s (see Chapter 1), social scientists sought more generalized explanations. Their new research efforts took on varied forms and areas of emphasis, but they shared a common view that dramatic economic and social change or disruption, such as modernization, was central in sparking revolutionary events. The views tended to focus on the role of individuals as potential revolutionaries and sought to understand what motivated them.

Among the main arguments emerging from this work was a psychological approach known as the relative deprivation model. According to this model, revolutions are less a function of specific conditions than of the gap between actual conditions and public expectations. Improving economic or political conditions might even help lead to revolution if, for example, such change causes increased public demands that go unmet and thus foster discontent. It has been suggested that the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution are examples of relative deprivation at work. As Iran experienced rapid modernization in the decades before the revolution, its progress only increased people's expectations for greater freedom and equality, especially among young adults. This is what is meant by relative deprivation: it is not absolute conditions that instigate revolution but rather how the public perceives them.

By the 1970s, these studies of revolution began to lose favor. In the third phase, critics argued that theories of revolution predicated on sudden change could not explain why some countries could undergo dramatic change without revolution (as in Japan during the early twentieth century) or what levels of change would be enough to trigger revolution. In the case of the relative deprivation model, there was little evidence that past revolutions were preceded by rising expectations or discontent. Similarly, in many cases both expectations and discontent rose, but revolution did not result. New studies of revolution took the more institutional approach, moving away from a focus on public reactions to a focus on the target of revolutions: the state.

Most influential in this regard has been the work of Theda Skocpol and her landmark book States and Social Revolutions. Focusing on France, China, and Russia, Skocpol argues that social revolutions require a very specific set of conditions. The first is competition between rival states as they vie for military and economic power in the international system through such things as trade and war.
Such competition is costly and often betrays the weakness of states that cannot match their rivals. Second, as a result of this competition, weaker states often seek reform to increase their autonomy and capacity, hoping that changes to domestic institutions will boost their international power. These reforms can include greater state centralization and changes in agriculture, industry, education, and taxation. Such changes, however, can threaten the status quo, undermining the power of entrenched elites, sowing discord among the public, and creating resistance. The result is discontent, political paralysis, and an opening for revolution. In this view, it is not change per se that is central to revolution, but the power and actions of the state. Other actors are of relatively little importance.

The institutional approach to revolution became the dominant view during the 1980s, paralleling a wider interest in institutions and the power of the state. Yet institutional approaches themselves are subject to questions and criticism. Some argue that an overemphasis on institutions ignores the role played by leadership or ideas in helping to catalyze and direct revolutionary action. In addition, if earlier approaches did not seem to fit with the historical record, institutional approaches are themselves hard to disprove, essentially asserting that where a revolution has occurred the state must have been weak and under international pressure.

These criticisms were underscored by the revolutions in Eastern Europe in 1989 and again in the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011. In the case of Eastern Europe, there can be no doubt that changes in the international system, specifically the Cold War and the Soviet Union's loosening of control over Eastern Europe, led to conflict and paralysis within these states. At the same time, however, public action was mobilized and shaped by opposition leaders who were strongly influenced by the ideas of liberalism, human rights, and nonviolent protest. In addition, mass protest appeared influenced by strategic calculation: successful public opposition in one country changed the calculations of actors elsewhere, increasing their mobilization and demands. Similar events are at work in the Middle East (see the "Institutions in Action" box, p. 150). A key factor in determining the movements' outcome has been the degree to which the military and paramilitary forces have remained loyal to the state or shifted their allegiance to those seeking to bring down the regime.

Drawing on these events, some scholars have reintegrated individual and ideational approaches. While state actions do matter, so do the motivations of opposition leaders, elites, and the public as a whole; the views of all three groups regarding political change; and the tools used to mobilize the public. Small shifts in ideas and perceptions may have a cascading effect, bringing people into the streets when no one would have predicted it the day before—including the revolutionaries themselves.

As important as the cause of revolution is its impact. If a revolution does manage to sweep away the old regime and install a new one, the effects can be profound, but surprising continuities from the past can remain. The first major impact is that revolutionary regimes often institutionalize new forms of politics, transforming the existing regime. Revolutions help pave the way for new ideas and ideologies: republicanism, secularism, democracy, liberalism, communism, and Islamism were all marginal ideas until revolutions helped place them at the center of political life. Revolutions have destroyed well-entrenched regimes and legitimized new and radical alternatives. They have also been responsible for dramatic economic and societal changes, such as the end of feudalism and the development of capitalism. This is why we tend to think of revolutions as positive events: in hindsight, their effects frequently seem progressive. If ideational factors are often underplayed as a source of revolution, they are undeniably central in the successful institutionalization of revolutionary regimes.

Though revolutions may be instruments of progress, it is important to note what they do not achieve. Despite the call for greater freedom and equality that is a hallmark of revolution, the result is often the reverse. Revolutionary leaders who once condemned the state quickly come to see it as a necessary tool to consolidate their victory, and they often centralize power to an even greater extent than before. This is not necessarily bad if the centralization of power can facilitate the creation of a modern state with a necessary degree of autonomy and capacity. Revolutions
Terrorism

The word terrorism, like revolution, is loaded with meaning and used rather indiscriminately. However, the conceptual difficulties surrounding the two terms are diametrically opposed. While revolution's conceptual fuzziness comes in part from its inherently positive connotation (which can lead people to associate the term with all sorts of things), the word terrorism carries a stigma and is a term no one willingly embraces. As a result, some confuse terrorism with a variety of other words, many of which are misleading, while others use the term indiscriminately to describe any kind of political force or policy they oppose. This situation has led some to conclude that terrorism is effectively impossible to define, and they fall back on an old cliché: “One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.” Such a conclusion undercuts the whole purpose of political science, which is to define our terms objectively. We should therefore seek out a definition as precise as possible and use it to distinguish terrorism from other forms of political violence. The continued use of terrorism makes this particularly important (see Figure 5.1).
true of Libya, where the Gaddafi family held political power for four decades. Libya took a violent path much like the one taken in Syria, and since 2011 Libya has experienced similar fragmentation and factionalized armed conflict. Institutions, in short, can’t fully account for why revolution succeeded where it did, but they can be seen to have influenced the strategies of political elites across the various cases.

Ideational explanations are similarly useful. In the case of Egypt, many point to the role young people played in shaping the message of the protests that brought down President Hosni Mubarak. Their “April 6 Youth Movement” studied how public protests brought down authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe and drew on the civil disobedience work of the American political scientist Gene Sharp, among others. To mobilize the public, “April 6” activists relied on Facebook and YouTube, prompting the regime to cut off Internet access in a failed last-ditch effort to fend off the rebellion. “The role of Islam as a democratic or fundamentalist force across the region is also central to any understanding of political change. The rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt polarized the population, paving the way for a military coup in 2013, whereas in Tunisia the Islamist Ennahda party has been central in the creation of a democratic and secular constitution in 2014.”

Finally, we should not discount the role of individual action, which sparked these revolutions. Mohamed Bouazizi was a 26-year-old Tunisian man who worked from a young age to support his family, selling produce as a street vendor. The police repeatedly harassed Bouazizi, ostensibly for lacking a business license but in reality because he failed to pay bribes. These repeated assaults took their toll; as his sister later noted, “those with no connections and no money for bribes are humiliated and insulted and not allowed to live.” After a final clash in December 2010, Bouazizi stood before the local governor’s office, amid the traffic, where he doused himself in gasoline and set himself alight. Protests began soon thereafter and spread across the region, raising common demands: dignity and change. Large-scale, domestic and international, and state and societal forces were critical in explaining the Arab Spring (and all revolutions), but we should not forget the role of one apparently powerless person in shaping history.

Terrorism can be defined as the use of violence by nonstate actors against civilians to achieve a political goal. As with revolution, several components are at work in this definition, and we should take a moment to clarify each. First, there is the question of nonstate actors. Why should the term not be applied to states as well? Do they not also terrorize people? Indeed, as we shall discuss later, the concept of terrorism originally referred to state actions, not those of nonstate actors. Over time, the term came to be associated with nonstate actors who used terrorism in part because conventional military force was not available to them. This, however, does not mean that states cannot terrorize. Rather, other terms have come to describe such acts. When states use violence against civilian populations, we speak of war crimes or human rights violations, depending on the context. Both can include such acts as genocide and torture. Terrorism as a term is as much about the kind of political actor as it is about their actions and intent.

Finally, there is state-sponsored terrorism. States do sometimes sponsor nonstate terrorist groups as a means to extend their power by proxy, using terrorism as an instrument of foreign policy. For example, India has long faced terrorist groups fighting for control over Kashmir, a state with a majority Muslim population (unlike the rest of India, which is majority Hindu). These terrorists are widely thought to be trained and armed by Pakistan, whose state leaders contend that Kashmir should be joined to their country. In short, we speak of terrorism as a nonstate action not because states are somehow above such violence but rather because other terminology exists to describe forms of violence perpetrated by states.

Our definition of terrorism also emphasizes that the targets of violence are civilians. Here the issue of intentionality is important. Violent conflicts often result in civilian casualties. But terrorists specifically target civilians, believing that this is a more effective way to achieve their political ends than attacking the state. This allows us to distinguish terrorism from guerrilla war, something that will come up in Chapter 8 when we compare South Africa and Zimbabwe. In contrast to terrorism, guerrilla war involves nonstate combatants who largely accept traditional rules of war and target the state rather than civilians. In the case of South Africa, during the military struggle against the regime the African National Congress considered, and then explicitly rejected, targeting civilians. In contrast, the Zimbabwean African National Union engaged in both guerrilla warfare and terrorism to achieve power. However, the line between these two can often be blurry: Is killing a policeman or a tax collector an act of terrorism or guerrilla warfare? Still, the central distinction remains, not only to observers but also, as suggested earlier, to those carrying out the violence. We will return to this point in a moment.
A further issue in defining terrorism centers on the political goal. It is important to recognize that terrorism has some political objective; as such, it is not simply a crime or a violent act without a larger purpose. Here, too, the lines can be less than clear. terrorists may engage in crime as a way to support their activities, and criminal gangs may engage in terrorism if they are under pressure from the state. Groups can also morph from one into the other. But in general, terrorism and other forms of violence can be sorted out by the primacy of political intent (Figure 5.2).

What are the causes of terrorism? As with revolution, scholars have proposed varied and conflicting hypotheses, and these have changed over time as the nature of terrorism has shifted. In addition, because terrorism is so amorphous and shadowy, we find few of the comprehensive theories we see in studies of revolution, though we can again group these in terms of institutional, ideational, and individual explanations.

One of the most common responses to terrorism is to cast it in institutional terms, often with the assertion that economic and educational background is critical to understanding terrorist motivations. Poverty and the lack of education are commonly cited in this regard, and terrorism is viewed as a tool of desperation when avenues for personal advancement (getting a job, starting a family) are absent or blocked. These arguments, while intriguing, don't have a great deal of evidence to back them up. Educational explanations do not appear to hold up, since terrorists tend to be better educated than the population as a whole and universities have frequently been centers of terrorist organization and recruitment. Economic explanations are equally problematic. We know that terrorists are not necessarily impoverished: Osama bin Laden came from a wealthy background. Although it may seem reasonable that poverty would be a motivation for terrorism, research on this topic finds instead that poverty tends to foster apolitical views and a detachment from political action. Here, too, research indicates that terrorists typically come from economically advantaged backgrounds and that terrorist activity is not clearly correlated with low or deteriorating economic conditions, as has also been suggested in the case of revolution. Explanations regarding the role of political institutions may be on firmer ground. Where state capacity and autonomy are
weak and mechanisms for public participation poorly institutionalized, terrorism may find both the rationale and opportunity to use force.  

Idealistic explanations are similarly useful and problematic. Terrorism is commonly blamed on some ideology, religion, or set of values. However, given the shifting and morphing of terrorism over time, these explanations often cannot account for cause and effect particularly well. We cannot describe terrorism as a logical outcome of one particular ideology or religion if we can find terrorism associated across a range of values depending on the context. Still, ideas themselves are important because they can provide justification for terrorist acts; groups need a political goal to motivate them to commit such violence.

Some have asserted that for terrorists the crucial aspect of any set of ideas is its connection to nihilist views. By nihilism, we mean a belief that all institutions and values are essentially meaningless and that the only redeeming value a person can embrace is violence. In this view, violence is desirable for its own sake. Nihilism can also be combined with utopian views, generating a conviction that violence can destroy and thus purify a corrupted world, ushering in a new order. Interestingly, then, the actual content of the ideas themselves can change, even dramatically, so long as the justification for violence and the call for utopia remain intact. Indeed, in many cases terrorist organizations lack a clear articulation of the actual outcome they want to achieve; the means is more important than the message.

Finally, researchers have consistently turned to individual explanations in seeking to understand the personal motivations of terrorists. As mentioned earlier, one common explanation centers on feelings of injustice—that an individual’s or community’s self-worth has been denigrated by others—coupled with alienation or humiliation. Such feelings can generate frustration, anger, and, most important, a desire for vengeance. In addition, terrorist groups can provide a sense of identity and solidarity for alienated or humiliated individuals. Political violence can give a life meaning, a sense of greater purpose. In fact, it has been argued that terrorist groups resemble religious cults, with their emphasis on community, the purity of the cause, faith in the rectitude of the group’s own beliefs and actions, and the conviction that retribution paves the way toward some utopian outcome.

The effects of terrorism are harder to discern than the effects of revolutions. The first question to ask is whether terrorists are able to achieve their goals. In the case of revolution, the political violence is by definition successful—we study cases in which regimes have been successfully overthrown. In the case of terrorism, however, scholars often concentrate more on the actors and focus on the outcomes less. Terrorists are mostly unsuccessful in achieving their stated long-term outcomes. Terrorists often seek some dramatic change in the existing domestic or international order, and their actions usually do not achieve the goal they have in mind. In that sense, then, terrorism is not particularly strategic if its primary outcome is to usher in specific political changes. However, this is not to say that terrorism has no impact. Economically, terrorism can be highly successful in depressing tourism, foreign direct investment, stock markets, and other sectors of the economy. Society can feel a similar impact, due not just to the effects of a weakened economy but also to increasing anxiety and insecurity that undermines people’s sense of well-being.

Terrorism can also distinctly affect politics. Countering terrorism can be a costly and frustrating process with little to show for itself, diverting national resources while failing to address public concerns. An eroded sense of confidence in the state can be the result. In the quest for greater security, governments and their citizens may favor increasing state power and curtailing civil liberties in the hope that such steps will limit terrorists’ scope for action. However, this can lead to a weakening of democratic institutions and civil rights. The result can be less trust in government and less public control over it. At an extreme, terrorism can help bring down a regime. In 1992, Alberto Fujimori, the president of Peru, dissolved the legislature and suspended the constitution, acts that he justified in part as necessary to battle two separate terrorist groups that had destabilized the country. Much of the public supported this action, seeing it as the only way to reestablish order. Terrorism in Russia by Chechen separatists similarly helped pave the way for Vladimir Putin to win the presidency in 2000, and Russia used subsequent attacks as justification for removing democratic institutions and limiting civil liberties. And as we well know from Afghanistan, terrorism can also be used as a tool to provoke international conflict.

This destruction of a regime, of course, is precisely what terrorists seek. Terrorism uses violence against civilians to rip apart the institutional fabric of state, society, and economy, calling into question all those things we take for granted, including stability, security, and predictability. By disrupting these most basic elements of modern life and instilling fear, terrorists believe they will help pave the way for revolution.

Terrorism and Revolution: Means and Ends

What do terrorists want? That question leads us to consider terrorism and revolution as related forms of political violence. While we might think of these two as quite separate, it was not always this way. In modern politics, the concepts of terrorism and revolution were initially bound together as parts of a single process, having
their origins in the French Revolution. For revolutionary leaders like Maximilien de Robespierre, terror was an essential part of revolution. Robespierre argued that terror is nothing other than justice, prompt, severe, inflexible; it is therefore an emanation of virtue in the service of revolutionary change. Thus terror was not only a positive act but also a tool in the service of the revolutionary state.

Over time, this concept of the relation between terrorism and revolution began to shift. Revolutionaries who embraced the lessons of Robespierre concluded that terror is not needed to consolidate revolution after a regime has been overthrown but can instead be used as the means toward that revolutionary end. A small group could speak for and lead the masses, instigating violence as a way to spark revolution. These revolutionaries thus openly embraced the name terrorist as an expression of their desire to use violence to achieve their political goals. Although the label terrorist has become stigmatized over time, this relationship between terrorism and revolution remains in place.

Terrorism can therefore be understood not simply in terms of who is directing political violence toward whom but also in its revolutionary nature. Terrorists rarely seek limited goals, such as political or economic reform, since the entire political system is seen as illegitimate. Rather, they believe that through their seemingly indiscriminate use of violence all the dominant institutions can be shattered and remade. Consider, for example, this passage from an early manifesto of the Peruvian terrorist group The Shining Path:

The people rise up, arm themselves and rebel, putting nooses on the necks of imperialism and reaction. The people take them by the throat, threaten their lives and will strangle them out of necessity. The reactionary meat will be trimmed of fat, they will be torn to tatters and rags, the scraps sunk into mire, and the remains burned. The ashes will be thrown to the winds of the world so that only the sinister reminder of what must never return will remain.

This link between terrorism and revolution also helps us to distinguish between terrorism and guerrilla war. We mentioned earlier that the line between these two forms of political violence is blurry but that we can distinguish between them in terms of their targets. Guerrilla war seeks to abide by traditional rules of war, avoiding the targeting of civilians. This decision is driven by political goals. Guerrillas typically accept that their opponents are legitimate actors, and they themselves wish to be regarded as legitimate by their opponents and the international community. Their demands, while sometimes extensive (such as greater civil rights or independence for an ethnic group), do not deny the legitimacy of the other side, as is normally the case with terrorism. These distinctions matter, for such differences in means and ends will affect how extensively states can negotiate with such groups to bring an end to conflict.

For example, during the civil conflict in Algeria in the 1990s, two nongovernmental groups were operating: the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). Both opposed the Algerian regime, which suppressed Islamic fundamentalist groups, but they fought it in very different ways. The FIS created an armed wing that targeted specific parts of the state seen as directly supporting the regime. The GIA, which began as a nonviolent political movement, declared that they could come to a compromise with the regime if certain demands were met, such as holding democratic elections. In contrast, the GIA rejected the regime and political process as un-Islamic and argued that anyone who viewed them as having cooperated with the state in any manner, such as voting, deserved to be killed. The GIA's killing was thus much more indiscriminate and widespread, directed at state, society, and the FIS. Jihad (war), they argued, was the only means to an Islamic state.

In short, revolution and terrorism have close connections. Revolution is often the ultimate goal of terrorists, who believe that using violence will help set the stage for revolution. More limited use of force, as in guerrilla war, reflects a desire to participate in or work with existing institutions rather than overthrow them. The issue, then, for nongovernmental wielders of violence is whether they desire a seat at the political table or seek to knock the table over.

Political Violence in Context: Faith, Terrorism, and Revolution

Now that we have considered different ways to approach political violence, particularly revolution and terrorism, let us apply these ideas to the most pressing example in contemporary domestic and international politics: religious violence. In Chapter 3 we spoke about the rise of ideology as a challenge to religion in the modern world. Ideologies appropriated for themselves many of the same claims and values that belonged to religion in the past, forcing religion out of the public and political sphere and into private life. Ideology, in this sense, can be seen as a secular or civil religion. However, as ideology has waned, the role of religion has reemerged in the public realm. This religious resurgence is accompanied by a particular element of fundamentalism: the desire to unite faith and the state, transforming religion into the ideological foundation for a political regime. While such fundamentalism may
be uncompromising (as with many ideologies), it is not necessarily violent. Many
fundamentalists believe that reestablishing God’s sovereignty can be done through
nonviolent engagement in politics or by withdrawing from politics and instead
working to increase the societal power of religion. But, as with ideologies, this form
of religious fundamentalism contains a violent strain of thought.

What are the conditions under which religion becomes a source of political
violence? As in our earlier discussion, they include institutional, ideational, and
individual factors. First, one common factor is hostility to modernity. In this view,
modern institutions, driven by states and nations, capitalism, ideology, secularism,
individualism, and material prosperity, have stripped the world of greater mean-
ings and driven people to alienation and despair. Indeed, political violence is often
embraced by those who initially enjoyed modernity but at some point turned away
from its “corrupt” lifestyle. This view has emerged in many different contexts but
seems to be most powerful in societies where modern institutions are foreign in
nature and poorly grafted onto traditional structures and values. This is often the
case in less-developed countries, which we will turn to in Chapter 10. At this
border between traditional and modern institutions, the tension can be the great-
est, which may explain why proponents of religious violence are often urban and
well-educated individuals; such persons are frequently most deeply immersed in
modernity and may feel its contradictions most sharply.

A second factor is what the sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer calls “cosmic
war.” In this view, the modern world not only actively marginalizes, humiliates,
and denigrates the views of the believers but also seeks to exterminate the believers
outright. Those who hold this view see themselves as soldiers in a struggle between
the righteousness of faith and its enemies (modernity), a war that transcends space
and time. This perspective is often bound up in conspiracy theories that point to
shadowy forces in league to exterminate the good. People holding these views can
rationalize violence against civilians because they see the conflict not in terms of
civilians versus combatants but in terms of the guilty versus the innocent: those
who do not stand on the side of righteousness are by definition on the side of evil.
Scholars note that this dehumanization of the enemy is an important component
in justifying violence against civilians; since social or religious taboos against
murder must be overcome.

Third, religion as a source of political violence is often connected to messianic,
apocalyptic, and utopian beliefs. Although the forces of darkness (modernity) have
gained the upper hand, the role of the righteous is to usher in or restore the sover-
eginity of God on earth. Violence is therefore not only acceptable but also a form of
righteous, whether in the form of self-sacrifice (martyrdom) or the sacrifice of others.
ISIS propaganda is frequently couched in these terms.

Religious groups or movements that resort to violence represent an extreme
form of fundamentalism, since their path to violence requires them to reinterpret
the faith in a way that divorces it from its mainstream foundations. These groups
or movements thus tend to break away from the mainstream faith and other fun-
damentalists, whom they accuse of having lost their way, by presenting their radical
alternatives as a restoration of religious truth. Most Muslim, Christian, and
other fundamentalists would thus find many of these radical views to be horrific
and far removed from their view of faith.

