

PRESIDENTIAL INFLUENCE ON PUBLIC OPINION IN MEXICO

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Introduction

The institution of the presidency has played an important role throughout the history of Mexico. The greatest power of the Mexican president may be that he can influence the way citizens think about politics. The institutional power of the president and the sparse political landscape (devoid of rivals) places the president at the forefront not only of Mexican politics, but also in the minds of Mexico's citizens. This paper seeks to analyze the primacy of the president in Mexico with regard to the shaping of public opinion.

The strength of the Mexican president has been established by many researchers who attribute his power to both the constitution and the dominance of the PRI. This power establishes the president as the primary political figure in Mexico vis-a-vis the legislature and political parties. However, these institutional studies fail to relate the power of the president to the behavior of the citizenry. This analysis will extend previous work on the Mexican presidency to show that the president also has the power to affect political opinions. The salience of the Mexican president in politics, the credibility of the president's message, and the accessibility of his cues enable the president to influence public opinion. Though these factors are grounded in the institutional power of the president, current research in political and social cognition explain how they are translated into political issue positions within the public.

Recent research in the study of attitude formation in Mexico has focused primarily on attitudes toward economic reform and other economic issues (Kaufman and Zuckermann 1998). The findings in Kaufmann and Zuckermann (1998) research indicate that the political institutions of the party and the president play important roles in shaping the public's opinion toward economic reform. This paper extends the research of Kaufmann and Zuckermann to show that the president's role in shaping public opinion is not unique to the economic realm. Rather, the importance of the president extends from his institutional role and powers, and influences a variety of issue domains.

Much of this paper discusses the historical features of the Mexican political system, and the empirical analysis is based on the Salinas administration. However, the Mexican political arena has undergone significant changes recently, particularly concerning the power of the presidency. In later sections, I will discuss the findings in light of these changes and the applicability of these findings to future research. Finally, I will conclude with hypotheses and suggestions for further study.

The Formal Presidential Powers

Previous studies of the Mexican presidency have attempted to define the power conferred upon the president, both formal and informal. The formal powers of the presidency are enumerated in the constitution. Luis Javier Garrido (1989) explains the scope of the formal presidential powers:

Presidential authority in matters of politics, legislation, foreign relations, jurisdiction, economics, finance, agriculture, commerce, health, education, and expropriation was enhanced further over the following decades, and to it were joined additional powers in the areas of labor, the economy, the treasury, administration, culture, elections, the government of the Federal District, and the decentralized agencies and parastatal industries.

Like many other Latin American presidents, the Mexican president has the ability to appoint his cabinet without any restriction. Though the president is not endowed with the power of decree, he can call for a suspension of the constitution, which, with the approval of the legislature, allows him to rule unilaterally. Mainwaring and Shugart (1997) show that the constitutional powers of the president in Mexico are not extraordinary within the region. Other presidents in Latin America can initiate legislation and appoint cabinet members without restraint. However, the formal powers of the legislature and the judicial system are designed to provide checks on the presidential power. The congress has the power to veto presidential initiatives, impeach the president, and vote against constitutional amendments. The judiciary, likewise, can rule

presidential actions unconstitutional. However, the informal powers of the president allow him to circumvent the formal system of checks and balances. The hegemony of the ruling party and the informal powers accorded to the president make anti-presidential actions by these branches a costly maneuver. Therefore, the legislature and judiciary are rendered impotent political institutions.

The Informal Presidential Powers

In addition to his formal powers, the president enjoys a wide range of informal powers that are a product of the president's role as party leader in a one party dominant system. The informal powers of the president broaden the scope of his power even further. As head of his party, the president has a great deal of control over party leadership. Because his party is the dominant party of Mexico, the power to control party leaders is in fact the ability to control entire political institutions. Garrido (1987) describes these as metaconstitutional powers. These powers give the president the ability to make constitutional amendments; designate his successor; and designate and remove most other governing officials including governors and state legislators. The informal powers of the president depend largely upon the relationship with his political party. Only the combination of constitutional power and party power vested in a single individual has the potential to produce the powerful Mexican president (Weldon 1997). Hence a discussion of the Mexican party system is important.

The President and the Party System

The Mexican party system has primarily consisted of a single dominant political party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). While there have been opposition parties, until the 1980's none have occupied significant government posts. As a result, the PRI has held the presidency, a majority of the legislature from its inception until 1997, and the required two-thirds majority for a constitutional amendment until 1988.

Clearly, the existence of a unified government for such a long period has enhanced the formal and informal powers of the president. Weldon (1997) explains that the control of the presidency and both chambers of Congress by a single party is key to the president's power. Only under these conditions can the president instill party loyalty and dominate the legislative branch.