To reiterate, it is a mistake to confuse fundamentalism with violence. Indeed,
much of what we have noted earlier—hostility toward rival institutions, dehu-
manization, and utopian views—can be found in modern political ideologies.
We can see this in the bloody revolutions that established communism in the
Soviet Union and China. Even the French Revolution of 1789 that helped usher
in the modern era was described by Alexis de Tocqueville in 1856 as akin to a
religious revolution directed toward “the regeneration of the human race” that
“roused passions such as the most violent political revolutions had been incapable
of awakening . . . able, like Islamism, to cover the earth with its soldiers, its
apostles, and its martyrs.” Bearing this in mind, we can consider some specific
examples of how religion has intersected with politics to generate political violence.

Within Al Qaeda and similar jihadist groups, individuals like Osama bin Laden
and Ayman al-Zawahiri (the group’s current leader) were steeped in modernity
before turning to religion and religious violence. This violence is understood as
part of a global struggle against infidels that goes back centuries. Hence, when bin
Laden referred to the West as “Crusaders” in his 1996 manifesto he was reaching
back to the battles between the Islamic and Christian worlds in the Middle Ages.
In the modern world, bin Laden argued, this crusade against Islam and its follow-
ers continues, though the West’s conspiracies are often cloaked by international
organizations like the United Nations. In the September 11 attacks, we can see
how the logic of cosmic war also fits into a greater narrative. Al Qaeda carried out
these attacks not simply to weaken the United States but also to provoke a back-
lash that they believed would intensify the conflict between the Islamic and non-
Islamic worlds and would in turn lead to the overthrow of “un-Islamic” regimes in
the Middle East and to the eventual collapse of the West.

In these circumstances, even Muslim civilians are fair targets, whether in
the United States, Europe, or the Middle East. This position is justified because their
“collaboration” with the forces of evil means that they are not true Muslims and
therefore can be killed, sacrificed to the cause. The jihadists’ willingness to sacri-
cifice civilian lives recalls our discussion of the GIA in Algeria, whose leader justified
their widespread violence against the public by stating that “all the killing and

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slaughter are an offering to God.” Similar justifications have been used in Syria and Iraq to kill civilians, including children.

Such views have strong parallels to certain violent strains drawn from Christianity. In the United States, some racist groups assert that Western Christianity has been corrupted and weakened by a global Jewish conspiracy, and they seek to rebuild Western society on the basis of a purified white race. One particularly important figure in this ideology was William Pierce, who died in 2002. Pierce, who held a Ph.D. in physics and was at one time a university professor, formed the National Alliance, a white supremacist organization, in 1974. Pierce departed from Christianity altogether as a faith tainted by its association with Judaism, offering instead a “cosmotheist” faith that viewed whites as belonging to a superior evolutionary track; on the road to unity with God. In his novel The Turner Diaries, Pierce describes the creation of a dedicated underground that would attack symbols of American authority, seize territory, and eventually launch a nuclear attack against the country itself. This apocalypse would destroy the state, allowing the revolutionaries to exterminate all nonwhites and those who do not accept the new order. This genocide would eventually extend worldwide. Timothy McVeigh’s bombing of the federal courthouse in Oklahoma City in 1995, which killed 168 people, was directly inspired by The Turner Diaries and Pierce’s argument that terror could trigger revolution. Pierce, while dissociating himself from McVeigh’s act, nevertheless stated that McVeigh was a soldier, and what he did was based on principle. . . . He was at war against a government that is at war against his people. In this war the rule is: Whatever is good for our people is good, and whatever harms our people is evil. That is the morality of survival.

Pierce’s views echo those of the Christian Identity movement, which has asserted that only whites are the chosen of God, as well as extremist European groups that present themselves as manifestations of pre-Christian pagan values. All of these groups have grown in size in recent years.

This violence extends outside the monotheistic religions of the West. In Burma, outbreaks of violent Buddhism has emerged in the 969 Movement, led by the monk Wirathu, which focuses its hostility on the Muslim minority. Although Muslims make up less than 5 percent of the population, Wirathu and the 969 Movement articulate a worldview that emphasizes the destruction of Buddhist communities in South and Southeast Asia by Islamic armies in the twelfth century and the beginning of an ongoing existential threat. Wirathu describes Muslims as an inherently violent “race” rather than followers of a religion, and followers of the 969 Movement have targeted Muslims in a series of deadly attacks, destroying mosques and displacing entire communities. The goal of the 969 Movement is to restore the role of Buddhism at the center of nation and state. As Wirathu has argued, “Taking care of our own religion and race is more important than democracy.” Whether this objective will bring the group into direct conflict with the Burmese state is uncertain.

In these three cases we see important similarities. First, these groups radically reinterpreted an existing faith by arguing that it had lost its way. Osama bin Laden, William Pierce, and Ashin Wirathu each claimed for themselves the ability to recast the faith in an overtly ideological manner. Second, through this reinterpretation, they viewed the world in terms of an existential battle between good and evil, purity and corruption. Third, as the defenders of truth, they placed themselves in the role of warriors in the service of faith, able to mete out justice to all those who are seen as the enemy, whether state or society. And finally, they described this violence not as an unfortunate necessity but as a sacrifice to the cause that would bring forth or restore a higher order.

These kinds of religiously motivated political violence can parallel similar acts carried out by nonreligious groups. The failures and humiliations of modernity, the creation of a group of “true believers” who see the world in stark terms of good versus evil, and the idea of a transformation that will destroy the old order and usher in a new age can all be ascribed to many secular ideologies and similarly used to justify violence.

Countering Political Violence

Our discussion indicates that political violence is a varied and constantly shifting force in the modern world. As long as states monopolize force, there will be actors who seek to wrest this power from the state so they can use it to pursue their own political objectives. Violence can be motivated by institutional, ideational, and individual factors—most likely some combination of the three. Though religious violence is currently the most pressing concern, we see that in many ways the distinctions between ideological and religious violence are not as great as we might have supposed.

Given the amorphous nature of political violence, what can states do to manage or prevent it? This is difficult to answer, since the response partly depends on the nature of the political violence itself. Although violence differs across time and place, we can nevertheless make a few tentative observations, understanding that these are not trite answers.
One observation is that regime type appears to make a difference; terrorism and revolution are less likely in democratic societies. Why? The simplest answer is that democracies allow for a significant degree of participation among a wide enough number of citizens to make them feel that they have a stake in the system. While democracies produce their own share of cynicism and public unrest, including political violence, they also appear to co-opt and diffuse the motivations necessary for serious organized or mass violence against the state and civilians. Again, this is not to say that democracies are impervious to political violence. The observation merely that democracies appear to be more effective at containing and limiting such groups by providing more options for political opposition.

Of course, one of the dangers is that terrorism and revolution sparked by one kind of regime can easily spill beyond its borders, particularly in such an interconnected world. While democracy may be an important factor in preventing violence carried out by its own citizens, it may not offer protection against political violence carried out by groups operating outside the state. Indeed, the paradox here is that open democratic societies may limit conflict but make for a much more tempting target for globalized political violence.

It might be concluded that if democracy is an important factor regime change should be a central goal for reducing political violence. However, such a policy is fraught with problems. First, research indicates that the successful institutionalization of democracy is predicated on how that regime change takes place. Regime changes that are imposed from the top down (such as through external intervention) or involve societal violence are less likely to produce a democratic outcome in the long run (Figure 5.3).²⁰

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**FIGURE 5.3**

Regime Change and Freedom

These charts look at nearly 70 cases of regime change from authoritarianism between 1973 and 2002. Chart (a) shows that in those cases where societal actors led the transition over 50 percent resulted in a free country with full civil and political rights. In contrast, less than 10 percent of transitions controlled by those in power or imposed by other states led to a free political regime. Chart (b) indicates that in those cases where societal actors were removed from violence nearly 70 percent of transitions resulted in a free country with full civil and political rights. In contrast, only 25 percent of transitions with societal violence resulted in a free political regime.

- Regime change led by societal actors
- Regime change led by ruling elite or externally imposed
- Societal actors removed
- Societal actors involved

Outcome of regime change

Source: Freedom House
The result of top-down or violent regime change is instead more likely to lead to an illiberal regime where democracy is weakly institutionalized or even to a failed state. And such conditions can provide both the motivation and the opportunity for political violence to emerge. In short, certain kinds of regime change can increase, not reduce, the number of regimes that foster political violence. Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria provide sad evidence of this.

What about states that are already liberal democracies and yet face political violence from domestic or international actors? In this case, the classic dilemma of freedom versus security raises its head. In the face of threats, democratic states and their citizens will often favor limiting certain civil liberties and increasing state autonomy and capacity in order to bring an end to political violence. In the United States, the 2001 Patriot Act is an example of such counterterrorism, with its increased powers to conduct public surveillance. Suspects in the United Kingdom can be detained up to 28 days without charge and under certain conditions can even be stripped of their citizenship if suspected of terrorism.

There are dangers here. Focusing excessively on security over freedom may be dangerous to democracy. Placing too much power in the hands of the state to observe and control the public could seriously threaten to erode individual rights and with them democracy, creating what some have called a “surveillance state.” As clear evidence of this, many point to the recent revelations about activities of the U.S. National Security Agency. Such activities can in turn contribute to political violence, since they confirm the idea that the state is conspiring to destroy its opponents, thus justifying violent resistance. Despite these dangers, people and politicians often seek dramatic and visible solutions because they provide a sense of security, although in reality they may have limited or even counterproductive effects. The old adage attributed to Benjamin Franklin is worth recalling: “Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety.”

In Sum: Meeting the Challenge of Political Violence

Political violence is a complex issue for scholars, states, and societies. Often its objectives are cast in idealistic terms as part of necessary historical change. At the same time, this violence can come at a tremendous cost of human life, when violence becomes an end in itself. Because political violence is a response to existing institutions, the institutional context differs across time and space, making it hard to extrapolate general properties from specific instances. Like a virus, it may suddenly emerge in unexpected places, ravaging the population before disappearing again. Or it may lie dormant for many years, only to break out when certain conditions come together.

There is clearly no one way to stop or prevent political violence. Countries have to balance prevention, such as providing democratic institutions and opportunities for political contention, with treatment, such as military and legal methods to counter terrorism. Treatment carries its own risk, and even the most comprehensive forms of prevention cannot guarantee that political violence will never break out.

Key Terms

- guerrilla war (p. 152)
- ideational (p. 141)
- nihilism (p. 155)
- political violence (p. 140)
- relative deprivation model (p. 146)
- revolution (p. 144)
- state-sponsored terrorism (p. 152)
- terrorism (p. 152)

For Further Reading

Why Study This Case?

Mexico offers students a fascinating case study of three challenges to a young democracy that are of particular interest to political scientists: the need for the state to establish political order, the need to implement the most effective and fair strategy for economic development, and the need to establish political transparency and the rule of law.

The first challenge, the need to achieve political order and to avoid the violence and disruption associated with a lack of order, was the subject of Samuel Huntington's classic Political Order in Changing Societies. No country illustrates this challenge better than Mexico. Mexico's first spurt of economic development took place under Porfirio Díaz's brutal authoritarian regime in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. That regime was displaced by the Mexican Revolution (1910–17), an extended period of cataclysmic mass violence and political anarchy. The chaos was finally ended by a unique and remarkably flexible semi-authoritarian regime governed by a dominant political party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).

Unlike the political atmosphere of most other developing countries, Mexico's post-1917 politics was relatively peaceful; after 1920, power was transferred between leaders through regular elections; and after the late 1930s, the military was thoroughly subordinate to civilians. Since 2000, Mexico has been governed by its first democratic regime but has struggled to impose order. Mexico's first two democratic presidents waged a war against Mexico's increasingly powerful drug cartels and unleashed the most serious wave of violence the country has seen since the Mexican Revolution. The violence has traumatized Mexican society, raised serious questions about the capacity and autonomy of the Mexican state, and led some domestic and foreign observers to wonder whether Mexico could become a failed state. In the context of an
escalating drug war, in 2012 Mexican voters returned the presidency to the PRI, hoping that its young and charismatic leader, Enrique Peña Nieto, could stem the violence. However, the PRI’s control of the presidency has raised questions about whether Mexico’s old authoritarian political machine could transform itself into a democratic political party.

A second challenge facing Mexico is determining the appropriate role for the state in economic development. Modern Mexican history has seen radical shifts between free-market political economic systems and a more statist political economy. Today Mexico is one of Latin America’s most open economies. Its embrace of neoliberal economics since the 1990s has made Mexico a middle-class society that is far more affluent than during the decades of statist economies, and it has experienced an export boom. But the dislocations caused by Mexico’s opening to the global economy worsened inequality, devastated its most vulnerable citizens, and fueled a massive wave of emigration to the United States. These dislocations have also launched a debate within Mexico about proposals to dismantle the last vestiges of statism, most notably the state ownership of oil, Mexico’s major natural resource.

A final challenge facing Mexico is the struggle between the rule of law and transparency on the one hand, and endemic corruption cultivated by decades of one-party rule on the other. Those who believed that Mexico’s embrace of democracy and a more open economy would reduce corruption and improve accountability have been sorely disappointed to date. Decades of authoritarian rule under the PRI weakened the rule of law and left Mexico with a police force and judiciary with low capacity, little accountability, and vulnerability to corruption. The inability of the Mexican state to defend its citizens from the violence unleashed by drug cartels has raised doubts about the competence of its corruption-riddled security apparatus and judiciary. The violence has also given rise to a powerful vigilante movement by frustrated citizens, a phenomenon that may itself prove a challenge to the rule of law.

The return to power of the PRI in 2012 has renewed both hopes and skepticism about each of these three dilemmas. President Enrique Peña Nieto has pledged to strengthen democracy through a series of political reforms, but many Mexicans are skeptical about such claims from a politician from the PRI, a party associated with over six decades of authoritarian rule. Peña Nieto criticized his predecessors’ war against the drug cartels but has broadly continued their policies. Can the PRI have more success in reducing violence in Mexico while shoring up its democratic institutions?

Peña Nieto has also pledged to further open Mexico’s economy as a way of stimulating economic growth, increasing oil revenue, and modernizing th
economy. Since taking office he has proposed some ambitious and controversial reforms of the oil sector, and he has pledged to break up powerful monopolies that dominate much of the economy. However, given that the PRI presided over a statist economy that sanctioned powerful monopolies in exchange for political support, many question whether the Peña Nieto administration can face down those on the left—and those within his own party—who oppose many of those reforms. Can Peña Nieto shepherd these reforms through the Mexican political system, and can he improve Mexico’s sluggish and unequal economy?

Peña Nieto’s success with these first two challenges will likely depend largely on his ability to improve transparency, empower Mexico’s feckless judiciary, strengthen the rule of law, and reduce systemic corruption. Can he distance himself and his party from the PRI’s reputation as a bastion of patronage, corruption, and opacity?

Historical Development of the State

The history of the modern Mexican state can be viewed as a struggle between political order, which has almost always been achieved by authoritarian rulers, and periodic outbursts of violence and political anarchy. When the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés arrived in Mexico in 1519, he encountered well-established and highly sophisticated indigenous civilizations. The country had long been home to such peoples as the Maya, Aztecs, and Toltecs, who had relatively prosperous economies, impressive architecture, sophisticated agricultural methods, and powerful militaries. Within three years of their arrival, the Spanish conquerors had defeated the last Aztec leader, Cuauhtémoc, destroyed the impressive Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, and exterminated the indigenous population. By the early seventeenth century, the indigenous population had been reduced from about 25 million to under 1 million. The surviving indigenous peoples of Mexico, concentrated in the central and southern parts of the country, became a permanent underclass of virtual slaves and landless peasants.

The Aztec Empire was replaced by the equally hierarchical, authoritarian, and militaristic Spanish Empire, which created a legacy very different from that imparted to the United States by British colonialism. Mexico was the richest of Spain’s colonial possessions (indeed, it was far richer at the time than Britain’s territories to the north), and Spain ruled the distant colony with an iron fist, sending a new viceroy to the colony every four years. Colonial viceroys were absolute dictators: armed with the terror of the Spanish Inquisition, they were able to stamp out most political dissent. Without any civilian oversight, rampant corruption thrived in the colonial administration.

Independence and Instability: The Search for Order

The struggle for independence can be viewed as a conflict over control of the state between the aristocracy loyal to Spain and the increasingly powerful and wealthy...
criollos (Mexican-born descendants of the Spanish colonists). Though inspired by the French and American revolutions, the Mexican independence movement was mostly a response to the sudden blow that Napoleon’s invading armies delivered to Spain. When Spain adopted a progressive-liberal constitution in 1812, conservative Mexican elites accepted independence as the only means to preserve order and the status quo. The leading rebels and political conservatives agreed that an independent Mexico, declared in 1821, would preserve the role of the Catholic Church and implement a constitutional monarchy with a European at the head. Mexico’s War of Independence was extremely violent, lasting 11 years and costing over half a million lives.

Mexico’s independence was dominated by political conservatives who sought to preserve the economic and social status quo. As a result, independence did nothing to alleviate the poverty of Mexico’s indigenous people and its large mestizo population. Indeed, the violence of the War of Independence and the elimination of the minimal protections of the Spanish Crown worsened their plight. The power of the large landholders, or latifundistas, grew with independence, and the newly independent Mexico became more unequal and politically unstable. Much of the turmoil and political chaos that plagued Mexico over the next half-century was caused by a dispute between conservatives who wanted to maintain a monarchy and liberals who wanted a U.S.-style democracy. With the end of Spanish rule and the strong centralized government of the viceroy, Mexico was dominated by local military strongmen known as caciques. Mexico’s weak central state could not impose its authority.

Independent Mexico’s first leader, Colonel Agustín de Iturbide, had himself crowned emperor in 1822. He was overthrown by General Antonio López de Santa Anna, Mexico’s first in a series of caudillos (national military strongmen), and was executed two years later. Santa Anna dominated Mexican politics for the next 30 years; despite his considerable power, however, he was unable to impose his authority over the local caciques or to prevent the secession of Texas in 1836. The impotence of a fragmented Mexico became even more apparent in the 1840s when a rising imperial power, the United States, defeated the country in the Mexican-American War (1846–48) and claimed half of Mexico’s territory (present-day Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, and Utah). In the aftermath of the defeat, Mexico’s weakened government faced a massive uprising, known as the War of the Castes by the indigenous Mayan population in the south. It took several years of fighting to subdue the rebellion. Over the next several decades, liberals who were led by a Zapotec Indian, Benito Juárez, attempted to centralize, modernize, and secularize Mexico. Juárez, who occupied the presidency on three separate occasions, imposed a fairly progressive constitution in 1857 and is today considered one of Mexico’s first proponents of democracy. Juárez was unable to bring stability to Mexico, however. In 1864, Mexican conservatives, backed by French troops, imposed an ill-fated and short-lived monarchy ruled by an Austrian emperor, Maximilian, who was
captured and executed in 1867. Juárez regained power, but his reforms alienated Mexican conservatives, and Mexico soon succumbed to a long dictatorship.

The Porfiriato: Economic Liberalism and Political Authoritarianism

From 1876 to 1910, Mexican politics was dominated by Porfirio Díaz. General Díaz had backed the liberal reforms of Juárez and fought to expel the French-imposed monarchy but then embraced conservative ideas to gain the support of elites and maintain power. He assumed power in 1876 and had himself reelected for much of the period up until 1910. He imposed a brutal authoritarian regime (known as the Porfiriato) and gave Mexico its first taste of stability since independence. Díaz was also responsible for Mexico's first real economic development and the first Mexican ruler to impose the power of the state on remote areas.

The Revolution

The Mexican Revolution (1910–20) can be viewed as a struggle between two groups attempting to seize control of the state. The first included middle-class Mexicans resisting the dictatorship of Díaz, who sought a more democratic political system with a capitalist economy. The second included radical social reformers who proposed, among other things, agrarian reform. Both groups sought to weaken the role of the Catholic Church.

In the first phase of the revolution, middle-class political reformers, led by the landowner Francisco Madero, defeated the Díaz dictatorship. Madero's victory promised democratic reforms and minimal economic change. The second phase of the revolution involved a struggle between these moderate political reformers and advocates of radical socioeconomic change. The most famous revolutionary advocate of the poor was Emiliano Zapata, a young mestizo peasant leader. Zapata organized a peasant army in Morelos, south of Mexico City, to push for agrarian reform. In the north of Mexico, Francisco (Pancho) Villa organized an army of peasants and small farmers.

Different social forces saw the Mexican Revolution as a means to accomplish very different types of goals, which helps explain why the conflict was so protracted and so bloody. After the initial uprising, Mexico soon descended into political chaos—armed bands led by regional caciques fought one another over a period of 10 years. About 1.5 million Mexicans (about 7 percent of the total population) died in or as a result of the conflict, and thousands more fled north to the United States. Order was restored only in 1917, under the leadership of a northern governor, Venustiano Carranza. He defeated not only those who wanted a return to a dictatorship but also Zapata and Villa, the more radical voices of the revolution.

The Constitution of 1917 reflected some of the contradictions of the revolution. The document was written not by peasants and workers but by middle-class mestizo professionals who had suffered under the Díaz dictatorship. That some of their values were largely "liberal" explains provisions that call for regular elections as well as harsh measures to weaken the Catholic Church. The constitution sought to prevent the reemergence of a dictatorship by devolving political power to Mexico's states, adopting federalism, and barring presidents, governors, mayors, and federal legislators from reelection. Reflecting the power of the emerging mestizo class and the role played by indigenous Mexicans in unseating the dictatorship, the 1917 constitution provided elaborate protection of indigenous communal lands and called for land reform. It was also a nationalist document, prohibiting foreign ownership of Mexican land and mineral rights.

Although Carranza successfully seized power and fostered the new constitution, he was unable to implement many of the reforms or to stem Mexican tendencies toward political violence. His government was responsible for the murder of Zapata in 1919, and Carranza himself was assassinated by political opponents in 1920.

Mexico's next two elected presidents, Álvaro Obregón (1920–24) and Plutarco Elías Calles (1924–28), finally put an end to the political bloodshed and developed a political system capable of maintaining order. Obregón promoted trade unions but brought them under state control. He also promoted land reform while tolerating the presence of large landed estates. He managed to gain the support and recognition of the United States, which had feared the revolution as a socialist experiment. Most significantly, he purged the army and weakened the revolutionary generals who had continued to meddle in politics.

President Calles consolidated state power by imposing the first income tax and investing in education and infrastructure. He vigorously enforced the constitution's limit on the power of the Catholic Church. The Church was a major landowner, and its support for the dictatorship of Díaz and the enemies of the revolution made it a prime target for reform. Religious processions were banned, clergy could not appear in public in religious garb, the Church could not own property, and control over education was given to the state. Attempts by the Revolutionary leadership to impose these reforms provoked a major social upheaval, the Cristero Rebellion (1926–29), a bloody conflict that claimed about 90,000 lives. The conflict ended when Revolutionary leaders agreed not to enforce some
of the anticlerical provisions of the constitution and to restore some or the privileges enjoyed by the Catholic Church.

After Calles left power, he created, in 1929, his most enduring legacy: the Partido Nacional Revolucionario, later renamed the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). From the outset, the PRI was conceived as a party of power and a party of the state. Its colors (red, white, and green) are the colors of the Mexican flag. Its goal was to encompass all those who had supported the revolution, and its members thus ranged from socialists to liberals. Moreover, it was designed to incorporate and co-opt the most important organizations and interest groups in Mexican society, starting with the army. The PRI's main purpose was to end political violence by controlling the political system and the process of presidential succession. After decades of instability and violence, the revolution's leaders brought Mexico an unprecedented period of political peace.

Stability Achieved: The PRI in Power, 1929-2000

For decades the PRI provided Mexico with the much-desired political stability that its founders had sought. Under the PRI, Mexico held presidential elections every six years, and presidents assumed office without violence or military intervention. The PRI regime featured a strong president, directly elected for a single six-year term. Though not stipulated in the 1917 constitution, PRI presidents claimed the power to name their successors by officially designating the PRI candidate for the presidency; for more than 80 years, no official PRI candidate lost a presidential election. During most of the PRI's tenure in office, the Mexican president enjoyed the reverence and aloofness of monarchical heads of state while possessing far more power than the typical democratic president. Most important, until 2000, Mexican presidents controlled the vast machinery of the PRI and used the state to dispense patronage. Unlike U.S. presidents, they faced no effective check on their power from the legislature, judiciary, or state governments, all of which were controlled by the PRI.

Under the PRI, regular elections were held for national, state, and local offices, and opposition parties actively contested these elections. During most of this period, there was no formal censorship of the press, and Mexicans were free to voice their opinions and criticize the government. Mexicans were also free to live where they wanted, and according to their constitution, they were living in a democratic state.

But under its surface, the Mexican regime had clear authoritarian tendencies. The PRI held an inordinate amount of power. Between 1929 and 2000, the PRI controlled the presidency and the vast majority of seats in the legislature and at the state and local level. The PRI dominated major trade unions and peasant organizations. Through its control of the state, the PRI controlled major pieces of the economy, including Mexico's vast oil wealth. The PRI became expert at co-opting possible sources of opposition, including the press and the weak opposition parties. Unlike many authoritarian regimes, the PRI did not often need to revert to harsher measures of repression; when necessary, however, the regime used a variety of tactics to stifle the opposition. Most notorious were the massacre of peaceful student demonstrators in Mexico City in 1968 and the increasing use of electoral fraud to preserve its political dominance in the 1970s and '80s as its grip on power began to erode.

Since the Mexican Revolution, scholars have struggled to characterize the Mexican regime. It is perhaps most accurate to view Mexico under the PRI as an authoritarian regime dominated by a single political party, but one that afforded far more civil liberties than its authoritarian counterparts elsewhere. Mexico held regular (though not always free and fair) elections, tolerated and even encouraged political parties (although those parties began to win state and local races only in the 1980s), and formally protected basic civil liberties. Compared with most other authoritarian regimes, the PRI kept human rights abuses to a minimum. It maintained its power almost exclusively through co-option, intimidation, and corruption. Its unparalleled success meant that it did not often need to resort to brute repression. The Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa aptly described the PRI regime as the "perfect dictatorship."

Just as Mexico's political system contained a mixture of democratic and authoritarian features, its political economic model was also contradictory. Some goals of the more radical supporters of the Revolution, like land reform and the nationalization of oil and mineral wealth, were promoted during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-40). But his successors were far more willing to accommodate the Mexican elite that the Revolution had left largely intact.

The Slow Erosion of PRI Power, 1980-2000

By the early 1980s, the vaunted stability of the Mexican regime was called into question by a series of interrelated economic and political challenges to PRI rule. The economic crises of the 1980s (due mainly to Mexico's massive foreign debt) and mid-1990s (caused by a sudden devaluation of Mexico's currency, the peso), unleashed numerous challenges to the party's political hegemony. The conservative opposition in northern Mexico, long an advocate of free-market economic
policies, began to seriously contest and occasionally win local and state elections. The PRI was then forced to revert to ever-increasing and ever-more-covert electoral fraud to deny power to the opposition.

The 1988 election of PRI president Carlos Salinas de Gortari was only possible through electoral fraud, and the popular outrage that resulted led to reforms of the electoral system that would eventually benefit the opposition. Salinas continued the PRI's gradual adoption of a neoliberal economic program by signing the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with the United States and Canada, and by eliminating the last remnants of the Revolution's more radical agenda (such as Mexico's commitment to land reform). Mexico's economy was opened to foreign investment, and the political system began a process of liberalization. As a result of the economic crisis, and due in part to the electoral reforms enacted under Salinas, the watershed election of July 2000 ended the PRI's 71-year control of the presidency. Vicente Fox, candidate of the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), handily defeated Francisco Labastida of the PRI, despite an expensive and elaborate PRI campaign.

Since 2000, Mexico has operated under the same constitution adopted after the Mexican Revolution. President Fox and his PAN successor, Felipe Calderón, were Mexico's first two democratically elected presidents, and they operated in a much more pluralistic and competitive political system. The election of Enrique Peña Nieto in 2012 marked the PRI's return to power at the national level (it had retained considerable power at the state and local level).

## Political Regime

### Political Institutions

Political scientists describe Mexico as democratic after 2000 because the PRI, and its vast network of patronage and clientelism, was dislodged from the presidency. The democratic political regime—established by the Mexican Revolution and manipulated by the PRI's authoritarian regime—remains in place today.

### THE CONSTITUTION

On paper, the Mexican regime does not differ markedly from that of the United States. The Constitution of 1917 calls for a presidential legislative-executive system, a separation of judicial, legislative, and executive power, and a system of federalism that at least formally gives Mexico's states considerable power. The 70-year domination of the political system by the PRI, however, rendered the formidable constitution largely meaningless. Mexican presidents enjoyed near-dictatorial powers with few checks on their authority. Through their domination of the PRI, they not only controlled the judiciary but also handpicked state governors. The Mexican legislature might have served as a check on the PRI, but until July 1997 it was controlled by it. Elections at all levels were largely a charade, serving mainly to validate PRI appointments to elective offices. Even the president was not truly elected, since incumbent presidents ritually designated their successor. Campaigns were more celebrations of the PRI's power than genuine political contests.

How, then, did the opposition manage to win local and state elections in the 1980s? And how did the opposition unseat the PRI in the 2000 presidential election? Part of the answer to these questions lies in the growing illegitimacy of the regime during the 1970s, when Mexico's economy began to deteriorate. But the erosion of PRI legitimacy was also the result of widespread outrage at the PRI's blatant and unabashed disregard for the rule of law in the 1980s and '90s. As opposition to the PRI grew, and as the PRI, reported more openly and more regularly to widespread electoral fraud, sectors of the party pushed for democratization. Seeking to polish its image, the PRI passed a number of reforms that favored the opposition.

One important set of reforms, passed in 1977, changed the electoral law (implementing some element of proportional representation, or PR) to guarantee the presence of the opposition in the legislature. Other reforms passed under...
the last PRI president, Ernesto Zedillo, gave the legislature control over judicial appointments and imposed electoral safeguards that greatly reduced the ability of a government to steal an election.

The Branches of Government

THE PRESIDENT

Because of their immense power and unchallenged authority during the long authoritarian rule of the PRI, Mexican presidents were viewed as elected monarchs. However, on paper, the 1917 constitution created a president with powers similar to those of the U.S. president and somewhat more limited than is the norm throughout Latin America. The perception that Mexico had an “Imperial presidency” had more to do with the 70-year dominance of the PRI than with the provisions of the constitution. A Mexican president can issue executive decrees that have the force of law in a few areas (including international trade agreements). The president can directly introduce legislation in Congress and can veto legislation initiated by Congress. Until 1994, Mexican presidents had extensive power to appoint and remove judges. As late as 1982, President José López Portillo essentially decreed the nationalization of Mexico’s banking system.

However, Mexican presidents serve a single six-year term, meaning that all of them are lame ducks (and in this regard are rendered weaker than most other presidents). They must be at least 35 years old and native born, and they cannot be a clergy member or an active member of the military. During the 70-year reign of the PRI, the power of the president was greatly enhanced by the tradition of handpicking his successor, who was generally chosen from among the cabinet members, but party primaries now select presidential candidates. In fact, in the last two presidential elections (2006, and 2012), the politician favored by the sitting president failed to win the nomination in the party primary election. During the authoritarian period, Mexican presidents also enjoyed enormous power because the state played a leading role in the economy. Control over key natural resources and infrastructure (for example, oil, electricity, and communications) historically put the key economic levers in the hands of the executive. However, with the economic reforms of the last decades, Mexican presidents have far less power over the economy than they had during the 1917–2000 period.

Mexican presidents appoint and preside over a large cabinet of ministers, who oversee the various government departments. In recent decades, the Secretary of

Government, which controls internal political affairs, and the Secretary of the Treasury, which oversees the economy, have been the highest-profile cabinet posts and have often been stepping-stones to the presidency. Since 2000, the Mexican cabinet has included 19 cabinet secretaries, in addition to seven policy coordinators whose job is to ease communication among ministries. Since Vicente Fox’s historic victory in 2000, Mexico’s presidents have lacked a majority in Congress. As a result, some of the constitutional checks on presidential power that long absent in the Mexican system have become more effective. Since 2000, presidents Fox, Calderón, and Peña Nieto have had to contend with a fragmented and increasingly assertive legislature and have thus been forced to bargain with the two major opposition parties in order to pass legislation. In recognition of this new reality, in 2013 President Peña Nieto approved the Pact for Mexico, a formal agreement with the two major opposition parties on many proposed political and economic reforms.

THE LEGISLATURE

Mexico has a bicameral legislature, called the National Congress, which is composed of a lower house (the Chamber of Deputies) and an upper house (the Senate). The 500-member Chamber of Deputies has the power to pass laws (with a simple majority for most laws), levy taxes, and verify the outcome of elections. Mexico’s upper house is composed of 128 members: 3 senators from each state and the Federal District of Mexico City, and an additional 32 senators selected from a national list on the basis of proportional representation. The upper house has fewer powers than the lower house, but it does have the power to confirm the president’s appointments to the Supreme Court, approve treaties, and approve federal intervention in state matters.

Both houses have a committee system that is much like the U.S. system. In practice, however, Mexican legislators and the legislative committees lack the teeth of their northern counterparts because of one key difference: according to Article 59 of the constitution, Mexican legislators cannot be reelected to consecutive terms. As a result, from 1970 to 1997, only about 14 percent of Mexican deputies entered the lower house with any legislative experience, effectively depriving Mexico of the kind of senior lawmakers who dominate the U.S. system. Most legislators were members of the PRI and could not afford to cross the party leadership, because they depended on the party for future political appointments.
Even after the PRI’s loss of the presidency in 2000, single-term legislators were reluctant to disobey their party leadership if they hoped to be nominated for another post in local or state government. Ironically, the PRI (whose founding principle was no reelection) is now the strongest advocate of ending term limits. Since returning to power in 2012, the PRI has formally proposed amending the constitution to allow legislators to be reelected, but only with the approval of their parties. If enacted, this reform may increase the experience and prestige of legislators, but it may not make them any more willing to vote independently from their parties.

The Mexican legislature is currently in transition. Until 1988, the PRI regularly won over 90 percent of lower house seats and never lost a Senate seat. Between 1970 and 2003, it averaged 66.9 percent of the seats in the lower house, dwarfing the presence of its nearest rival, the PAN (National Action Party), which averaged about 17 percent during that period. In 1997, the two main opposition parties were able to form a coalition and take control of the lower house.

Before 1997, the lower house approved about 98 percent of the legislation submitted by the executive, but that percentage has fallen steadily since then. Moreover, the number of laws originating in the legislature (instead of in the president’s office) has increased dramatically. Since 2000 the lower house has successfully resisted pieces of legislation proposed by Fox, Calderón, and Peña Nieto. Because Mexican parties in the legislature have been extraordinarily well disciplined (Mexican legislators almost always vote according to the wishes of the party leadership), it has been almost impossible for presidents to poach votes from opposition legislators.

Despite his inaugural pledge to respect Congress, Fox began his term by acting very much like the PRI presidents, designing legislative proposals without any congressional input. His impetuous behavior only emboldened the legislature. Congress blocked some legislation and radically altered other measures. For example, the lower house modified Fox’s indigenous rights bill, which emerged from the legislature so weakened that the Zapatista guerrillas (whose rebellion it was intended to end) rejected it. Fox’s proposed reform of Mexico’s tax structure was tempered by the PRI and the leftist Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) opposition, and Congress blocked his effort to negotiate a reduction of tariffs on imported sugar.

President Calderón faced similar legislative opposition but proved more adept at compromising with the opposition-dominated legislature. He achieved some major legislative victories as a result. President Peña Nieto has generally worked very well with the opposition-controlled legislature, and shortly after taking office, he negotiated the Pacto por México (Pact for Mexico) to gain a majority in the legislature for over 90 key reforms.

THE JUDICIARY

Mexico’s judiciary is structured according to the U.S. model. Like the United States, Mexico has a Supreme Court as well as courts at the local and state levels. The 11 Supreme Court justices are appointed by the president and are confirmed by a two-thirds vote of the Senate. However, unlike the United States, in Mexico these justices are limited to 15-year terms.

The Mexican judiciary has important formal powers, but during the authoritarian period the Supreme Court never overturned any law, and it tended to view
its jurisdiction in very limited terms. In the 1980s, dramatic changes were introduced to give the Supreme Court far greater jurisdiction and power. The Supreme Court can now determine the constitutionality of legislation upon the request of one-third of the lower house, but it can strike down a law only if a supermajority of eight out of 11 justices agrees. The reforms have increased the independence of the judiciary by creating a seven-member Federal Judicial Council to oversee the administration of justice.

During the last years of authoritarian rule and in the early years of the Fox administration, the Supreme Court assumed a much more activist role. For example, it ordered PRI President Zedillo’s administration to release records relating to the banking industry, and it struck down Fox’s attempt to privatize the generating of electricity. Despite this progress, Mexico’s judicial system is severely hampered by a widespread perception that judges, especially at the local level, are corrupt. Presidents Fox, Calderón, and Peña Nieto have made it a priority to enhance the prestige and power of the beleaguered court system. An even more serious problem is the overall weakness of the rule of law in Mexico. According to one prominent political scientist, “Mexico is already, up to a point, a democracy, a middle-class society, and an open economy, but is nowhere near to becoming a nation of laws.”

Mexico’s judicial system is currently in transition. A number of constitutional amendments since the mid-1990s have led to significant reforms. A 2008 amendment required all state and federal judicial systems to move from a European-style inquisitorial system to an oral-based jury model by 2016. The reform’s implementation is behind schedule (by May of 2013, only three states had passed laws to implement the legislation), and Mexico will have to retrain its lawyers and judges; but once implemented, the reforms will hopefully lead to a more transparent and effective legal system. The new system will place greater emphasis on due process rights for those accused of crimes and will impose the presumption of innocence. A 2010 reform gave Mexicans the ability to use class action lawsuits to permit groups of citizens to sue in defense of their rights.

The Electoral System

During the last two decades of PRI rule, elections were widely viewed as corrupt. The 1988 presidential election was probably the zenith of PRI electoral fraud: more than 30,000 ballot boxes disappeared. In an effort to cover up the thievery, the federal government declared the final ballots a state secret. Only in 1996 did the PRI succumb to pressure and create a truly independent Federal Electoral Institute, taking power away from the government-controlled Secretary of Government. It also created the Federal Electoral Tribunal to adjudicate all electoral disputes. Mexico now has a sophisticated and transparent electoral system featuring a national electoral register and voter identification cards, public funding for electoral campaigns, and strict limits on private contributions. Nevertheless, the bitterly contested presidential elections of 2006 raised new concerns about Mexico’s electoral system and generated calls for further reform.

Voting is compulsory in Mexico, although this law is sporadically enforced. In part because of this law and in part because the PRI traditionally used its power to encourage electoral turnout, Mexican elections under the PRI had high turnout, usually between 60 and 70 percent. Since 2000, turnout has been closer to 60 percent (it was about 63 percent for the 2012 presidential elections), which is higher than in the United States but low in relation to the rest of Latin American countries where voting is mandatory.

Mexican presidents are directly elected, but unlike in many Latin American political systems, there are no provisions for a second round of voting if a candidate fails to win a majority of the vote. In the context of Mexico’s political party system, in which three main parties have each won a third of the vote, this has meant that all recent elections have produced presidents with a relatively small plurality of the vote, and with a legislature dominated by the opposition. Indeed, each of the last three Mexican presidents won successively smaller majorities of the popular vote, and Calderón won the disputed 2006 election with only about 36 percent of the vote. President Calderón introduced legislation in December 2008 to create a two-round voting system, but it failed to gain legislative support.

Mexico’s current electoral system for the legislature dates from reforms implemented by PRI president Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado in 1986. Mexico now has a mixed electoral system for the lower house, which includes 300 single-member districts and 200 proportional representation seats. Deputies in the lower house serve three-year terms. Mexico’s electoral system for the upper house is unique: Senators serve six-year terms, and three are elected from each state and the federal district. The party with the most votes wins two Senate seats, and the party finishing second is automatically awarded the third seat. An additional 32 seats are allocated according to PR. Elections to the Senate take place at the same time as the presidential elections. Parties must get at least 2 percent of the national vote in order to win seats from the PR lists.

Mexico’s electoral law also has provisions that make it difficult for a party to win a majority of the seats in either house of the legislature. A party’s total number
of seats in the lower house cannot exceed the percentage of the party's PR vote by more than 8 percent. In effect, this means that to gain a legislative majority, a party would need to get at least 42 percent of the PR vote and then win a large number of single-member contests to push the total number of seats over 50 percent. In Mexico's system of three major political parties, legislative majorities have, to date, been elusive. This means that in stark contrast to the 1917–2000 period of PRI dominance, divided government is likely to be the rule in the future.

President Peña Nieto, with the support of the conservative PAN, has recently reformed the Federal Electoral Institute. It now has power over local elections, where fraud has been more widespread, as well as the power to annul the results in close elections where candidates have overspent the legal limits.

Local Government

Despite being formally federal, Mexico operated very much like a unitary political system during authoritarianism. Excessive localism and a history of instability and political violence caused by the absence of a weak central authority favored the PRI's centralizing tendencies, despite the federalist constitutional rhetoric. Federal authorities controlled local elections, local budgets, local police forces, and so forth. Until 1997, the mayor of Mexico City was a cabinet member appointed directly by the president. Mexico currently has 31 states and a Federal District of Mexico City, each with its own constitution and unicameral legislature. States are subdivided into municipios (similar in some ways to county governments in the United States). State governors, county councils, and county presidents are now elected directly. Until 1988, all governors were from the PRI, although in the 1980s only widespread electoral fraud prevented opposition victories. Indeed, some of the first serious opposition to PRI hegemony came at the local level, especially in Mexico's prosperous north, where unpopular PRI local leaders and state governors were successfully defeated by opposition candidates. The PRI's use of widespread electoral fraud at the local level helped ignite regional opposition to the party's heavy-handed centralist policies. The first opposition governor took power in 1989, in the state of Baja California. In the 1990s, the PRI began to accept opposition victories in numerous local elections, and by the end of that decade opposition parties controlled seven governorships.

Mexican states have important powers, but their sovereignty is far more circumscribed by federal authorities, especially the federal bureaucracy, than is state sovereignty in other federal systems such as Brazil, Germany, and the United States. The PRI regime limited local autonomy by retaining tight control over public funds, and today the federal government collects about 90 percent of all tax revenue. Since the return to democracy an increasing portion of government spending—currently about half of the total—was delegated to state and local governments, often as the result of horse trading between presidents and the opposition majority in the legislature.

In the 1980s and 90s, state and local politics provided the first opportunities for Mexico's anti-PRI opposition, although some local and state offices (especially in rural areas) remained PRI strongholds long after the party lost the presidency in 2000. A good example is the rural west coast state of Guerrero, where the PRI retained a lock on state government until being ousted by the leftist PRD in the gubernatorial elections of 2005. Another example is the southern state of Oaxaca, where a PRI governor was accused of repression and corruption, and where the PRI lost power only in 2010, when the two main opposition parties joined forces.

Following the U.S. model, Mexican states and localities have their own police forces, but these forces have been widely viewed as bastions of corruption. Since 2006, local police have been replaced in some areas by federal forces to root out corruption. The investigation surrounding the mysterious disappearance of 43 university students at a rural teacher's college in September 2014 revealed the local government, the local police, and drug traffickers had worked together to kidnap the students. Still, Mexicans have more confidence in their local government than in the federal government (see "Confidence in Mexican Institutions, 2011," p. 60).

Political Conflict and Competition

The Party System

During Mexico's long authoritarian period following the Mexican Revolution, opposition parties were mostly tolerated; some were even encouraged to exist to give superficial legitimacy to the PRI-dominated system. The PRI skillfully cultivated and selectively co-opted all the opposition parties, which were generally weak and divided until the 1980s. The PRI also periodically altered the election laws to increase the presence of the opposition in the legislature while using its ties with big business to outspend its rivals. And, when necessary, the PRI employed electoral fraud to retain control of the presidency and key governorships.
The Partido Revolucionario Institucional

The PRI was founded in 1929 as a way of ending Mexico’s often violent struggle for political power. From the start, the PRI was viewed as a party representing the interests of the Mexican state. During its long rule, the PRI became increasingly indistinguishable from the state, and the immense power of Mexico’s presidents resulted from their effective control over both the party and the state.

A key element of the PRI’s exercise of power was the use of patron-client relationships, in which powerful government officials delivered state services and access to power in exchange for the delivery of political support. The patron-client relationships operated from the top of the hierarchy, dominated by the PRI-controlled presidency, down to the very poorest segments of society. At the elite level, vast informal networks of personal loyalty known as camarillas (political cliques) were far more important than ideology.

The PRI also maintained control over the state, as a result of its ability to mobilize and control mass organizations through a system that political scientists call corporatism. During the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas, worker and peasant organizations were created and then integrated into the PRI structure. By using the state to channel patronage to PRI mass organizations, the PRI rendered independent mass organizations marginal and impotent. Mexico’s business elite duly lavished the PRI with campaign donations. One notorious example was a 1993 dinner, hosted by President Carlos Salinas, at which two dozen of Mexico’s top business leaders were asked to give $25 million each to the PRI.

As a party of power, the PRI’s ideology has been malleable, shifting over time to reflect the view of its presidential candidates. For example, redistributive and nationalist economic policies implemented during the Cárdenas presidency (1939-40) were directly contradicted by subsequent PRI presidents. All PRI leaders claimed to represent the legacy of the Mexican Revolution; yet as we have seen, that legacy is ambiguous. While it is true that the PRI generally favored state-led capitalism and economic nationalism until the 1980s, after that time the PRI readily accepted free-market reforms and Mexico’s entry into NAFTA. However, that shift did lead to a significant schism in the PRI to the creation of the leftist PRD in 1989.

Given that PRI presidents supported very different types of political economic policies, why was there not more open dissent within the PRI? In part, dissent was not strong because the PRI wrote electoral rules that made it virtually impossible for dissident PRI factions to form new parties and win elections.

The erosion of popular support for the PRI can be traced back to the repression of the student movement. In 1982, the PRI slowly but steadily began losing support in presidential, congressional, and local elections. Some of the decline was a direct result of Mexico’s rapid urbanization: while rural Mexico was particularly susceptible to local PRI bosses, urbanites were better educated, wealthier, and more politically independent. The PRI also suffered from a reduction in the state’s ability to dispense patronage during tough economic times. The economic austerity policies of the 1990s; a cornerstone of the government’s neoliberal policies, undoubtedly cost it a number of votes.

Ironically, the erosion of the PRI’s political power in the 1990s was also a partial consequence of its attempt at democratic reform. Seeking to enhance its democratic legitimacy, the government in the 1990s spent over $1 billion to implement a high-tech electoral system that greatly reduced electoral fraud.

Even with its historic defeat in the July 2000 presidential elections, the PRI continued to wield enormous power at the state and local level, where its old-style political machines were most effective and where allegations of old-style PRI corruption were commonplace. Even before the PRI’s return to the presidency in July 2012, the PRI governed 20 of Mexico’s 31 states as well as the Federal District.

After losing the presidency in 2000, the PRI was in a state of disarray. As a party designed to serve sitting presidents, it no longer had a clear leader. The official party leadership, the PRI-Legislative delegation, and PRI governors all wielded considerable power and produced what one observer has called “a hydra-headed behemoth.” Recent changes in the PRI structure, however, have led to the direct election of a party president, and by 2011 the PRI seemed poised for a political comeback. The failure of the Fox and Calderón administrations to enact badly needed reform (largely due to the stubborn opposition of the PRI) and the inconclusive drug war combined with the internal rancor within the leftist PRD after its narrow loss in the 2006 elections, created a political opening for the PRI. The PRI and its allied parties made impressive gains in the 2009 midterm elections, winning a majority of seats in the lower house. By 2011, the PRI controlled 17 of Mexico’s 28 governorships. Outgoing state of Mexico governor Enrique Peña Nieto, a young and charismatic PRI leader, completed the party’s remarkable political comeback with his victory in the 2012 presidential elections. Ironically, Peña Nieto attempted to identify the “new” PRI with an ambitious agenda to reform the very system the party had created in the early twentieth century.

The PRI remains an enigmatic political party whose ideology is hard to define. Currently, it is best viewed as being located on the center-right in the Mexican...
party system. In 2012, about half of voters who define themselves as being on the right or in the center supported the PRI while less than a quarter of self-defined leftists backed the PRI. Peña Nieto has tried to portray the PRI as a modern, centrist, democratic party, but the bases of the PRI’s power at the state and local level are still controlled by old-style PRI machine politicians associated with corruption, co-optation, and electoral fraud. It remains to be seen whether Peña Nieto will have the willingness and ability to modernize his party.

THE PRD

After the Mexican Revolution, the PRI attempted to occupy the political space traditionally occupied by leftist parties, even though it often pursued an economic model that favored big business. Because the PRI regime had its leftist phases, especially during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas, and because Mexico’s foreign policy often supported leftist governments and leftist movements elsewhere in Latin America, leftist parties occupied little real political space.

Nevertheless, parties of the left existed in Mexico, though most of them supported the PRI. Although the Communist Party was banned until 1979, the Popular Socialist Party (a moderate socialist party) and a few other leftist parties regularly won a few seats in the legislature. A serious leftist political force emerged only in the 1980s, when a leftist faction within the PRI, led by Michoacán governor Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, bolted from the party in protest over the PRI’s embrace of neoliberal economic reforms. Cárdenas, the son of the former president most famous for promoting land reform and nationalizing Mexico’s oil, then led the newly formed Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) in a coalition of four opposition parties in the 1988 elections.

Bolstered by the high-profile leadership of Cárdenas and boosted by the PRI’s loss of popularity, the PRD performed extremely well in the 1988 elections. Many observers believe that had there not been significant electoral fraud, the PRD would have won those elections. Despite this auspicious start, the PRD struggled as a leftist opposition party. It has been plagued by internal fighting and has been unable to capture enough voters outside its strongholds in Mexico City and the south.

The PRD clearly stands to the left of the PRI and the PAN. During the 1980s and ’90s, it attacked the PRI’s neoliberal reforms and neglect of poor Mexicans. It advocated more nationalist and protectionist policies than had been pursued by the PRI since the 1940s. Some PRD candidates at the state and local level have had considerable success, and the PRD has controlled Mexico City’s government since 1997, but the party’s performance in the 2000 presidential elections was certainly a disappointment. Cárdenas won just over 32 percent of the presidential vote, and the PRD did only slightly better in elections to Congress. The 1999 elections left the PRD as a minor political force with too few seats in Congress to build a majority, even if combined with the PAN.

The PRD’s prospects improved considerably after the 2003 legislative elections. With its allies on the left, it saw its support increase moderately, to one-quarter of the electorate, and it gained 36 seats, the biggest gain of any party. The PRD defeated the PRI in key gubernatorial elections in Guerrero and Baja California del Sur in February 2005, although the PRD still controlled only one of Mexico’s 32 states.

The PRD mayor of Mexico City, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, a charismatic populist, emerged as the front-runner in the 2006 presidential election but saw his lead slip away as the conservative opposition portrayed him as a dangerous radical who would endanger Mexico’s prosperity and harm relations with the United States. Long after his defeat, López Obrador continued to claim that his razor-thin loss in the 2006 election was the result of fraud and illegal government action, despite a ruling to the contrary by Mexico’s Federal Electoral Tribunal. His defiant stand, his refusal to recognize the government of Felipe Calderón, and his convening of weeks of street protests (in which he had himself “sworn in” as president) hurt the PRD’s image and badly divided the party. López Obrador’s postelectoral outburst (including his remark, “to hell with your constitutional institutions”) seemed to cast doubt on his and his party’s commitment to democracy and served only to frighten middle-class Mexicans. The 2009 lower house elections reduced the PRD’s presence from 123 to 71 seats, or about 14 percent of the total.

The PRD remains a weakened and divided party, split between moderates and supporters of the more radical López Obrador. A tacit recognition of its declining strength was the PRD’s decision in 2010 to enter electoral alliances with the conservative PAN in order to compete with the resurgent PRI in state and local elections. In late 2011, the PRD again selected the controversial López Obrador as its candidate for the 2012 presidential elections, thus bypassing more moderate candidates and further dividing the Mexican left.

López Obrador toned down his leftist rhetoric and performed better than expected, but he came in second with about 32 percent of the vote. He once again unsuccessfully challenged the legitimacy of the electoral process in Mexico, claiming that the PRI had bought votes and illegally funded its campaign.
Fox created his own campaign organization. That organization did not depend on the official PAN hierarchy, which was dominated by Fox’s political rivals. Once in office, Fox formed a cabinet that included no members of the PAN’s traditional wing, and his closest advisers were non-PAN members. He had stormy relations with the more conservative “traditionalist” wing of the PAN, which dominated the legislature and the party hierarchy.

Fox’s record in office has been viewed as a mixed bag, but on the whole, his administration had trouble meeting the very high expectations that accompanied his historic victory in 2000. It delivered on some concrete reform promises; however, Fox passed a transparency law to facilitate public oversight of government, and he restructured and purged Mexico’s powerful and corruption-riddled Federal Judicial Police. He passed legislation to allow some 10 million Mexicans living abroad (many in the United States) to vote in elections. Some progress was made on health care and pension reform, and the Fox administration was praised for containing inflation. The successes, however, were outweighed by numerous policy failures, due largely to Fox’s inability to work with the opposition-dominated legislature as well as the opposition within his own party.

Fox failed to end the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas, was unable to pass a badly needed tax increase to raise revenue for social spending and other public investment, and had a disappointing record on rooting out government corruption. After the PAN’s drubbing in the 2003 legislative elections, when the governing party lost one-quarter of its seats in the lower house, Fox’s status as a lame-duck president was exacerbated, and his government was accused of losing focus.

Fox’s successor, Felipe Calderón, had been involved in conservative politics his entire adult life. His father was a founder of the PAN, and Calderón became leader of its youth wing in his twenties. He held a variety of elected...
political positions and twice served as a federal deputy. He served as party president in the 1990s, when the PAN first began to mount a serious challenge to the PRI. Vicente Fox appointed him secretary of energy; an important cabinet post in oil-rich Mexico. In a 2005 internal party election, Calderón defeated President Vicente Fox’s choice for the 2006 PAN presidential nomination. He then narrowly defeated the leftist Manuel López Obrador in the bitterly contested 2006 presidential election. In office Calderón generally proved to be a social conservative and a supporter of free-market policies. His campaign to defeat Mexico’s drug cartels delivered mixed results. The ensuing violence tarnished Calderón’s previously high approval ratings in opinion polls.

For the 2012 presidential election, the PAN selected Mexico’s first-ever woman presidential candidate, Josefina Vázquez Mota. She was head of the PAN’s parliamentary delegation and a former cabinet minister. Vázquez Mota won the PAN primary election, defeating President Calderón’s preferred candidate. Paradoxically, the poor image and popular frustration with the two previous PAN presidents and party because she was less well known than her two competitors, Vázquez Mota did poorly in the election, winning just over a quarter of the vote.

Since the watershed 2000 election and the transition to democracy, the Mexican party system has been in flux. Beginning in the 1990s, there was a significant partisan “dealignment,” in which many voters abandoned the PRI. Not all those voters have realigned themselves with other parties, however, and a large segment of the Mexican electorate remains fluid.

This fluidity can be witnessed in the legislative elections since 2000. The 2000 presidential elections were a clear victory for Vicente Fox, but the PRI emerged from the legislative elections as the dominant political force, though it suffered setbacks in its percentage of votes and in the number of seats it won in the lower house. The big loser in those elections was the leftist PRD, which was relegated to third place. The 2003 elections signaled a comeback for the left: the PRD and its allies picked up 36 seats in the lower house. The governing PAN lost 50 seats in the lower house, and the PRI continued to suffer a loss of votes but was able to exploit the electoral system to win 16 additional seats. The 2006 elections led to a recovery for the PAN and a dramatic increase in support for the leftist PRD at the expense of the PRI. Like his predecessor, President Calderón had to govern without a majority in the lower house. The 2009 elections signaled another shift in direction, as the PRD made important gains at the expense of the PAN and PRD. In 2012, the PRD gained seats at the expense of both the PRI and the PAN.

Mexico's current party system is extremely competitive. There are three major parties, but in most of the country, two parties contend for power. In Mexico’s more prosperous north and west, the PAN and the PRI fight for votes, while in poorer southern Mexico, the PRD and the PRI are chief rivals. Only in Mexico City and the surrounding areas do all three parties truly compete on an equal footing. The PRI remains the only party with support in all regions, while the PRD and the PAN have more regionally concentrated bases of support. About 20 percent of Mexicans identify with each of the three major parties, and 30 percent claim to be independent.

A variety of smaller parties compete for, and regularly win, seats in the Mexican legislature. The most important of these is the Mexican Greens Party (PVEM), a mislabeled and entirely opportunistic party that has almost nothing in common with its environmentally oriented European counterparts. The PVEM was allied with the PAN for much of its existence, until it began to break away from the PAN in 2008 and align with the PRI in 2012.
Elections

During most of the PRI’s long authoritarian rule, elections were more national celebrations of PRI power than competitive electoral campaigns. Every six years, the country was decked out in the PRI’s colors, patronage was dispensed on a massive scale, and the PRI nominees (in effect, the presumed winners) touted their constituencies and made speeches.

The 2000 presidential campaign broke with this tradition. The opposition candidates (Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas of the PRD and Vicente Fox of the PAN) had announced their intention to run for the presidency several years before the election, and both candidates were widely assumed to have a lock on their parties’ nominations. The PRI candidate, traditionally named quite late in the six-year presidential term, was determined for the first time by a PRI primary vote. As a result, several PRI candidates began campaigning for the nomination early in Zedillo’s presidential term. Francisco Labastida won the party primary in a highly controversial manner.

The 2000 campaign was also the first to be governed by new electoral finance rules, which not only sharply limited private contributions but also provided candidates with public financing. Access to the media by all political parties was far more equitable than ever before. While PRI candidates still enjoyed an advantage, the playing field was more level than it had been in past elections. The first truly fair and competitive election was also the first national campaign in which U.S.-style mudslinging was widespread. The PRI portrayed Fox as a U.S. lackey; for his part, Fox questioned Labastida’s “macho” credentials. Some of the most negative campaigning took place between the two PRI contestants for the nomination. The 2000 campaign was also the first truly modern campaign in Mexican history. Television took on a pivotal role. The campaign culminated in two televised presidential debates, which the charismatic and engaging Fox won handily over the more wooden Labastida and Cárdenas.

In the 2000 campaign, Mexico’s three major political parties presented voters with a fairly wide range of choices. The PRI, under the campaign slogan “Power will serve the people,” represented the legacy of the Mexican Revolution and nationalism. The PAN shared the PRI’s enthusiasm for neoliberal reforms but offered itself as the party of democratization, as captured by its campaign slogan “Ya” (“Enough already!”). Only the leftist PRD criticized neoliberal economic policies and NAFTA.

The 2006 presidential campaign was Mexico’s first “normal” presidential contest. In 2000, the main issue had been democratization and the defeat of the PRI’s semi-autoritarian regime. In 2006, Mexicans faced their first real choice between parties of the Right and Left. The early front-runner, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (of the leftist PRD) ran a campaign aimed at improving the plight of Mexico’s poor. His main opponent, the PAN’s Felipe Calderón, advocated a pro-business set of policies aimed at increasing employment. Calderón chipped away at López Obrador’s initial lead by questioning his commitment to democracy and portraying him as a dangerous leftist who would threaten Mexican economic stability. The campaign was characterized by an unprecedented level of impassioned and negative attack ads. The outcome of the 2006 election revealed a polarized and divided electorate; Calderón and López Obrador each won just over 35 percent of the vote, and Calderón won by a mere one-half of a percentage point.

The 2012 campaign was the first to take place under electoral reforms adopted in 2007 and 2008; and that reduced allowable private campaign financing by almost half. The campaign featured two lackluster debates between the main presidential candidates. In some ways, each of the three major candidates had to defend their questionable records. Peña Nieto had to try to distance himself from the PRI’s association with authoritarian rule while fending off attacks involving his record as governor of the state of Mexico. Peña Nieto proposed policies that largely continued the PAN’s agenda of fighting organized crime and liberalizing the economy while at the same time calling for increased social spending. José María Vázquez Mota had the unenviable task of defending the PAN’s association with the bloody war against drug cartels as well as Mexico’s sluggish economic growth under two previous PAN administrations, and she was saddled by outgoing President Calderón’s low popularity ratings. The leftist López Obrador sought to distance himself from what many Mexicans viewed as his irresponsible behavior in the aftermath of the 2006 presidential elections. He was the only major candidate to call for an end to Mexico’s war against drug cartels, and the only one to oppose reforms to Mexico’s energy sector. Peña Nieto won the election with 38.2 percent of the vote (López Obrador won 31.6 percent, and Vázquez Mota of the PAN won 25.4 percent). Although the PRI won the presidency, the party lost its majority in the legislature, forcing President Peña Nieto to negotiate with the opposition in order to pass legislation.
Civil Society

During authoritarianism, Mexican groups and associations were often incorporated into the state in a system known as corporatism. The paternalistic PRI would then mediate among different groups while making sure that no one group challenged government power. The PRI was formally divided into three sectors (labor, peasants, and the “popular” middle class), each dominated by PRI-controlled mass organizations. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the Mexican state could control all autonomous groups in society. To cite one example, the private-sector Confederation of Employers of the Mexican Republic (COPARMEX) became an important voice of opposition to the PRI, instead of supporting the governing party. Indeed, a variety of autonomous civil society organizations emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, mainly in response to economic crises, predating the PRI’s ouster from power in 2000.17

Given its level of economic development, Mexican civil society remains weak compared with many other Latin American countries.18 Eighty-five percent of Mexicans report that they belong to no civil society organization, and a similar percentage say they have never worked formally or informally with others to resolve community problems.19 A long history of a strong and paternalistic state, and a deep-seated distrust of others, which according to opinion research fits the Latin American norm, may be responsible. In the words of a former Mexican foreign minister, “It should not be altogether surprising that after nearly five hundred years of a strong state, civil society should be weak. From this perspective, Mexicans are disorganized... because an all-powerful state has crowded them out.”20

Mexican civil society may be weak in comparative perspective, but in recent years increasing numbers of Mexicans have become frustrated by their government’s inability to protect them against organized crime. A good example is the tiny mountain town of Cherán in the state of Michoacán, where in June 2011 citizens expelled the municipal and state police because those forces were unwilling or unable to stop the deforestation of the surrounding old-growth forest by armed criminal gangs. Villagers claimed that the police forces had been corrupted by the gangs. Heavily armed gangs had arrived in town and cut thousands of acres of timber, and they murdered or kidnapped local citizens who opposed them. In response, the townspeople removed the mayor, formed a governing council, and established a militia to guard against further encroachments.

The willingness of Mexicans to organize to defend their communities from violence may be an encouraging example of Mexican civil society in action, but it can also have potentially dangerous consequences, and it threatens to create another set of armed groups beyond state control. The vigilante movement became especially prominent in the state of Michoacán, where the “Knights Templar” (a drug and extortion gang) were responsible for a wave of violence that intimidated local government and police. At their peak, in 2014, vigilante groups had gained control of 26 of the state’s 113 municipal districts.21 That year the Mexican government sought to integrate the vigilante groups into a new police force called the Rural Force. Some vigilante members refused to cooperate with the Mexican state, and many police were reported to have been corrupted by the gangs. Moreover, vigilantes and the federal police engaged in armed clashes that threatened to escalate. After 43 college students disappeared in September 2014 after peacefully protesting discriminatory hiring practices, demonstrations took place throughout Mexico demanding that the federal government take action against corrupt local governments.
Although the PRI successfully co-opted Mexico's private sector for decades, it can be argued that business groups later emerged as the most powerful source of opposition to authoritarian rule. During authoritarianism, most private-sector interests were channeled into a variety of semi-official organizations including the National Chamber of Industries and the National Chamber of Commerce. Until 1996, private-sector membership in these organizations was mandatory. Even though the PRI never gave business organizations formal representation within the governing party, business interests wielded power through more informal organizations and channels. The secretive Business Coordinating Council (CCE), which represents some of Mexico's wealthiest capitalists, had close ties to the Fox government.

In the PRI-led authoritarian regime, the relationship between the business sector and the PRI was complex and often contradictory. The PRI's policies generally favored the private sector, especially big business. At the same time, business leaders bitterly opposed attempts by some PRI presidents to enact the social agenda of the Mexican Revolution. In the 1970s, Presidents Luis Echeverría Álvarez and José López Portillo sought to expand the role of the state in the economy, and their policies damaged business-government relations. Although those policies were short-lived, they served to garner opposition to the PRI among northern business interests. Moreover, they were an important factor in the business sector's early support for the conservative PAN in the last decades of PRI authoritarianism and after the return of democracy in 2000. The prospect of a PRD victory in 2006 clearly alarmed much of the business sector, which feared that the election of the leftist López Obrador would damage Mexico's business climate. Their situation encouraged many business leaders to rally behind PAN candidate Felipe Calderón.

Since returning to power in 2012, the PRI relationship with big business has been strained. President Peña Nieto has actively sought to weaken the power of monopolies that dominate key areas of the Mexican economy, like the media, telecommunications, and the banking sectors. These reforms are popular with Mexican citizens who are tired of paying higher prices that result from the monopolies, but the business sector attacked the reforms as an attempt by the PRI government to strengthen state regulation of the private sector. The Peña Nieto government passed reforms making it harder for businesses to block government regulation in the courts. The business community opposed his plans to raise sales taxes.

After the Mexican Revolution, the PRI actively supported the unionization of Mexican workers. However, the unions were thoroughly integrated into and controlled by the governing party. They received massive subsidies from the state, which made them politicallypliant. They enjoyed privileged treatment under the PRI, in part because they were never able to incorporate much of the workforce (about 16 percent, at their peak) and because one-third of their members were government employees. The labor movement in Mexico was highly centralized. The dominant labor organization, the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), was created by the PRI and became one of the main supporters of the governing party. Until his death in 1997, Fidel Velázquez Sánchez served as a pillar of PRI authoritarianism and dominated the CTM for more than 50 years. Unions independent of the PRI are a relatively new phenomenon. In 1997, Mexico's independent unions formed the National Union of Workers (UNT) to compete with the CTM. Since the mid-1990s, a series of laws and court decisions have weakened the grip of the formerly official unions. Neoliberal economic policies that have been implemented over the last three decades have created challenges for the CTM. Its membership has clearly suffered from the economic reforms, and its leadership no longer benefits from government patronage. On the one hand, democratic reforms are likely to give labor unions more autonomy and a greater ability to contest government policy. On the other hand, the reforms passed by the Calderón and Peña Nieto governments were aimed at weakening the power of important unions. For example, in 2013 the legislature passed a reform of Mexico's education system that broke the control of the powerful teacher's union over the hiring and evaluation of teachers. Earlier that year the government jailed Esther Gordillo, the long-time leader of the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE). The SNTE is also the largest labor union in Latin America and was a key piece of the PRI's patronage network for decades. Gordillo became wealthy as the SNTE leader, and the union has long been considered a bastion of corruption.

THE MEDIA

The PRI-dominated authoritarian regime maintained a political lock on the media through co-option more than coercion. Rather than imposing censorship, the government courted the favor of Mexico's media by purchasing advertisements...
in pro-PRI media outlets, giving supportive media voices cheap access to infrastructure; and bribing reporters outright. Mexico’s largest media conglomerate, Televisa, was extremely close to the PRI.

By the early 1990s, the PRI had loosened its control over the media somewhat. The government stopped bribing reporters, and the wave of privatizations created a more competitive media environment, allowing for criticism of the PRI. Since the return of democracy in 2000, Mexico has had a more vibrant media that is often critical of the government. Still, the power of Mexico’s two main television networks, which are historical bastions of PRI support, were left largely intact. In the 2012 elections, these networks were criticized for coverage that favored the PRI. The leftist candidate Manuel López Obrador, backed by a social media protest movement, claimed that the Mexican media had unfairly favored its old patron, the PRI. However, as we have seen, since taking office the Peña Nieto administration has enacted reforms to weaken conglomerates like Televisa.

While Mexico’s media has flourished in the democratic era, Mexico’s journalists have often been targeted by drug cartels after reporting on the violence that has plagued Mexico. At least 16 journalists were murdered over the last decade, and the Committee to Protect Journalists ranked Mexico as the seventh-most dangerous country for journalists. In some cases, this activity has led to the return of the type of self-censorship that was common during the decades of authoritarian rule.

One positive trend has been the growing importance of social media in Mexico. During the 2012 electoral campaign, a student movement, called #YoSoy132, used Twitter and Facebook to call attention to what the protesters viewed as uncritical media coverage of the PRI’s candidate Peña Nieto, eventually persuading the major networks to televise the second presidential electoral debate. However, the impact of social media may be limited by the very low levels of Internet access; in 2013 only 18 percent of Mexicans reported using the Internet daily, and only 37 percent said they used the Internet at least occasionally (see “IN COMPARISON: Internet Access,” p. 601).

Society

Ethnic and National Identity

The journalist Alan Riding has described Mexico as a nation proud of its indigenous past but ashamed of its indigenous present. After the Mexican Revolution, the PRI glorified and embraced its Indigenous ancestry and militarized the mestizaje, or “blending of cultures,” produced by the Conquest. Indigenous peoples who have not assimilated into mestizo Mexico have been politically marginalized and become victims of Mexico’s worst poverty, whereas Mexico’s wealthy elite have tended to be lighter skinned and of European origin.

The PRI’s success in perpetuating the myth of mestizaje may help explain how it avoided the kind of ethnically based violence that has plagued Guatemala, its neighbor to the south, and other Latin American nations. But that myth was violently shattered on January 1, 1994, when a rebel army made up mostly of ethnic Mayans, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), occupied several towns in Mexico’s southernmost state of Chiapas.

Many viewed the EZLN as solely an indigenous group seeking greater autonomy for Mexico’s long-neglected native population. It soon became clear, however, that the EZLN included among its demands the democratization of the Mexican political system and an end to the neoliberal reforms that had ravaged the indigenous poor. Chief among the EZLN’s concerns was the abrogation of Article 27 of the Constitution of 1917, which had mandated land reform. On a more general level, the EZLN was reacting to the devastation caused by neoliberal trade policies that had exposed the inefficient peasant farmers to competition from cheaper foreign imports. The call for democratization was partly a response to the political lock that the PRI maintained on some of Mexico’s poorest and most heavily indigenous regions.

Political Conflict and Competition

IN COMPARISON

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Internet Access

Do you use the Internet at least occasionally? Those answering: Yes.

Mexico Profundo Bordiú Botella
The Zapatista uprising was surprisingly popular within Mexico and, together with the economic crisis, helped erode PRI political dominance and accelerate electoral reforms. In 1996 the Zedillo government signed the San Andrés Peace Accords with the EZLN, promising protection of indigenous languages and granting indigenous communities political autonomy. These provisions were never implemented; however, and Vicente Fox, who claimed he could resolve the Chiapas conflict “in fifteen minutes,” was unable to make peace with the Zapatistas. Fox’s proposed constitutional amendment aimed at addressing some Zapatista demands was watered down by Congress, and the Zapatistas rejected the outcome. As of 2015, the standoff between the government and the Zapatistas continues; the EZLN is controlling some remote communities, and its demands remain largely unmet.

Politics and Political Culture

Perhaps the most important aspect of Mexican political culture is a profound mistrust of the state and the government. Opinion research demonstrates that Mexicans have a far more negative view of their political system and state than do their counterparts in Europe, the United States, and even Latin America. A 2013 poll showed that only about a quarter of Mexicans were very or somewhat satisfied with the way democracy works; it was the second lowest assessment of any of the 18 Latin American countries polled.27

Mexicans' high level of disenchantment with their state and political system has been exacerbated by the government’s poor response to many national crises over the past two decades. A high-profile split within the PRI, the massive electoral fraud of 1989, corruption charges against former president Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the Chiapas uprising, and the economic crisis of the 1980s and '90s were all factors that helped to erode popular confidence in the Mexican system. More recently, the bitterly disputed 2006 presidential election and the inconclusive and bloody war against drug traffickers have contributed to the disenchantment.

These scandals and decades of authoritarian rule may explain why over 70 percent of Mexicans express little or no interest in politics, notwithstanding a temporary surge of interest during the historic 2000 presidential elections.28 Mexican men express far more interest in politics than do women, and interest in politics increases with levels of education and income. Mexicans on the left of the political system (supporters of the PRD) generally express much higher levels of interest in politics than do Mexicans in the center and on the right.

Unlike communist regimes, which actively promote political mobilization, Mexican authoritarianism sought to contain and limit popular participation in politics through a variety of methods, notably co-optation. Trade unions, the media, and even some opposition political parties, were for decades co-opted by...
the PRI. Mexico’s political culture continues to show the effects of decades of authoritarian rule: the country has very low levels of participation in politics, party membership, and political activism. Although there is some evidence of a steady increase in popular political activity since the 1980s, declining voter turnout is still a concern. Turnout declined to only 59 percent in 2006, but rebounded to 65 percent in 2013. In midterm legislative elections, turnout has hovered around 50 percent.

During authoritarianism, most Mexicans professed sympathy for no political party. The erosion of PRI hegemony in the 1980s and 1990s and the increasing competitiveness of elections led far more Mexicans to identify with a political party. By 2000, the PRI and the PAN each enjoyed the support of about one-third of the electorate, and the PRD was supported by about 10 percent. Opinion data show quite clearly that the Mexican electorate is anchored on the center right. The leftist PRD suffers because only about 20 percent of Mexicans identify themselves as being on the left, versus 27 percent who view themselves as being on the right. Although more Mexicans define themselves as being on the left or right than do U.S. respondents, Mexicans have been steadily gravitating toward the center, where 41 percent of Mexicans now place themselves.

The erosion of PRI political hegemony has also been accompanied by a dramatic shift in the social class basis of Mexico’s parties. Wealthy and middle-class Mexicans abandoned the PRI in droves between 1989 and 2000. By 2000, the PRI depended mostly on the support of lower-class Mexicans, though the PAN had nearly the same amount of support among poor voters. Indeed, one of the remarkable changes between 1989 and 2000 was the PAN’s ability to garner support from all classes. In the 2006 elections, the leftist PRD did best among poorer voters while the PAN was clearly favored by wealthier and more educated voters. The region more than any other factor best explains party support in Mexico.

In 2011, political scientist (and former Mexican foreign minister) Jorge Castañeda published a controversial book in which he argued that Mexico’s political culture was ill-suited to the conditions of democratic politics, a middle-class society, and an increasingly globalized economy. Castañeda identifies excessive individualism, an exaggerated aversion to any form of conflict, disdain for the rule of law, and a xenophobic attitude toward the United States as signal features of Mexican culture that are likely to hamper its future development. He argues that these cultural traits have a long history, and that the authoritarian regime of the PRI as a reflection of Mexican culture rather than a cause for it. For Castañeda, this deep-seated culture helps explain a plethora of ill-afflicting Mexican society, including a weak civil society, the widespread lack of respect for political institutions, and Mexico’s endemic corruption. His critics attacked the book as overly simplistic, filled with stereotypes, and reflective of the values of a wealthy Mexican who spent much of his life outside of Mexico.

Opinion research reveals that most Mexicans favor democracy over authoritarianism, but its levels of support for democratic rule are below average for Latin America. In 2002, shortly after Mexico’s transition to democracy, about 47 percent stated that democracy was preferable to any other kind of government. By 2013 that figure had dropped to 37 percent and was the lowest of all Latin American countries surveyed. If there is positive news, it is that only 16 percent said that authoritarian rule might be preferable in some circumstances. This figure has dropped from a high of 43 percent in 2000 and has remained fairly constant even as the public’s attachment to democracy has eroded. When compared with U.S. respondents, however, Mexicans are far more likely to define democracy in terms of equality than in terms of freedom. The inability of democracy to remedy Mexico’s staggering inequality or halt the violence of its drug wars could further undermine Mexican support for democracy.

### Political Economy

The leaders of the Mexican Revolution had a complex and often contradictory set of goals. Some of the revolutionaries were middle-class landowners who sought greater political democracy, others sought major socioeconomic (especially land) reform, and others were mostly interested in restoring political order while eliminating the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz.

Between 1917 and 1980, leaders of the PRI agreed on some main features of the Mexican economy. First, Mexico’s industrialization would be encouraged through import substitution industrialization (ISI) policies, which employed high tariffs to protect Mexican industries and agriculture. Government policies provided Mexican entrepreneurs with subsidized credit and energy and very low taxes. The PRI’s ability to control labor, and therefore labor costs, also benefited Mexico’s entrepreneurs. Second, Mexico was to have a capitalist economy, but the Mexican state played an important role in key sectors of the economy, though far less than in socialist economies.

Despite this general consensus, economic policies of the PRI presidents between 1917 and 2000 fluctuated a great deal. The nationalists, usually associated with the left wing of the PRI, placed more emphasis on redistribution of income, plenty of state social spending, and a strong state presence in the
Dimensions of the Economy

In aggregate wealth, Mexico is a prosperous developing country; and compared with other developing countries, it is fairly industrialized.
line. Mexico had abandoned ISI policies and embraced free trade and globalization as a response to the economic crisis of the early 1980s, but this response had made it even more vulnerable to economic instability.

NAFTA and Globalization

NAFTA has drastically reduced most tariffs on agricultural goods traded among Mexico, Canada, and the United States. Between 1993 and 2012, trade between the United States and Mexico increased by over 500 percent. As a result, Mexico has been flooded by U.S. products (such as corn and pork) that cost one-fifth as much to produce as similar Mexican products. NAFTA has doubled the amount of food Mexico imports from the United States, thereby lowering food prices for consumers but creating a massive crisis for millions of Mexico’s farmers. About one-fifth of Mexicans work in agriculture, the vast majority poor subsistence farmers who have been hurt the most by NAFTA competition. As a result, Mexico has eliminated millions of jobs in agriculture. NAFTA has also exacerbated the gap between the wealthy north and the impoverished south.

In many other ways, however, NAFTA benefits Mexico. Manufacturing exports to the United States have skyrocketed, growing at an average rate of 75 percent annually since the agreement went into effect. Overall, Mexican exports rose sevenfold between 1994 and 2011: Greater access to U.S. markets has also been a boon to Mexico’s fruit and vegetable producers, who now supply much of the U.S. winter market, although exports of agricultural goods have grown very modestly compared with those of manufactured goods. Cheaper imports have benefited a wide variety of Mexican producers and consumers.

Mexico’s embrace of NAFTA clearly created a more diversified economy. In the 1980s, oil made up about two-thirds of the country’s exports. Mexico now exports a wider variety of goods, but it remains extremely dependent on the U.S. market, to which it sends over 80 percent of all its exports.

Mexico’s entry into NAFTA has attracted more direct U.S. investment in Mexico. Much of that investment has gravitated toward maquiladoras, factories that import materials or parts to make goods that are then exported. These factories, concentrated along the Mexico-U.S. border, account for about half of all Mexico’s exports. They now generate more foreign exchange for Mexico than does any other sector, including oil. The maquiladoras have added half a million jobs to Mexico’s north, but some critics argue that the operations add relatively little to the Mexican economy because most materials and technology are imported.

Average maquiladora wages are above Mexico’s minimum wage but below the average wage in the manufacturing sector. The concentration of maquilas in Mexico’s wealthier north has exacerbated the country’s severe regional income gap.

Whether NAFTA has created more winners than losers is a hot topic within Mexico. One result of the new pressures created by NAFTA has been an increased flow of Mexicans to the United States in search of employment. Clear, however, that NAFTA has dislocated millions of Mexicans and will present new political and economic challenges for future Mexican administrations.

Economic Policies and Issues

Despite the commitment to greater equality brought about by the Mexican Revolution and the efforts of some reformist presidents to help the poor, Mexico is a country of massive inequality. The Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes called Mexico a country “where 25 people earn the same as 25 million pre-1980s statist policies were unable to address the persistence of mass poverty in Mexico, and the more recent shift to neoliberal policies has only enlarged the gap between rich and poor. In 2008, the poorest 40 percent of the population earned about 12 percent of Mexico’s income while the wealthiest 10 percent earned about 40 percent, and the gap has not changed significantly since 1980s. Forbes magazine listed 24 Mexicans in its 1994 annual report of the “swelling roster of global billionaires.” Only the United States, Germany, and Japan had more billionaires at the time. In 2011, Forbes listed 10 Mexican billionaires, including the world’s second wealthiest individual, entrepreneur and media mogul Carlos Slim.

Poverty continues to be a serious problem for Mexico, despite significant improvements in the last two decades. Between 1992 and 2008, extreme poverty declined from about 21 percent to about 18 percent of the population, and the overall poverty rate dropped from 55 percent to 47 percent. Poverty in Mexico is most pronounced in rural areas, still home to some 25 million people. Despite the legacy of land reform, most rural Mexicans cannot support themselves on their tiny plots of land, and many are forced to seek work as migrant laborers. Millions have migrated to already overcrowded urban areas, seeking employment and a better life, and millions more have emigrated to the United States for the same reasons.
Mexico's wealth is also geographically unequal. Northern Mexico is far wealthier than the central and southern regions. While the north is characterized by large-scale export agriculture (benefiting from proximity to the U.S. market), land use is much more fragmented in the south. Southern Mexico has a far poorer infrastructure, lower levels of education, and more poverty.

Another indicator of the degree of inequality in Mexico is the tremendous size and importance of the informal sector. It is estimated that well over one-quarter of the labor force is employed in the underground economy as informal vendors of goods and services, producing about 13 percent of the Mexico's GDP. Mexican cities are full of ambulantes (street vendors), which local governments have fought unsuccessfully to regulate. These workers pay no taxes on their earnings but enjoy few protections or benefits.

The decrease in poverty since Mexico's democratization in 2000 has resulted from steady increases in social spending as a percentage of GDP. Efforts to redress these inequalities through increased social spending have been hampered by Mexico's inability to collect taxes, especially when compared with wealthier industrialized countries. Attempts to raise taxes meet with widespread skepticism, in part because Mexico's traditionally corrupt state is simply not trusted.

President Peña Nieto campaigned on a platform that included a major tax reform proposal, but the PRF's failure to win a majority in the legislature forced him to water down those proposals, eventually striking a deal with the leftist PRD to gain passage for the measure. The reform, passed into law in November 2013, includes an increase in income tax on the wealthiest Mexicans; a tax on stock market profits; new taxes on high-calorie foods; and reduction of a whole host of tax breaks.

Despite the myriad problems facing Mexico's economy, we would be remiss if we failed to point out the biggest change in Mexico's political economy over the last two decades. Since its recovery from the economic crisis of the mid-1990s, and under the presidencies of Zedillo, Fox, Calderón, and Peña Nieto, about half of Mexico's population has entered the middle class. Several factors are responsible for this dramatic shift. First, economic stability since the mid-1990s; and especially the containment of inflation, has benefited the middle class. Second, government antipoverty programs have kept many Mexicans from falling out of the middle class. The conditional cash transfer program called Oportunidades ("Opportunities") gives payment to about a quarter of all Mexican families in exchange for pledges that their children remain in school and get preventive medical care. Finally, Mexico's entry into NAFTA has created a more competitive economy, lowering prices of food and consumer goods for Mexicans.

The Battle Over Oil

State ownership of oil, and President Lázaro Cárdenas' slogan, "The oil is ours, became important symbols of the Mexican Revolution and Mexico's independence from foreign domination of its economy. PEMEX, the state oil company founded by Cárdenas in 1938, has played an enormous role in Mexico's economy. It is Mexico's biggest company and its biggest source of tax revenue (in 2013, taxes on its revenue funded a third of the federal budget). But PEMEX has been losing money (in 2013, it lost about $13 billion), in part because it lacks the capital and expertise to explore deepwater oil reserves in the Gulf of Mexico. As a result, oil production has declined for nine straight years and is now at its lowest level since 1995.

In December 2013, President Peña Nieto signed into law a bitterly contested constitutional reform that would permit foreign and private investment in the Mexican gas and oil sector for the first time in over 70 years. In March 2014, he called the energy reform "The most important economic change in Mexico in 50 years." PEMEX will lose its monopoly over the sale of gasoline, but it will also pay lower taxes to the government to increase its profitability. The powerful National Union of Mexican Oil Workers, whose strict control over labor has hampered PEMEX's ability to hire skilled labor, will lose its seats on the PEMEX governing board. A company that for decades was run as a government agency (it was chaired by the energy minister) will get a more independent board of directors. The hope is that Mexico will attract billions of dollars of foreign investment into the energy sector and increase exploration and development of oil and gas, and that PEMEX will once again become profitable.

Foreign Relations and the World

Mexico's foreign relations have always been heavily molded by the country's complex relationship with the United States. In the political turmoil of the nineteenth century, Mexico lost half its territory to an expanding United States. Indeed, Mexico's humiliation at U.S. hands has been a major theme in the Mexican psyche. Even Porfirio Díaz, whose dictatorship promoted closer ties to the United States, is reported to have lamented, "Poor Mexico! So far from God and so close to the United States."

One goal of the Mexican Revolution (and the aim of much of its official rhetoric) was to restore the sovereignty and power of Mexico on the global stage. During authoritarianism, the PRI leadership clearly sought a system that would
government's strategy in the drug war. In July 2011, the United States agreed to allow Mexican trucks to carry shipments within the United States, observing a provision of NAFTA that the United States had refused to honor for 17 years. For years, Mexico had expressed frustration with the U.S. refusal to honor such commitments, and in 2001 it imposed over $2 billion in retaliatory tariffs on imported U.S. goods. Mexican public opinion, however, remained largely favorable to the United States. A survey published in 2014 reported that 60 percent of Mexican respondents had a favorable view of the United States, and 70 percent said that economic ties with the United States were good for Mexico.

**CURRENT ISSUES IN MEXICO**

**Mexico's Drug War: Can the Mexican State Contain Organized Crime?**

The Mexican government's successful war on drug cartels has been undermined by the continuing presence of organized crime. In the north of the country, the drug cartels continue to operate with impunity, importing and transporting drugs across the border. The government's efforts to contain organized crime have been met with resistance from the cartels, who have used violence and intimidation to maintain their control.

**The Role of the United States**

The United States has been a key player in the drug war, providing financial and military support to Mexico's efforts to combat organized crime. However, the effectiveness of these efforts has been limited by the presence of the drug cartels in the United States, which continues to be a major source of illegal drugs.

**The Future of the Drug War**

As the drug war continues, there is growing concern about the sustainability of the government's efforts to contain organized crime. The cartels continue to operate with impunity, and there is a risk that they may be able to expand their influence in the future. The government will need to take a long-term approach to the drug war, focusing on the root causes of organized crime and working to reduce demand at the same time.
A map of the areas controlled by Mexico's drug cartels. Much of Mexico is plagued by drug crime.

of 1 percent) have been convicted. Critics have called for allegations of military abuse against civilians to be investigated in the civilian justice system rather than within the military, and Mexico's Supreme Court has echoed that view. The rapid growth of anti-cartel vigilante movements, discussed earlier in this chapter, has created the specter of additional human rights violations.

Finally, the violence engendered by the drug war has taken an economic toll. A leading business organization reported in 2013 that the climate of insecurity was costing Mexican business almost $6 billion dollars annually. It claimed that almost 30 percent of Mexican businesses had suffered attacks by organized crime.46

Migration

Mexicans have a long history of emigrating across the 2,000-mile border between Mexico and the United States. Mexicans have argued that the United States depends on Mexican immigrants and that the latter's right to work in the United States should be guaranteed through bilateral agreements. But many Americans have focused on the negative effects of Mexican immigration to the United States.

Why has there been such a steady flow of Mexicans into the United States? Most of them are seeking the higher standard of living in the United States, although the first wave of immigrants in the early twentieth century were also fleeing the violence of the Mexican Revolution. During the severe labor shortages of World War II, the United States established the Bracero Program, which allowed more than 4 million Mexicans to work temporarily in the United States between 1942 and 1964. Today, almost 11 million Mexicans live in the United States (about 10 percent of Mexico's total population and 4 percent of the U.S. population).

From 1965 to 1986, an estimated 5.7 million Mexicans immigrated to the United States, 81 percent of them undocumented.49 The United States operated a de facto guest-worker program whereby border enforcement was tough enough to prevent a flood of immigration but not so strict as to prevent a steady flow of cheap and undocumented labor. The costs of illegal immigration were raised just enough that only about one in three undocumented Mexicans could be caught and returned. Most immigrants who tried to enter the United States succeeded, although not on the first try. The U.S. attempt to enforce border control was largely symbolic, but it never threatened the availability of cheap labor. The dramatic growth of undocumented Mexican immigrants, especially after the economic crisis in Mexico during the early 1980s, became a political crisis in the United States during the 1980s and '90s. The result was the 1986 U.S. Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which imposed sanctions on employers of

NOTES


I remember three different incidents of violence in three different parts of my life. In two of them I was an observer, in one a perpetrator.

In the fall of 1963 I was in Selma, Alabama, and saw two young black civil rights workers clubbed to the ground by state troopers and then attacked with electric prods, because they tried to bring food and water to black people standing in line waiting to register to vote.

As a twenty-two-year-old Air Force bombardier, I flew a bombing mission in the last weeks of World War II, which can only be considered an atrocity. It was the napalm bombing of a small French village, for purposes that had nothing to do with winning the war, leaving a wasteland of death and destruction five miles below our planes.

Years before that, while a teenager on the streets of Brooklyn, I watched a black man in an argument with an old Jewish man, a pushcart peddler who seemed to be his employer. It was an argument over money the black man claimed he was owed, and he seemed desperate, by turns pleading and threatening, but the older man remained adamant. Suddenly the black man picked up a board and hit the other over the head. The older man, blood trickling down his face, just kept pushing his cart down the street.

I have never been persuaded that such violence, whether of an angry black man or a hate-filled trooper or of a dutiful Air Force officer, was the result of some natural instinct. All of those incidents, as I thought about them later, were explainable by social circumstances. I am in total agreement with the statement of the nineteenth-century English philosopher John Stuart Mill: “Of all the vulgar modes of escaping from the consideration of the effect of social and moral influences upon the human mind, the most vulgar is that of attributing the diversities of conduct and character to inherent natural differences.”

Yet, at an early point in any discussion of human violence, especially a discussion of the causes of war, someone will say, “It’s human nature.” There is ancient, weighty intellectual support for that common argument. Machiavelli, in The Prince, expresses confidently his own view of human nature, that human beings tend to be bad. This gives him a good reason, being “realistic,” to urge laying aside moral scruples in dealing with people: “A man who wishes to make a profession of goodness in everything must necessarily come to grief among so many who are not good. Therefore it is necessary for a prince, who wishes to maintain himself, to learn how not to be good.”

The seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes said, “I put forth a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire for power after power, that ceaseth only in death.” This view of human nature led Hobbes to favor any kind of government, however authoritarian, that would keep the peace by blocking what he thought was the natural inclination of people to do violence to one another. He talked about “the dissolute condition of masterless men” that required “a coercive power to tie their hands from rapine and revenge.”

Beliefs about human nature thus become self-fulfilling prophecies. If you believe human beings are naturally violent and bad, you may be persuaded to think (although not required to think) that it is “realistic” to be that way yourself. But is it indeed realistic (meaning, “I regret this, but it’s a fact . . .”) to blame war on human nature?

In 1932, Albert Einstein, already world famous for his work in physics and mathematics, wrote a letter to another distinguished thinker, Sigmund Freud. Einstein was deeply troubled by the memory of World War I, which had ended only fourteen years before. Ten million men had died on the battlefields of Europe, for reasons that no one could logically explain. Like many others who had lived through that war, Einstein was horrified by the thought that human life could be destroyed on such a massive scale and worried that there might be another war. He considered that Freud, the world’s leading psychologist, might throw light on the question Why do men make war?
“Dear Professor Freud,” he wrote. “Is there any way of delivering mankind from the menace of war?” Einstein spoke of “that small but determined group, active in every nation, composed of individuals who . . . regard warfare, the manufacture and sale of arms, simply as an occasion to advance their personal interests and enlarge their personal authority.” And then he asked, “How is it possible for this small clique to bend the will of the majority, who stand to lose and suffer by a state of war, to the service of their ambitions?”

Einstein volunteered an answer, “Because man has within him a lust for hatred and destruction.” And then he put his final question to Freud, “Is it possible to control man’s mental evolution so as to make him proof against the psychoses of hate and destructiveness?”

Freud responded, “You surmise that man has in him an active instinct for hatred and destruction, amenable to such stimulations. I entirely agree with you. . . . The most casual glance at world-history will show an unending series of conflicts between one community and another.”

Freud pointed to two fundamental instincts in human beings: the erotic, or love, instinct and its opposite, the destructive instinct. But the only hope he could hold for the erotic triumphing over the destructive was in the cultural development of the human race, including “a strengthening of the intellect, which tends to master our instinctive life.”

Einstein had a different view of the value of intellect in mastering the instincts. After pointing to “the psychoses of hate and destructiveness,” Einstein concluded, “Experience proves that it is rather the so-called ‘Intelligenz’ that is most apt to yield to these disastrous collective suggestions.”

Here are two of the greatest minds of the century, helpless and frustrated before the persistence of war. Einstein, venturing that aggressive instincts are at the root of war, asks Freud, the expert on instincts, for help in coming to a solution. Note, however, that Einstein has jumped from “man has within him a lust” to “disastrous collective suggestions.” Freud ignores this leap from instinct to culture and affirms that the “destructive instinct” is the crucial cause of war.

But what is Freud’s evidence for the existence of such an instinct? There is something curious in his argument. He offers no proof from the field of his expertise, psychology. His evidence is in “the most casual glance at world-history.”

Let’s move the discussion forward, fifty years later, to a school of thought that did not exist in Freud’s time, sociobiology. The leading spokesperson in this group is E. O. Wilson, a Harvard University professor and distinguished scientist. His book *Sociobiology* is an impressive treatise on the behavior of various species in the biological world that have social inclinations, like ants and bees.6

In the last chapter of *Sociobiology*, Wilson turned to human beings, and this drew so much attention that he decided to write a whole book dealing with this subject: *On Human Nature*. In it there is a chapter on aggression. It starts off with the question: “Are human beings innately aggressive?” Two sentences later: “The answer to it is yes.” (No hesitation here.) And the next sentence explains why: “Throughout history, warfare, representing only the most organized technique of aggression, has been endemic to every form of society, from hunter-gatherer bands to industrial states.”

Here is a peculiar situation. The psychologist (Freud) finds his evidence for the aggressive instinct not in psychology but in history. The biologist (Wilson) finds his evidence not in biology but in history.

This suggests that the evidence from neither psychology nor biology is sufficient to back up the claim for an aggressive instinct, and so these important thinkers turn to history. In this respect, they are no different from the ordinary person, whose thinking follows the same logic: history is full of warfare; one cannot find an era free of it; this must mean that it comes out of something deep in human nature, something biological, a drive, an instinct for violent aggression.8

This logic is widespread in modern thought, in all classes of people, whether highly educated or uneducated. And yet, it is almost certainly wrong. And furthermore, it’s dangerous.

Wrong, because there is no real evidence for it. Not in genetics, not in zoology, not in psychology, not in anthropology, not in history, not even in the ordinary experience of soldiers in war. Dangerous because it deflects attention from the nonbiological causes of violence and war.

It turns out, however, that Wilson’s firm assent to the idea that human beings are “innately aggressive” depends on his redefinitions of innately and aggressive. In *On Human Nature* he says, “Innateness refers to the measurable probability that a trait will develop in a specified set of environments. . . . By this criterion human beings have a marked hereditary predisposition to aggressive behavior.” And the word aggression takes in a variety of human actions, only some of which are violent.

In other words, when Wilson speaks of people being “innately aggressive” he does not mean that we are all born with an irresistible drive to become violent—it depends on our environment. And even if we become aggressive, that need not take the form of violence. Indeed,
Wilson says that "the more violent forms of human aggression are not the manifestations of inborn drives." We now have, he says, "a more subtle explanation based on the interaction of genetic potential and learning."

The phrase genetic potential gets us closer to a common ground between Wilson and his radical critics, who have attributed to him sometimes more extreme views about innate aggression than he really holds. That is, human beings certainly have, from the start (genetically) a potential for violence, but also a potential for peacefulness. That leaves us open to all sorts of possibilities, depending on the circumstances we find ourselves in and the circumstances we create for ourselves.

There is no known gene for aggression. Indeed, there is no known gene for any of the common forms of human behavior (I am allowing the possibility that a genetic defect of the brain might make a person violent, but the very fact that it is a defect means it is not a normal trait). The science of genetics, the study of that hereditary material carried in the forty-six chromosomes in every human cell and transmitted from one generation to the next, knows a good deal about genes for physical characteristics, very little about genes for mental ability, and virtually nothing about genes for personality traits (violence, competitiveness, kindness, surliness, a sense of humor, etc.).

Wilson's colleague at Harvard, scientist Stephen Jay Gould, a specialist in evolution, says very flatly (in Natural History Magazine, 1976): "What is the direct evidence for genetic control of specific human social behavior? At the moment, the answer, is none whatever."

The distinguished biologist P. W. Medawar puts it this way, "By far the most important characteristic of human beings is that we have and exercise moral judgement and are not at the mercy of our hormones and genes."

In the spring of 1986 an international conference of scientists in Seville, Spain, issued a statement on the question of human nature and violent aggression, concluding, "It is scientifically incorrect to say that war is caused by 'instinct' or any single motivation... Modern war involves institutional use of personal characteristics such as obedience, suggestibility, and idealism... We conclude that biology does not condemn humanity to war."

What about the evidence of psychology? This is not as "hard" a science as genetics. Geneticists can examine genes, even "splice" them into new forms. What psychologists do is look at the way people behave and think, test them, psychoanalyze them, conduct experiments to see

on biological instinct and on impressions gained in infancy, has pointed to the fact that, unlike most animals, human beings have a long childhood period for learning and cultural influence. This creates the possibility for a much wider range of behaviors." Erikson says that our cultures have created "pseudospecies," that is, false categories of race and nation that ossurate our sense of ourselves as one species and thus encourage the hostility that turns violent.

Animals other than human beings do not make war. They do not engage in organized violence on behalf of some abstraction. That is a special gift of creatures with advanced brains and cultures. The animal commits violence for a specific, visible reason, the needs for food and for self-defense.

Genetics, psychology, anthropology, and zoology—none of these fields has evidence of a human instinct for the kind of aggressive violence that characterizes war. But what about history, which Freud pointed to?

Who can deny the frequency of war in human history? But its persistence does not prove that its origin is in human nature. Are there not persistent facts about human society that can explain the constant eruption of war without recourse to those mysterious instincts that science, however hard it tries, cannot find in our genes? Is not one of those facts the existence of ruling elites in every culture, who become enamored of their own power and seek to extend it? Is it not another of those facts the greed, not of the general population, but of powerful minorities in society who seek more raw materials or more markets or more land or more favorable places for investment? Is there not a persistent ideology of nationalism, especially in the modern world, a set of beliefs taught to each generation in which the Motherland or the Fatherland is an object of veneration and becomes a burning cause for which one becomes willing to kill the children of other Motherlands or Fatherlands?

Surely we do not need human nature to explain war; there are other explanations. But human nature is simple and easy. It requires very little thought. To analyze the social, economic, and cultural factors that throughout human history have led to so many wars—that is hard work.

One can hardly blame people for avoiding it.

But we should take another look at the proposition that the persistence of war in history proves that war comes from human nature. The claim requires that wars be not only frequent, but perpetual, that they not be limited to some nations but be true of all. Because if wars are only intermittent—if there are periods of war and periods of peace and if
there are nations that go to war and other nations that don’t—then it is unreasonable to attribute war to something as universal as human nature.

Whenever someone says, “history proves...” and then cites a list of historical facts, we should beware. We can always select facts from history (there are lots to choose from) to prove almost anything about human behavior. Just as one can select from a person’s life just those instances of mean and aggressive behavior to prove the person naturally mean and aggressive, one can also select from that same person’s life only those instances of kind and affectionate behavior to prove him or her naturally nice.

Perhaps we should turn from these scholarly studies of history, genetics, anthropology, psychology, and zoology to the plain reality of war itself. We surely have a lot of experience with that in our time.

I remember reading John Hersey’s novel, The War Lover. It interested me greatly, partly because I am an admirer of Hersey’s writing, but even more because his subject was the crew of a Flying Fortress, the B-17 heavy bomber in World War II. I had been a bombardier on such a crew in just that war. The novel’s main character is a pilot who loves war. He also loves women. He is a braggart and a bully in regard to both. It turns out that his boasted sex exploits are a fraud and, in fact, he is impotent; it appears that his urge to bomb and kill is connected to that impotence.

When I finished reading the novel, I thought, Well, that may explain this piss-poor (a phrase left over from that war) fellow Hersey has picked as his subject and his lust for violence and death. But it doesn’t explain war.

The men I knew in the air force—the pilots, navigators, bombardiers, and gunners on the crews flying over Europe, dropping bombs, and killing lots of people—were not lusty to kill, were not enthusiasts for violence, and were not war lovers. They—we—were engaged in large-scale killing, mostly of noncombatants, the women, children, and elderly people who happened to inhabit the neighborhoods of the cities that we bombed (officially, these were all “military targets”). But this did not come out of our natures, which were no different than when we were peacefully playing, studying, and living the lives of American boys back in Brooklyn, New York, or Aurora, Missouri.

The bloody deeds we did came out of a set of experiences not hard to figure out: We had been brought up to believe that our political leaders had good motives and could be trusted to do right in the world;

we had learned that the world had good guys and bad guys, good countries and bad countries, and ours was good. We had been trained to fly planes, fire guns, operate bombsights, and to take pride in doing the job well. And we had been trained to follow orders, which there was no reason to question, because everyone on our side was good, and on the other side, bad. Besides, we didn’t have to watch a little girl’s legs get blown off by our bombs; we were 30,000 feet high and no human being on the ground was visible, no scream could be heard. Surely that is enough to explain how men can participate in war. We don’t have to grope in the darkness of human nature.

Indeed, when you look at modern war, do you find men rushing into it with a fierce desire to kill? Hardly. You find men (and some women) joining the armed forces in search of training, careers, companionship, glamour, and psychological and economic security. You find others being conscripted by law, under penalty of prison if they refuse. And all of them suddenly transported into a war, where the habit of following orders and the thinking into their ears of the rights of their cause can overcome the fear of death or the moral scruples of murdering another human being.

Many observers of war, and former soldiers too, have spoken of the lures of war for men, its attractions and enticements, as if something in men’s nature makes war desirable for them. J. Glenn Gray, who was in army intelligence and close to combat situations in the European theater during World War II, has a chapter in his book The Warriors called “The Enduring Appeals of Battle.” He writes of the “powerful fascination” of war. He says, “The emotional environment of warfare has always been compelling... Many men both hate and love combat.”

What are these “appeals” of war according to Gray? “The delight in seeing, the delight in comradeship, the delight in destruction.”

He recalls the biblical phrase “the lust of the eye” to describe the sheer overpowering spectacle of war, the astounding scenes, the images, the vignettes—things never before experienced by young men who lived ordinary lives on ordinary farms or ordinary streets. That is certainly true. I had never seen the innards of a fifty-caliber machine gun; had never flown in an airplane miles high, in the night and close to the stars, overwhelmed by the beauty of that, and operated my bombsight and watched specks of fire flare like tiny torches on the ground below; and had never seen at close range the black puffs that were the explosions of antiaircraft shells, threatening my life. But that is not a love of war; it is an aesthetic need for visual and emotional excitement that comes,
unrequested, with war and that can also be produced by other experiences.

Gray is also certainly right about the extraordinary comradeship of men in combat. But they don’t seek combat because of that, any more than men in prison seek imprisonment because in prison they often forge human ties with fellow prisoners far stronger than any they have on the outside.

As for the “delight in destruction,” I am skeptical about that. Granted, there is something visually exciting about explosions and something satisfying about hitting your target efficiently, as you were trained to do. But the delight that comes in a job well done would accompany any kind of job, not just destroying things.

All of the elements Gray and others have talked about as “the enduring appeals” of war are appeals not of violence or murder but of the concomitants of the war situation. It is sad that life is so drab, so unsatisfying for so many that combat gives them their first ecstatic pleasures, whether in “seeing” or companionship or work done well. It challenges us to find what the philosopher William James called “the moral equivalent of war,” ways to make life outside of war vivid, affectionate, even thrilling.

Gray himself, although he tries to understand and explain those “enduring appeals,” is offended by war. The Warriors recalls an entry in his own wartime journal, made December 8, 1944, which reflects not only his own feelings, but that of so many other veterans of war, that war is an affront to our nature as human beings. He wrote,

Last night I lay awake and thought of all the inhumanity of it, the beastliness of the war. . . . I remembered all the brutal things I had seen since I came overseas... all the people rotting in jail, some of whom I had helped to put there. . . . I thought of Plato’s phrase about the wise man caught in an evil time who refuses to participate in the crimes of his fellow citizens, but hides behind a wall until the storm is past. And this morning, when I rose, tired and distraught from bed, I knew that in order to survive this time I must love more. There is no other way.

When the U.S. government decided to enter World War I, it did not find an eager army of males, just waiting for an opportunity to vent their “natural” anger against the enemy, to indulge their “natural” inclination to kill. Indeed, there was a large protest movement against entrance into the war, leading Congress to pass punitive legislation for antiwar statements (3,000 people were prosecuted for criticizing the war). The government, besides conscripting men for service on threat of prison and jailing antiwar protesters, had to organize a propaganda campaign, sending 75,000 speakers to give 750,000 speeches in hundreds of towns and cities to persuade people of the rightness of the war.

Even with all that, there was resistance by young men to the draft. In New York City, ninety of the first hundred draftees claimed exemption. In Minnesota, the Minneapolis Journal reported, “Draft Opposition Fast Spreading in State.” In Florida, two black farm workers went into the woods with a shotgun and mutilated themselves to avoid the draft; one blew off four fingers of his hand, the other shot off his arm below the elbow. A senator from Georgia reported “general and widespread opposition to the enactment of the draft. . . . Mass meetings held in every part of the State protested against it.” Ultimately, over 300,000 men were classified as draft evaders.

We have an enormous literature of war. Much of it was written by men who experienced combat: Erich Remarque and Ernest Hemingway on World War I; Norman Mailer, James Jones, Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller, and Paul Fussell on World War II; Philip Caputo, Tim O’Brien, John DelVecchio, Bill Ehrhart, and Ron Kovic on Vietnam. The men they write about are not (with occasional exceptions) bloodthirsty killers, consumed by some ferocious instinct to maim and destroy other human beings. They connect across a whole century with the young scared kid in Red Badge of Courage; they experience fear more than hate, fatigue more than rage, and boredom more than vengefulness. If any of them turn into crazed killers for some moment or some hour, it is not hard to find the cause in the crazed circumstances of war, coming on top of the ordinary upbringing of a young man in a civilized country.

A GI named John Keating wrote a letter to his wife:

After all those years of preparation in the schools, you walked out the door, and they told you it was your duty to kill the commies in South Vietnam. If you wouldn’t volunteer, they would draft you, force you to do things against your will. Put you in jail. Cut your hair, take away your mod clothes, train you to kill. How could they do that? It was directly opposite to everything your parents had been saying, the teachers had been saying, the clergymen had been saying. You questioned it, and your parents said they didn’t want you to go, but better that than jail. The teacher said it was your duty. The clergy said you wouldn’t want your mother to live in a commu-
nist country, so you'd best go fight them in Asia before they landed in California. You asked about 'Thou shalt not kill,' and they mumbled."

It was no instinct to kill that led John Ketwig into military duty, but the pressure of people around him, the indoctrination of his growing up. So it is not remarkable that he joined the military. What is remarkable is that at a certain point he rebelled against it.

While 2 million men served in Vietnam at one time or another, another 0.5 million evaded the draft in some way. And of those who served, there were perhaps 100,000 deserters. About 34,000 GIs were court-martialed and imprisoned. If an instinct really was at work, it was not for war, but against it.

Once in the war, the tensions of combat on top of the training in obedience produced atrocities. In the My Lai Massacre we have an extreme example of the power of a culture in teaching obedience. In My Lai, a hamlet in South Vietnam, a company of U.S. soldiers landed by helicopter early one morning in March 1968, with orders to kill everybody there. In about one hour, although not a single shot was fired at them, they slaughtered about 400 Vietnamese, most of them old people, women, and children. Many of them were herded into ditches and then mowed down with automatic rifles.

One of the American soldiers, Charles Hutto, said later, "The impression I got was that we were to shoot everyone in the village. . . . An order came down to destroy all of the food, kill all the animals and kill all the people. . . . the village was burned. . . . I didn't agree with the killings but we were ordered to do it." 19

It is not at all surprising that men go to war, when they have been cajoled, bribed, propagandized, conscripted, threatened, and also not surprising that after rigorous training they obey orders, even to kill unarmed women and children. What is surprising is that some refuse.

At My Lai a number of soldiers would not kill when ordered to: Michael Bernhardt, Roy Wood, Robert Maples, a GI named Grzesik. Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson commanded a helicopter that flew over the scene and, when he saw what was happening, he landed the helicopter and rescued some of the women and children, ordering his crewmen to fire on GIs if they fired on the Vietnamese. Charles Hutto, who participated in the My Lai Massacre, said afterward,

"I was 10 years old, and I'd always been told to do what the grown-ups told me to do. . . . But now I'll tell my sons, if the government calls, to go, to serve their country, but to use their own judgment at times . . . to forget about authority . . . to use their own conscience. I wish somebody had told me that before I went to Vietnam. I didn't know. Now I don't think there should be even a thing called war . . . 'cause it messes up a person's mind."

In British novelist George Orwell's essay, "Shooting an Elephant," he recalls his experience in Burma, when he was a minor official of the British Empire. An elephant ran loose, and he finally shot it to death, but notes he did this not out of any internal drive, not of malice, but because people around him expected him to do that, as part of his job. It was not in his "nature."

The American feminist and anarchist Emma Goldman, writing at the beginning of the twentieth century before so much of the scientific discussion of the relationship between violence and human nature, said,

Poor human nature, what horrible crimes have been committed in thy name! Every fool, from king to policeman, from the flathead parson to the visionless dabbler in science, presume to speak authoritatively of human nature. The greater the mental charlatan, the more definite his insistence on the wickedness and weaknesses of human nature. Yet how can any one speak of it today, with every soul a prison, with every heart fettered, wounded, and maimed? 21

Her point about "the visionless dabbler in science" was affirmed half a century later by Nobel Prize-winning biologist Salvador E. Luria, who points to the misuse of science in attributing violent behavior to our genes. Moving away from genetic determinism and its mood of inevitability (as too often interpreted, the inevitability of war and death), Luria says that biologists have a nobler role for the future: to explore "the most intriguing feature—the nobility of the human spirit." 22

That nobility is revealed in human history, but it is a history that Machiavelli and a succession of scholarly pessimists ignore as they concentrate on the worst aspects of human behavior. There is another history, of the rejection of violence, the refusal to kill, and the yearning for community. It has shown itself throughout the past in acts of courage and sacrifice that defied all the immediate pressures of the environment.

This was true even in the unspeakable conditions of the German death camps in World War II, as Terence des Prez pointed out in his book The Survivor. He wrote, "The depth and durability of man's social
nature may be gauged by the fact that conditions in the concentration camps were designed to turn prisoners against each other, but that in a multitude of ways, men and women persisted in social acts.”

It is true that there is an infinite human capacity for violence. There is also an infinite potential for kindness. The unique ability of humans to imagine gives enormous power to idealism, an imagining of a better state of things not yet in existence. That power has been misused to send young men to war. But the power of idealism can also be used to attain justice, to end the massive violence of war.

Anyone who has participated in a social movement has seen the power of idealism to move people toward self-sacrifice and cooperation. I think of Sam Block, a young black Mississippian, very thin and with very bad eyes, taking black people to register to vote in the murderous atmosphere of Greenwood, Mississippi, in the early 1960s. Block was accosted by a sheriff (another civil rights worker, listening, recorded their conversation):

SHERIFF: Not where you from?
BLOCK: I’m a native of Mississippi.
SHERIFF: I know all the n**** here.
BLOCK: Do you know any colored people?
(The sheriff spat at him.)
SHERIFF: I’ll give you till tomorrow to get out of here.
BLOCK: If you don’t want to see me here, you better pack up and leave, because I’ll be here."

History, so diligent at recording disasters, is largely silent on the enormous number of courageous acts by individuals challenging authority and defying death.

The question of history, its use and abuse, deserves a discussion of its own.
Dictatorship by Force

Modernization came to Mexico during the Díaz regime not simply as the result of positivist theory and careful economic planning. The peace and stability that made it all possible were at least in part attributable to brute force. Díaz maintained himself in power from 1876 to 1911 by a combination of adroit political maneuvering, threats, intimidation, and, whenever necessary, callous use of the federal army and the rurales.

Throughout the thirty-four years the dictator maintained the sham of democracy. Elections were held periodically at the local, state, and national levels, but they were invariably manipulated in favor of those candidates who held official favor. The press throughout the epoch was tightly censored; journalists who dared to oppose the regime on any substantive matter found themselves in jail or exile, while recalcitrant editors found their newspapers closed down. Filomeno Mata, the editor of the Diario del Hogar, suffered imprisonment over thirty times for his anti-electionist campaigns. While a few persistent critics were killed, the large majority of the journalists were bludgeoned into submission and ceased to constitute a threat.

The dictator played off political opponents against one another, or bought them off. Potentially ambitious generals or regimental commanders were shifted regularly from one military zone to another to assure that they would be unable to cultivate a power base. State governors were invited to assume the same position in other states or to become congressmen. cabinet secre-
Mexico's "West Point," the Colegio Militar de Chapultepec trained much of the officer corps of the Porfiriato army.

The federal artillery corps, well trained and well equipped, was the pride of the Díaz army.

hundred jefes políticos (local political bosses). In 1900, although relative peace had already been achieved, Díaz was still spending almost one-fourth of the total budget on the military establishment. He believed it was worth it because the modernization process was so intertwined with his concept of enforced peace. The relationship has been summarized by one scholar of Mexican militarism as follows: "The Díaz system was self-reinforcing. The military provided the order necessary for economic development, and economic development provided the revenues necessary to keep the military loyal. Economic growth also built a modern communications network, which made it far easier for the army to stamp out disorders in the outlying areas."

Díaz's científico advisors have been labeled racist for their conscientious denigration of the Indian population. But the generalization has certain flaws, for it presupposes a monolithic philosophical framework within the científico community. José


Limantour was less a follower of Comte than of Darwin. He adapted notions of natural selection and survival of the fittest to Mexican reality as he understood it and emerged from his introspection calling for an aristocratic elite to reorder society. Little or no help could be expected from the Indian population. Francisco Bulnes, a prolific historian and apologist for científico rule, was more openly racist. Five million (white) Argentinians, he argued, were worth more than fourteen million Mexicans. The Mexican Indian was sullenly intractable and hopelessly inferior, not because of innate corruption of his genes but because his grossly deficient diet sapped his mental, moral, and physical vitality. He responded not to the logic of force but to the art of persuasion. Less biologically oriented was Justo Sierra, the most famous científico of them all. Cofounder of the conservative newspaper, La Libertad, author of Evolución política del pueblo mexicano, secretary of education during part of the Porfiriato, and first rector of the national university, Sierra argued forcefully that social and cultural forces, not biological ones, had shaped the Indian's inferior position. And unlike Limantour and Bulnes, Sierra asserted the Indian's educability.

In the political sense the científicos may have had a point. Perhaps Mexico was not yet ready for democracy, and perhaps it was too early to broaden the participatory base. But their impassioned defense of the need for "administrative power" implied at best self-deception and at worst blatant hypocrisy. If they truly believed that the Indian masses could be prepared for a more active role in the political life of the Mexican nation, the logical place to begin the preparation process was an educational system that reached the people. But the schools built during the Porfiriato, even when the Department of Education was in Justo Sierra's hands, were almost all located in the cities where the criollos lived, not in the rural areas where they might serve the Indian and mestizo population. At the end of the Porfiriato Mexico still had two million Indians not speaking Spanish. They had been left aside.

The Hacendados

Mexico was still overwhelmingly a rural country when the twentieth century arrived, and the rural peasantry bore most of the costs of modernization. The payment was exacted in fear of the rurales, intimidation by local hacendados, constant badgering by jefes políticos and municipal officials, exploitation by foreign entrepreneurs, and, most important, seizure of private and communal lands by government-supported land sharks.

Life in rural Mexico had been dominated by the hacienda complex since the colonial period, but the abuses of the system were exacerbated markedly during the Díaz regime as railroad construction pushed land values up. The problem of exaggerated land concentration was directly attributable to a new land law enacted in 1883. This law, designed to encourage foreign colonization of rural Mexico, authorized land companies to survey public lands for the purpose of subdivision and settlement. For their efforts the companies received up to one-third of the land surveyed and the privilege of purchasing the remaining two-thirds at bargain prices. If the private owners or traditional ejidos could not prove ownership through legal title, their land was considered public and subject to denunciation by the companies.

The process that ensued was predictable. Very few rural Mexicans could prove legal title. All they knew for sure was that they had lived and worked the same plot for their entire lives, and their parents and grandparents had done the same. Their boundary line ran from a certain tree to a certain stream to the crest of a hill. The few who could produce documents, some dating back to the colonial period, were convinced by the speculators and their lawyers that the papers had not been properly signed, or notarized, or stamped, or registered. But not even those communal ejidos that could produce titles of indisputable legality were immune. The Constitution of 1857 with its Reform Laws was once again applied to the detriment of the ejidos, and with greater vigor than ever before.

Within five years after the land law became operative, land companies had obtained possession of over 68 million acres of rural land and by 1894 one-fifth of the total land mass of Mexico. Not yet completely satisfied, the companies received a favorable modification of the law in 1894, and by the early twentieth century most of the villages in rural Mexico had lost their ejidos and some 134 million acres of the best land had passed into the hands of a few hundred fantastically wealthy families. Over one-half of all rural Mexicans lived and worked on the haciendas by 1910.

The Mexican Census of 1910 listed 8,345 haciendas in the republic, but a few wealthy individuals, often tied together by a marriage network of family elites, owned ten, fifteen, or even twenty of them. Though varied in size, hundreds of forty or fifty thousand acres were not at all uncommon. Fifteen of the richest...
600,000 acres, and son-in-law Federico Sisniega held some 260,000 acres and was a director of the Banco Nacional de Chihuahua. To strengthen the already strong Terrazas-Creel line, son Alberto married his niece, Emilia Creel, the daughter of his sister Eugenia and Enrique Creel. Son Federico Terrazas married into the Falomir family and daughter Adela into the Múoz family. Two of the other most wealthy and prestigious families in the state.

It is virtually impossible to calculate either the fortune or the power wielded by the Terrazas-Creel clan. Luis Terrazas himself probably did not know how much he owned. He surely did know, however, that the value of rural land in Chihuahua rose from about $4.30 per acre in 1879 to about $9.88 per acre in 1908. Had he been able to liquidate only his personal, nonurban holdings on the eve of the Mexican Revolution, he would have carried over $69 million to the bank.

One can be certain that little of major importance occurred in Chihuahua without the approval of patriarch Don Luis Terrazas. During the Díaz regime members of the extended family sat for a total of sixty-six terms in the state legislature and twenty-two terms in the national legislature. Because residency requirements were loosely defined, Emilia Creel and Juan Terrazas became national senators from other Mexican states. Municipal and regional officials born either the Terrazas-Creel names or their stamp of approval. The immense power was built upon a foundation of land, and the state of Chihuahua was a microcosm of what was happening throughout the Mexican republic.

The state of Mexico was dominated not by one extended family but rather by a handful of powerful sugar families: the García Piñonets, the Amors, the Torre y Múoz, and a few others. To fund the purchase of expensive new machinery these families had to increase production and so began expanding into new lands. As no public lands were available, they completely encircled small ranches and even villages, thereby choking off all infusions of economic lifeblood. Some towns stagnated, while others vanished from the map altogether. The town fathers of Chihuahua could not even find sufficient land for a new cemetery and were reduced to burrying children in a neighboring village.

The Peones

The millions of rural Mexicans who found themselves in dying villages or subsisting as peones on the nation's haciendas were worn off financially than their rural ancestors a century before. The average daily wage for an agricultural worker remained almost steady throughout the nineteenth century—about thirty-five centavos. But in the same hundred-year period the price of corn and chiles more than doubled, and beans cost six times more in 1910 than in 1860. In terms of purchasing power correlated with the price of corn or cheap cloth, the Mexican peón during the Díaz regime was twelve times poorer than the United States farm laborer.

Working conditions varied considerably from region to region, and even from hacienda to hacienda, but they were generally poor. Peones often availed themselves of the talents of a scribe to spell out their gnawing complaints. While it was not uncommon for the peón to be allotted a couple of furrows to plant a little corn and chiles and on occasion might receive a small ration of food from the hacienda, he worked from sunrise to sunset, often seven days a week, raising crops and tending cattle. Sometimes he was allowed to cut firewood free; on other occasions he paid for the right. The scant wages he received most often were not paid in currency but in certificates or metal discs redeemable only at the local tienda de rayas, an all-purpose company store located on the hacienda complex. Credit was extended liberally, but the prices, set by the hacendado or the mayordomo were invariably several times higher than those in a nearby village. For the hacendado the situation was perfect. The taxes on his land were negligible; his labor was, in effect, free, for all the wages that went out came back to him through the tienda de rayas with a handsome profit. The peón found himself in a state of perpetual debt, and by law he was bound to remain on the hacienda so long as he owed a single centavo. Debts were not eradicated at the time of death but passed on to the children. Should an occasional obdurate peón escape, there was scarcely any place for him to go. Many states had laws making it illegal to hire an indebted peón.

The bookkeeping procedures in the tienda de rayas always seemed to work to the disadvantage of the illiterate peón. Goods charged against his account were more expensive than they would have been had he been able to pay cash. And other items were often debited to his account. Charges for a marriage ceremony or a funeral often exceeded the monthly wage. Fines for real or imagined crimes on the hacienda were added; forced contributions for fiestas and interest on previous debts were tacked. And, in the most ignominious charge of all, some hacendados
ord keeping in the tienda de raya—and always the sense of pov-
erty, powerlessness, and hopelessness. During especially busy
times like planting or harvesting, the permanent work force was
augmented by temporary workers, often from surrounding vil-
lages. New arrivals, frequently earning a slightly higher wage
than the resident peones seemed to break the socioeconomic equi-
librium, and violence between the two groups of workers was a
constant threat.

The dichotomies of nineteenth-century Mexican life, especially
those of wealth and poverty, are almost all to be found on the ha-
cia, The main hacienda house was sumptuous, externally and
internally. But the hacendado would seldom spend more than a
few months a year there. Most often he had other haciendas to
attend, inevitably businesses to manage in the cities, and then he
had to visit his children in their fine European or United States
boarding schools. The hacienda provided, in addition to its in-
come, a summer vacation home, a change of pace, and social sta-
tus. The hacendado's teen-age children, remarkable for their con-
spicious consumption, used trips to the hacienda to impress their
friends. The extended families could be comfortably accommo-

even added a monthly fee for the privilege of shopping at the
tienda de raya.

Stories of corporal punishment of the peón (petty theft could
bring two hundred lashes) and sexual violation of the young
women on the haciendas are commonplace, but they are virtually
impossible to prove or disprove. It is certain that conditions on
the henequen haciendas of Yucatán were the worst in the repub-
lic. Because many of the peones in Yucatán were deportees from
other parts of Mexico (some were recalcitrant Yaqui Indians
from Sonora, and others were convicted criminals), they were
forced to work in chains, and flogging was not uncommon.
There is little evidence, however, that this type of physical mal-
treatment was widespread throughout Mexico. Surely the peón
and his family were everywhere subject to the personal whims of
the hacendado or the mayordome, but hacienda records and cor-
respondence to local, state, and even national officials reveal that
complaints, while frequent, rarely contained charges of physical
abuse. More common are complaints of intolerable working con-
ditions, violence in the peón community itself, and dishonest rec-

After the turn of the century, Yaqui Indians, recalcitrant from their first
contact with the Spaniards, were rounded up and shipped off to Yucatán
virtually as slaves.
dated, and young boys, donned in charro costume and mounted on carefully bred and well-groomed horses, could fancy themselves country squires. Birthdays, saints' days, and feast days were reason enough to move the family from the state capital to the hacienda for an outing, and on special occasions, like an eighteenth birthday or a wedding, entire train cars could be reserved to carry guests, musicians, local dignitaries, and domestics.

The contrast between the hacendado and those who worked the hacienda and made it live is so stark as to be absurd. Because all "justice" on the hacienda was administered by the mayordomo, the peón had no genuine judicial rights or legal recourse. If a mayordomo overreacted in punishment of some real or imagined offense, he was accountable to nobody. Within a mile of the grand hacienda house were miserable, one-room, floorless, windowless adobe shacks. Water had to be carried in daily, often from long distances. The individual plots allotted to the peón were worked often after sunset, when the important work of the day had been completed. Twice a day a few minutes would be set aside to consume some tortillas wrapped around beans and chile, washed down with a few gulps of black coffee or pulque. Protein in the form of meat, fish, or fowl, even on the cattle haciendas, was a luxury reserved for a few special occasions during the year. Infant mortality on many haciendas exceeded 25 percent.

Diversion in the form of a local fiesta might occur once a year. An amateur bullfight could be staged in the hacienda corral, and resident aficionados would try their hand with a half-grown fighting bull that somehow looked bigger as it got closer. The peones, fortified with pulque or mescal, who found momentary escape entertaining their friends often paid dearly for their bravado, but a broken arm or a punctured thigh was a small matter when one had nothing to look forward to but the drab existence and appalling squalor of the next twelve months.

Porfirio Díaz had developed his country at the expense of his countrymen. He hermetically sealed himself off from the stark realities of Mexican masses. The great material benefits of the age of modernization in no way filtered down to the people. They were still an amorphous mass destitute of hope. Their lives were not in the least changed because the new National Theater was built in Mexico City or because José Limantour was able to borrow money in London or Paris at 4 percent. In fact, for them the cost of modernization had been too great.
Can Mexico Be Saved?  
The Peril and Promise of López Obrador  
By Denise Dresser  
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In 2012, Mexico’s future looked promising. The election of a dashing young president, Enrique Peña Nieto, imbued the country with a new sense of energy and purpose. Back in power after a 12-year hiatus, the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, had promised to reinvent itself and shun the corrupt authoritarianism it had practiced during the seven decades it ruled Mexico. As the country seemed to reach a consensus on long-delayed structural reforms, the international press heralded “the Mexican moment.” According to the cover of Time magazine, Peña Nieto was “saving Mexico” by opening up the energy sector to foreign investment, combating monopolies, changing archaic labor laws, and leaving nationalism and crony capitalism in the past.

Just six years later, however, a historic election swept the PRI from power and delivered a landslide victory to its nemesis, the antiestablishment leader Andrés Manuel López Obrador, and his party, the National Regeneration Movement (MORENA). The election was a sharp rebuke to Peña Nieto, his agenda, and the political and economic system that has been in place since the country transitioned to democracy in 2000. Despite the early promise of Peña Nieto’s modernizing reforms, by 2018, eight in ten voters disapproved of the PRI. The election catalyzed popular anger over frustrated economic expectations, rampant corruption, and a homicide rate that has made Mexico one of the most violent countries in the Western Hemisphere.

But the vote was about more than merely punishing the PRI for its failings. López Obrador won because he was perceived as an authentic opposition leader: an insurgent politician who for years—including during two previous runs for the presidency—had railed against rapacious elites and a democratic transition gone awry. This time, however, his message in defense of “the people” resonated with wider segments of the Mexican electorate because the ills he diagnosed had become increasingly evident during the Peña Nieto administration.

López Obrador’s promise to shake up the status quo appealed to a restive population eager for regime change. What it will mean in practice, however, remains unclear. So far, the president-elect’s policy positions have been vague, and his team is unknown and untested. Addressing Mexico’s toxic mix of truncated democracy and crony capitalism will require substantive reform. Many citizens hope that López Obrador will make Mexico’s government and economy genuinely inclusive. Others fear that he will push the country backward by resurrecting dominant-party rule, increasing presidential power, and stoking nationalism. A polarized Mexico is now caught between two forces: anger at those who have governed so badly and fear of those who have just been elected.

UNFULFILLED PROMISES
For decades, Mexico has been plagued by the same set of problems. From 1929 to 2000, single-party rule normalized corruption and stunted the development of Mexican institutions. Even now, the country’s economy produces profound inequality, with wealth concentrated in the hands of a few elites. Power operates through patronage and bribery. There are no adequate checks and balances to hold leaders to account. At the same time, the proliferation of drug-related crime has made violence routine.

Throughout the 1990s, political elites and party leaders focused on changing the rules of electoral competition in Mexico. These efforts culminated in Vicente Fox’s victory in the country’s 2000 presidential election. Fox, a member of the National Action Party (PAN), was the first opposition candidate to defeat the PRI. His victory ended single-party rule and marked the country’s official transition to electoral democracy.

Many believed that the PRI’s defeat would transform the prevailing political and economic system, but that did not prove to be the case. The vices associated with authoritarian rule persisted, including corruption and a lack of transparency and accountability. After Fox’s victory, the Mexican political system became a strange hybrid of authoritarianism and democracy: a system that promoted power sharing among party leaders but did little to guarantee the representation of ordinary citizens.

From 2000 to 2012, the PAN’s approach to governing closely resembled that of the party it had replaced. Patronage, vote buying, and corruption continued. As a result, citizens began to lose faith in the system altogether. According to...
to a government survey from 2011, only four percent of the population had a favorable impression of political parties, and only ten percent believed that legislators governed on behalf of their constituents.

The democratic transition also failed to improve the country's security situation—in fact, it got worse. In 2006, President Felipe Calderón launched a "war on drugs," deploying the Mexican military to fight powerful drug cartels and end drug-related violence. Instead of solving these problems, the policy, which is still in place, has turned Mexico into a country of graveyards, where mothers sift through dirt to find the remains of their children. In states where the military has conducted operations, the violence has actually increased, as cartels fight both government forces and one another over territory and move on to other illicit activities, such as extortion and kidnapping. Where the armed forces have replaced civilian police officers, ordinary crime has skyrocketed. The army is not trained to carry out police duties, and its incursions to fight the cartels have often produced an escalation in human rights violations.

In the last decade, Mexico has seen over 250,000 homicides and over 34,000 disappearances. More than 140 mayors and candidates for office have been assassinated. And whole swathes of the country, including parts of the states of Guerrero, Michoacán, Morelos, and Tamaulipas, are now controlled by organized crime. Meanwhile, corruption and incompetence in the police forces, the courts, and the military have continued unabated.

**PENASTROIKA AND ITS DISCONTENTS**

The deteriorating security situation and the PAN's failure to turn Mexico into a functioning democracy opened the door for a PRI comeback. Peña Nieto promised to help his struggling country join the ranks of the developed world. Immediately after assuming office in 2012, he forged the Pact for Mexico, a legislative accord among the country's main political parties that approved structural reforms on issues such as energy, labor, tax policy, telecommunications, and education.

The pact was initially celebrated as a political achievement. But although many of the reforms looked good on paper, their design and execution were deeply flawed. Peña Nieto's proposals conflicted with the vested interests of the same powers that had enabled his ascent to the presidency: the gerontocracy that controlled the labor unions, the monopolists that dominated the Mexican economy, the government-controlled media, and the powerful television duopoly that carefully manufactured his image. These forces were willing to support a light version of the proposed reforms, but they opposed more substantive changes that threatened to undercut their power. As a result, when the reforms reached Congress, where secondary legislation was designed to put them into effect, a legislative branch dominated by special interests introduced new rules that diluted the possibility of a deeper impact. Peña Nieto's cronies defended their privileged positions with the tacit consent of a government that seemed more interested in marketing the approval of the reforms than in making them succeed.

Although not all the reforms failed—energy reform, for example, spurred foreign investment, and telecommunications reform lowered cell phone rates for consumers—their modest achievements pale in comparison to what was promised. Peña Nieto assured Mexicans that he would raise economic growth to six percent per year. Instead, growth has averaged only 1.3 percent per year. Meanwhile, inequality and wealth concentration are on the rise. According to the economist Gerardo Esquivel, ten percent of the Mexican population now controls more than 64 percent of the country's wealth. In 2002, the fortunes of Mexico's top 16 multimillionaires represented two percent of GDP; by 2014, that share had risen to nine percent. And the four richest people in Mexico all made their fortunes in sectors regulated or controlled by the government. Mexico now occupies seventh place in The Economist's index of crony capitalist countries, behind Russia, Malaysia, Ukraine, Singapore, Hong Kong, and the Philippines.

Mexican society is shaped like a pyramid: at the top are a handful of rent seekers, who manipulate the system to increase their personal wealth rather than invest in the economy or support innovation. At the base, meanwhile, are the 52 million Mexicans who live below the poverty line—21 million of whom survive on less than $2 a day. According to a 2015 Oxfam report, only one in five Mexicans can be considered not poor or vulnerable to poverty. Successive reformist governments have failed to address the persistence of manipulated, highly concentrated markets. Growth is not possible when the state cannot ensure equality, regulate monopolies, or guarantee the transparency of economic transactions. Under Peña Nieto and his predecessors, pervasive cronyism crippled reformist efforts. Even good intentions delivered bad results.

**IT'S THE CORRUPTION, STUPID**

In Mexico, paradoxically, more democracy has meant more corruption. The democratic transition did not stop the transfer of public
wealth into private pockets; instead, it exacerbated and normalized that historical practice. Although democratic theory suggests that pluralism and political competition help combat corruption, Mexico demonstrates that in the absence of the rule of law, they actually incite further capacity.

In Mexico's fledgling democracy, corruption has spread from the executive branch to the legislature, the judiciary, state and local governments, and even the media. As the legislative branch has gained more power over how money is spent, illegal appropriations for political use have multiplied. Decentralizing the federal budget to the states has opened up new opportunities for local leaders to do business with public funds. Instead of providing checks and balances against corruption, the federal and local legislatures have been the beneficiaries of government largesse. The same is true of the 32 governors who receive large amounts of federal funds, which they use at their own discretion.

According to the nongovernmental organization México ¿Cómo Vamos? (Mexico, How Are We Doing?), corruption eats up nine percent of Mexico's GDP. It deters foreign investment, hampers economic growth, and limits the benefits of the North American Free Trade Agreement. The World Economic Forum says that corruption is the main factor that makes it hard to do business in Mexico.

During the Peña Nieto administration, however, corruption, which had long been considered normal, was increasingly denounced as it became more public and less constrained. According to the nongovernmental organization Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad (Mexicans Against Corruption and Impunity), corruption has reached alarming levels in the last six years. Mexico is currently ranked 135 out of 180 countries on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index; 90 percent of Mexican citizens believe that corruption is one of the country's primary problems. This concern is not unwarranted. During the Peña Nieto administration, the governor of Veracruz, Javier Duarte, allegedly embezzled millions of dollars of public funds, and more than a dozen other governors and former governors, many of whom Peña Nieto praised as examples of the new PRI, are now under investigation or hiding from the authorities. The president's own family has been implicated: in 2014, the so-called Casa Blanca scandal revealed that the president's wife had purchased a $7 million house from a favored government contractor.

Under Peña Nieto and his predecessors, pervasive cronyism crippled reformist efforts. Peña Nieto attempted to avoid responsibility for these scandals by arguing that corruption was a cultural issue. Instead of reforming bad rules or designing better laws, he blamed amoral citizens. But corruption is the product of incentives, not habits; it's about what authorities sanction, not what society condones. And under Peña Nieto, Mexican authorities were willing to tolerate a staggering level of official wrongdoing. Consider, for example, the massive scandal involving the Brazilian construction company Odebrecht, which has admitted paying more than $800 million in bribes to government officials in various countries. The case has shaken up politics throughout the region, bringing down presidents and prominent members of the political elite. But in Mexico, not a single politician or contractor has been indicted, owing to pressure on law enforcement authorities from high-level officials who fear that a real investigation would be damaging to the PRI. What the Mexican media have dubbed "a pact of impunity" protects the political class regardless of party or ideology, undermining public trust in government institutions.

The starkest example of official impunity is the case of the 43 students from Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers' College who disappeared in 2014 and whose fate remains unknown. After massive protests erupted over the incident, Peña Nieto's government brought in a panel of independent international experts to review the case. But when the experts began to cast doubt on the government's handling of the investigation, authorities made it impossible for them to carry out their work and ultimately forced them out of the country.

ENTER AMLO
During the 2018 election, López Obrador became the candidate of choice for the majority of voters, who were frustrated with the current state of affairs. Decades of corruption and the failures of the Peña Nieto government allowed López Obrador to cast himself as the redeemer of a fundamentally flawed system.

The election results were a crushing defeat for the PRI, which did not win a single governorship out of the nine in contention or any of the 300 federal electoral districts. The party even lost in Atlacomulco, Peña Nieto's hometown. The PRI will become the fifth-largest party in Congress after being dominant for 89 years.

For López Obrador, the results were a triumph. MORENA earned 53 percent of the vote, versus the PRI's 16 percent, and it received 30 million votes, significantly more than the 15 million that Fox obtained in 2000. López Obrador's party and its coalition allies will have an absolute
majority in Congress, with over 300 seats out of 500, and a majority in the Senate. After 24 years of divided rule, López Obrador will enjoy a unified government, which will have the capacity to pass laws and approve the budget with little opposition.

López Obrador’s victory can be explained by both what happened during the race and what failed to happen over the last 30 years. There is no question that his opponents ran disastrous campaigns. Ricardo Anaya, the candidate of a center-right–center-left alliance that had been forged among the PAN, the Party of the Democratic Revolution, and the Citizens’ Movement, was viewed as smart but robotic—someone who connected more easily with Silicon Valley executives than with his disgruntled fellow citizens. And he was never credible as a transformative opposition leader, given the 12 years of PAN rule that came before.

Meanwhile, the PRI candidate, José Antonio Meade, bore the brunt of Peña Nieto’s unpopularity and the tarnished PRI brand.

López Obrador, on the other hand, assembled a team of moderates who tempered his strident tendencies and explained his policies in a way that made them seem more acceptable and less radical. MORENA transitioned from purism to pragmatism and created a broad, multiclass, and ideologically vague coalition that was capable of drawing in both conservative evangelicals and progressive civic activists. U.S. President Donald Trump’s demonization of Mexico also helped López Obrador, whose brand of nationalism resonated among those who felt offended by Trump’s tirades and Peña Nieto’s mild response to them. López Obrador also won support by defending the oil industry in the face of energy reforms that many viewed as benefiting only foreign investors and their domestic allies.

But something more profound lies at the root of this political reconfiguration. López Obrador’s message and personality have been the same since he became an opposition leader in 2006. But what seemed radical in 2006 feels necessary in 2018. What once provoked fear now engenders hope. The majority of the electorate supported López Obrador because his bleak diagnosis corresponded with the violence, corruption, and insecurity that ordinary Mexicans experience every day.

Members of Mexico’s traditional ruling class did not understand that lambasting López Obrador as a populist would not prevent him from reaching the presidency; they should have instead addressed the grievances he exploited. But they did little to make the economic system more inclusive or the political system more representative. López Obrador’s ascent is the predictable consequence of failed modernization. Greedy, antidemocratic elites should have seen it coming.

THE ROAD AHEAD
Despite his landslide victory, López Obrador remains a polarizing figure. His critics view him as a divider and a class warrior; his supporters cherish him as an unwavering champion of democracy and social justice. For some, he is a wolf in sheep’s clothing; for others, he represents a radical and long-desired break with the old regime.

López Obrador’s victory will almost certainly alter the party system and the existing economic model. But the specific nature of that change is difficult to predict. When it comes to policy, López Obrador has been erratic and often contradictory. As mayor of Mexico City from 2000 to 2006, he was a pragmatic leader, and his team today mostly consists of moderates. Now, however, there will be pressure from his base to disavow many of the reforms implemented during the Peña Nieto administration. López Obrador has said that he will support the North American Free Trade agreement, but he has also hinted that protectionist measures might be necessary to invigorate the domestic market and promote food security. Ultimately, he is a social leader drawn to grand narratives, not to the specifics of public policy. It will be up to his inexperienced cabinet to maintain the delicate balance between the changes that Mexicans demand and the macroeconomic stability that investors expect.

In his victory speech, López Obrador espoused the language of reconciliation, declaring that he would seek a peaceful and orderly transition and that he would not “govern arbitrarily.” But there is no question that he will have a great deal of discretionary power. Along with the smaller parties in his electoral coalition, he may even have enough votes to modify the constitution.

Although the PRI and the PAN retained a small presence in the legislature and still control a number of governorships, the opposition has been decimated, and it could become even smaller as members flee to join MORENA. López Obrador’s party is on its way to becoming a new version of the old PRI: a hegemonic party that crowds out competition by uniting disparate political factions under a pragmatic umbrella. Patronage and corruption held the PRI together, and MORENA has not signaled that it will break with those practices; in fact, it is well positioned to emulate and embrace them. López Obrador has not broken ties with union leaders associated with government graft or acted against members...
of his own party accused of using public funds for personal gain.

For those worried about Mexico’s dysfunctional democracy, there are some troubling signs. López Obrador has promised to return power to the people by submitting key policy issues to public referendums. This practice could push the country toward majoritarian extremism, in which democracy is seen as a constant confrontation between the popular will and those who oppose it, rather than as an inclusive system of negotiation and compromise. During the campaign, López Obrador portrayed institutions such as the Supreme Court and the National Institute for Transparency, Access to Information, and Personal Data Protection as obstacles, vilified the media outlets that criticized him, and suggested that his personal moral rectitude meant that he should be granted broader discretionary powers than his predecessors.

But much of what he has promised, including an end to corruption and violence, will require significant modifications to Mexico’s institutions, which were created in an era of single-party rule. Unless the government promotes an agenda focused on transparency, accountability, institutional remodeling, and the protection of individual rights, Mexico will simply replace one unaccountable party with another. Some of López Obrador’s critics have warned that he might turn Mexico into another Venezuela, where the authoritarian leader Nicolás Maduro has dismantled democratic institutions and bankrupted the state, pushing society to the brink of collapse. The real risk for Mexico, however, is not that it will become another Venezuela; it is that it will simply remain the same old Mexico.

To prevent this outcome, López Obrador would be well advised to take a new approach when he assumes office on December 1. The centerpiece of this agenda should be the establishment of an autonomous attorney general’s office with the authority to investigate and prosecute corruption at the highest levels. In addition, he should push for the passage of legislation, currently stalled in Congress, that would make the national anticorruption system fully functional. He will also need to name an anticorruption czar and guarantee that the position has teeth. Finally, López Obrador should rethink the war on drugs by gradually returning the military to the barracks and, at a minimum, legalizing marijuana for medicinal and recreational use, which would reduce the profits enjoyed by the cartels.

Mexico will experience truly transformative change only if its new leaders focus on strengthening the rule of law. The biggest mistake López Obrador can make would be to delegitimize democracy by relying on referendums and centralizing power in his own office. Much of the positive change that Mexico has experienced since 2000 was the result of pressure from below, fomented by an increasingly vibrant and demanding civil society. The country’s future does not depend on one man or one movement. Mexico needs a broad, pro-democracy coalition that addresses the root cause of its polarized politics: the absence of institutions that are capable of providing transparency, accountability, and systemic checks and balances. The Mexican people need to put pressure on López Obrador to make good on his bold promises. The Mexican novelist Juan Rulfo once wrote, “It had been so long since I lifted my face that I forgot about the sky.” If Mexicans do not look upward and demand more, those who govern won’t do so, either.
How NAFTA Explains the Two Mexicos
The re-negotiation of the landmark trade deal will shape the country’s future.

PAUL IMISON
SEP 23, 2017, The Atlantic

On January 1, 1994, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, a group of indigenous rebels in Mexico, seized public buildings in towns and cities across Chiapas, the country’s poorest, southernmost state. On that day, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) had gone into effect, heralding a new era in economic integration and freedom of trade across the United States, Canada, and Mexico, eliminating tariffs among the countries and symbolizing a new post-Cold War consensus on free markets and trade. But for the Zapatistas, NAFTA represented the recolonization of their country, and they sought to give voice to their protest through armed struggle. The Mexican military put their uprising down swiftly, and the Zapatistas retreated into autonomously governed caracoles, or communes, where they live to this day, rejecting government aid and living largely on proceeds from San Cristóbal’s NGO-run tourist industry and wealthy supporters abroad.

Twenty-three years later, backpackers, activists, and academics, still descend on San Cristóbal de Las Casas, a jewel of a city in the highlands of Chiapas, to celebrate the Zapatistas, who became instant icons of the nascent alterglobalization movement. Yet as visitors fill the rebel-themed cafes and art galleries in the city’s colonial center, they are notably less attracted to its notorious “Misery Belt” on the outskirts, an area of unpaved streets and crumbling shacks. Here, young men and women migrate from the countryside to work in the informal street-vendor economy or head north to Mexico City and the assembly plants along the U.S. border that NAFTA helped create, seeking not revolution, but gainful employment in the capitalist economy. “We came here to make a fresh start ... because work was scarce in our village,” Miguel Gómez, a flower vendor in San Cristóbal’s municipal market, told me. His three siblings have already migrated north to seek work, he said. “But it’s not easy. In this city, everything depends on tourism.”

Today, officials from Mexico, the United States, and Canada, are gathering in Ottawa for the third round of talks to renegotiate NAFTA. The prospects for such an upgrade are uncertain. President Donald Trump initially threatened to terminate the agreement, declaring it the “worst trade deal ... maybe ever,” citing U.S. job losses and a growing trade deficit; he has since accepted the need for a relaunch. Canada wants to reform dispute settlement mechanisms and secure improved labor and environmental standards. The Mexican government has also called for an improved deal that takes into account its newly opened energy and telecoms sectors, along with other upgrades.

NAFTA’s impact on Mexico has long been a subject of debate. For many, it represents the “two Mexicos”—one increasingly industrialized and affluent, the other largely rural and impoverished—and the widening gap between them. With Mexico set for a crucial presidential election in July 2018, it is on this issue, rather than Trump’s border wall, that the real debate over the country’s future lies.

NAFTA coincided with a wider period of change for Mexico as the country sought to rebuild after its infamous “Lost Decade.” By the time the Latin American debt crisis, spurred by a collapse in commodity prices, struck in 1982, Mexico’s economy looked much like Venezuela’s today, trapped in a cycle of oil dependence, debt, and inflation. Amid the string of political and economic reforms that followed, its de facto one-party state, run by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), crumbled. In 2000, democracy was consolidated by the election of President Vicente Fox from the pro-market National Action Party which governed until 2012; under the current administration of Enrique Peña Nieto, the Mexican congress has passed market reforms touching nearly every sector of the economy from education to energy.

These changes have fundamentally transformed Mexico. Exports have grown by more than 500 percent since 1993 thanks to growth in manufacturing. Mexican universities are increasingly producing high-skilled workers while firms in the aerospace, tech, and the financial industry, are innovating at a rapid clip. The country’s middle class grew by 11 percent between 2000 and 2010. Meanwhile, NAFTA’s integrated legal framework, which strengthened property rights and dispute mechanisms, has enhanced the rule of law in a private sector long hamstrung by political interference. “This has been one of the most understated achievements of NAFTA,” Valeria Moy, an economist at the Autonomous Technological Institute of Mexico,
told me, "The market has helped usher in changes that the Mexican government couldn't."

Yet the results have been uneven. Foreign investment has overwhelmingly clustered in states like Chihuahua and San Luis Potosí, which tout their well-designed infrastructure and easy access to the U.S. border. The removal of tariffs and subsidies on agriculture, notably corn, caused massive job losses in the country's rural south, prompting both migration and social unrest. According to Mexico's official statistics agency, while 60 percent of the population of Nuevo León, the country's wealthiest state, per capita, which borders Texas, are middle class, 80 percent of those living in Chiapas dwell in poverty. Referring to this divide, Macario Schettino, an economist at the Technological Institute of Monterrey, said: "Latin America begins not at the border with the U.S., but [halfway down] in Mexico City."

Schettino and many other observers cite four key reasons for the gap. Mexico's tax system, long dependent on dwindling oil revenues, currently brings in just under 9 percent of the country's GDP from non-petroleum sources (compared to 26 percent in the United States). Mexico's public-education system has long been the worst among Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development nations. Vast geographical discrepancies—Mexico stretches across 761,606 square miles—mean that many citizens live in isolated mountain regions, cut off from infrastructure and public services. Finally, and crucially, an adequate rule of law continues to evade the country.

Chiapas remains a microcosm of such challenges. Its government recoups a measly 1.5 percent of its budget in taxes, due to the fact that 80 percent of the local population works in the informal labor sector. Regulation and cronyism continue to hamper many industries, stifling entrepreneurship. The state's education system, one of Mexico's worst, was virtually paralyzed for three years as teacher unions violently protested a 2013 reform. Cash-transfer programs are frequently used to buy political support.

The argument on the left has long been that neoliberalism—or, the absence of the state and supremacy of the market—is to blame. In 2016, however, Chiapas boasted the fifth-largest budget of Mexico's 32 states. Since the Zapatista uprising, it has received billions of additional dollars in the form of federal aid. Yet extreme poverty has only increased in that time while the state ranks fourth nationally in infant mortality and first in illiteracy.

The reasons for the situation in Chiapas are various. Chief among them is what political scientist Sareilly Martínez, a native of Chiapas, described as an "auction pyramid" in which political parties selectively distribute aid to resolve local conflicts and social leaders protest violently to secure more funding. In rural parts of the state, the blocking of highways and hijacking of municipal buildings are commonplace. Politically motivated assassinations, often barely reported amid Mexico's drug-related violence, are increasingly frequent. The murder in 2016 of the mayor of San Juan Chamula, an indigenous municipality popular with tourists, was one of the few cases to draw national headlines. Political changes have failed to break the cycle. In 2006, the leftist Democratic Revolutionary Party won Chiapas for the first time; debt increased, as did poverty and social strife. The story has been repeated under current governor Manuel Velasco of the Green Party, who, in 2015, oversaw local elections condemned by opponents as among the most corrupt in Mexican history.

Blame is frequently directed at the federal government for failing to impose order. Yet political necessity and the lack of an independent anticorruption system—currently the subject of an endless congressional fight—highlight the fact that since the 1980s Mexico has prioritized growth and political stability over consolidating the rule of law. Analyst Carlos Mota has argued that the two Mexicanos are also reflected in the Mexican state: one known internationally for world-class economists whose talents are sought after by the World Bank; the other gripped by the clientelism of old.

Given the stark inequality that continues to plague Mexico, the debate over the role of the market versus that of the state that NAFTA provoked in 1994 is unlikely to disappear. Much like the United States and Canada, Mexico needs both a strong, transparent government that can uphold the law and lure investment (as is currently happening with the country's burgeoning tech sector in Jalisco State) and dynamic markets that can incentivize talent and innovation. The parts of Mexico that have begun striking this balance have thrived; those that haven't have fallen behind.

The debate will continue when Mexicans go to the polls in 2018. With the current administration marred by both corruption scandals and mediocre growth, the frontrunner is leftist Andrés Manuel López Obrador, or AMLO, who favors greater state intervention in the economy and has vowed to hold referenda on the country's market reforms. AMLO is frequently compared to both Trump and Venezuela's late Hugo Chávez for his outspoken...
views and cult-like following. Yet while some view him as a radical in the Chávez vein, he most closely resembles Mexico’s leaders of the 1970s who used populist rhetoric to justify heavy spending while showing little appetite for genuine reform.

If elected, however, AMLO would inherit a very different Mexico from the one of 35 years ago. The country’s democracy is increasingly competitive, as evident in the way citizens fought for the passage of a grassroots anticorruption bill in recent months. Its media is more independent. Its people travel more widely than ever before. AMLO would also lack the compliant congress and high oil revenues of prior administrations. Popular in the country’s southern and central regions, yet far less so in the north, AMLO, too, represents the two Mexico. Regardless of the outcome of the NAFTA talks, which may yet provide a boost to the country’s economy, it is how Mexico resolves its divide that will ultimately determine its future.
Excerpt from "The Fourth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle," issued by the leadership of the EZLN on January 1, 1996.

Today, the struggle for democracy, liberty and justice in Mexico is a struggle for national liberation.

II

Today, with heart of Emiliano Zapata and having heard the voice of all our brothers and sisters, we call upon the people of Mexico to participate in a new stage of the struggle for national liberation and the construction of a new nation, through this . . .

FOURTH DECLARATION OF THE LACANDON JUNGLE

in which we call upon all honest men and women to participate in the new national political force which is born today: the

ZAPATISTA FRONT OF NATIONAL LIBERATION a civic and peaceful organization, independent and democratic, Mexican and national, which will struggle for democracy, liberty and justice in Mexico. The Zapatista Front of National Liberation is born today and we invite the participation of the workers of the Republic, the workers in the field and in the city, the indigenous people, the squatters, the teachers and students, Mexican women, the youth in all the nation, honest artists and intellectuals, religious people who are accountable, all those Mexican citizens who do not want Power but democracy, liberty, and justice for ourselves and for our children.

We invite national civic society, those without a party, the citizen and social movement, all Mexicans to construct this new political force.

A new political force which will be national. A new political force based in the EZLN.

A new political force which forms part of a broad opposition movement, the National Liberation Movement, as a space for citizen political action where there may be a confluence with other political forces of the independent opposition, a space where popular wills may encounter and coordinate united actions with one another.

A political force whose members do not exert nor aspire to hold elective positions or government offices in any of its levels. A political force which does not aspire to take power. A force which is not a political party.

A political force which can organize the demands and proposals of those citizens and is willing to give direction through obedience. A political force which can organize a solution to the collective problems without the intervention of political parties and of the government. We do not need permission in order to be free. The role of the government is the prerogative of society and it is its right to exert that function.

Note: This and All major Zapatista writings were published in hardcopy and online. Zapatistas were early adopters of the Internet.
A political force which struggles against the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few and against the centralization of power. A political force whose members do not have any other privilege than the satisfaction of having fulfilled its commitment.

A political force with local, state and regional organization which grows from the base, which is its social force. A political force given birth by the civic committees of dialogue.

A political force which is called a FRONT because it incorporates organizational efforts which are non-partisan, and has many levels of participation and many forms of struggle.

A political force called ZAPATISTA because it is born with the hope and the indigenous heart which, together with the EZLN, descended again from the Mexican mountains.

A political force with a program of struggle with 13 points. Those contained in the First Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle and added throughout the past two years of insurgency. A political force which struggles against the State-Party System. A political force which struggles for a new constituency and a new constitution. A political force which does not struggle to take political power but for a democracy where those who govern, govern by obeying.

We call upon all those men and women of Mexico, the indigenous and those who are not indigenous, we call upon all the peoples who form this Nation; upon those who agree to struggle for housing, land, work, bread, health, education, information, culture, independence, democracy, justice, liberty and peace; to those who understand that the State-Party System is the main obstacle to a transition to democracy in Mexico; to those who know that democracy does not mean substituting those in absolute power but government of the people, for the people and by the people; for those who agree with the need to create a new Magna Carta which incorporates the principal demands of the Mexican people and the guarantees that Article 39 be complied with through plebiscites and referendums; to those who do not aspire or pretend to exercise public privileges or elected posts; to those who have the heart, the will and the wisdom on the left side of their chest; to those who want to stop being spectators and are willing to go without pay or privilege other than participation in national reconstruction; to those who want to construct something new and good, to become a part of the ZAPATISTA FRONT OF NATIONAL LIBERATION.

Those citizens without a party, those social and political organizations, those civic committees of dialogue, movements and groups, all those who do not aspire to take Power and who subscribe to this FOURTH DECLARATION OF THE LACANDON
JUNGLE commit themselves to participate in a dialogue to formulate its organic structure, its plan of action, and its declaration of principles for this ZAPATISTA FRONT OF NATIONAL LIBERATION.

Today, this January 1 of 1996, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation signs this FOURTH DECLARATION OF THE LACANDON JUNGLE. We invite all the people of Mexico to subscribe to it.

III

Brothers and Sisters::

Many words walk in the world. Many worlds are made. Many worlds are made for us. There are words and worlds which are lies and injustices. There are words and worlds which are truths and truthful. We make true words. We have been made from true words.

In the world of the powerful there is no space for anyone but themselves and their servants. In the world we want everyone fits.

In the world we want many worlds to fit. The Nation which we construct is one where all communities and languages fit, where all steps may walk, where all may have laughter, where all may live the dawn.

We speak of unity even when we are silent. Softly and gently we speak the words which find the unity which will embrace us in history and which will discard the abandonment which confronts and destroys one another.

Our word, our song and our cry, is so that the most dead will no longer die. So that we may live fighting, we may live singing.

Long live the word.
Long live Enough! 
Long live the night which becomes a soldier in order not to die in oblivion. In order to live the word dies, its seed germinating forever in the womb of the earth. By being born and living we die. We will always live. Only those who give up their history are consigned to oblivion.

We are here.
We do not surrender.
Zapata is alive, and in spite of everything, the struggle continues.

From the mountains of the Mexican Southeast.

Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos
Indigenous Clandestine Revolutionary Committee General Command of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation Mexico,
January of 1996