However, unified government has the possibility of extending the prestige of the legislature as well. If party leadership exists independent of the presidency, the legislature can assert itself and force the compliance of the president to its whims. The congress can use the formal tools provided by the constitution (voting down presidential initiative, overriding presidential vetoes) to strengthen its power. Therefore, unified government does not explain the imbalance of power between the legislature and the president. The key variable, instead, is the locus of party power, which resides in the presidency.

Weldon (1997) describes the complex relationship between the dominant party and the president. Until the Cardenas administration (1934-1940), the head of the dominant party shared power with the president, though the party head was independent of the presidency (the exception is Obregon who occupied both positions from 1920 to 1924). The party leader organized Congress and could check the power of the president. Cardenas, with the help of congress, was able to depose the party leader and assume that role. Subsequent presidents have continued to act as party head.

The role of the president within the PRI provides an explanation for the strength of the president's informal power, which are generally exercised at the expense of legislative and state powers. As head of the PRI, the president can determine who will be on the party's ballot. In effect, the PRI has a closed party list. While nominating conventions are held for some posts, they generally ratify party leadership decisions. The head of the party has the power to choose which candidate names appear on the ballot with the PRI party label (Cornelius and Craig 1991).

Within a dominant party system, this is tantamount to appointing people to office. Furthermore,

the president can also remove party officials from elected office by declaring the election void or by appointing officials to different administrative offices. The non-consecutive term limit for congress makes legislators dependent upon the president and party for future appointed offices in subsequent administrations to continue their political careers. Therefore, party members have greater incentives to be responsive to presidential callings than to constituencies. This is true even at the local level. Federal funding to localities comprises most of local and state budgets. These funds are at the discretion of the president. Therefore even local officials are held in check by the office of the president. (Weldon 1997)

These powers not only induce party loyalty, they serve to eliminate potential individual intra-party rivals. The ability to depose or demote political officials enables the president to remove leaders who are gaining strong political bases and may be a political threat. Further, the ability to determine the party's future presidential candidate (and therefore his successor) is also the ability to not choose aspirants who openly campaign for the position (undermining the authority of the president). Clearly, within the PRI, the president emerges as the dominant figure.

The nature of the Mexican political party system also works against political rivals from other parties. The dominance of the PRI has been self-perpetuating. Because the party has held most political offices, elites choose to support the party that is capable of putting them into office. As a result, viable candidates seldom challenge the PRI. Opposition groups have also realized that working with the PRI is often the best way to political power. The same factors that induce cohesion within the party make it difficult for non-PRI officials to operate. Often termed the "loyal opposition" (Von Sauer 1974), the PAN has been successful in winning local elections. After winning a number of national legislative positions in 1988, the PAN choose to support the PRI on a number of important measures, including giving the president the necessary number of votes for key constitutional amendments. While the president has less power over non-PRI officials, opposition to the president from outside the party continues to be difficult. The most successful

attempt at opposition at the presidential level has come from Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, son of former president Lazaro Cardenas. Cardenas led an opposition movement within the party (called the Democratic Current) and eventually left the PRI to form his own party, taking with him a small faction of the PRI. In 1988, Cardenas mounted the most successful opposition presidential campaign ever, nearly winning a majority in an election marred by fraud. Following the 1988 campaign, Cardenas regrouped factions of his electoral coalition party to form the PRD, but has been unable to match his 1988 high water mark.

The president's power, embedded in both the constitution and the party system, establishes him as an important political figure and indicates that the president can influence other institutions and elite behavior by altering the incentive structure. The influence of the president on the public may be subtler. The president may play a more persuasive role in the public. A key aspect of this analysis is individual opinions and how they are formed. The field of political psychology provides the tools to analyze the relationship between the institution of the presidency and public opinion in Mexico.

Sources of Political Issue Positions

A large area within the field of political science (primarily in American politics) is devoted to public opinion research and the relationship between public opinion and political behavior. Early conceptions of the American voter expected rational thought about issues and coherent issue structures. Yet, repeated studies beginning with Converse (1966) have found that issue positions of the American electorate are not very coherent and not based on ideology. Dominguez and McCann (1994, 1996) confirm this in the Mexican case, showing that voters do not exhibit ideological constraints in issue positions, and that issue positions do not structure vote choice. In response to these findings, researchers have begun looking for the sources of public opinion and the causes of political behavior beyond these traditional approaches.

One innovation in the study of public opinion is the conception of political attitudes as endogenous to the political system. It is possible that individuals' opinions are formed, in part by political actors (Brody and Page 1972; Page and Jones 1979; Zaller 1992; Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock 1991). These political elites have the ability to frame issues and persuade the public through cues. Impressions of political actors may serve to guide the issue positions of the public. What Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock (1991) refer to as a "likeability heuristic".

Persuasion effects are grounded in both social cognition theory and in consistency theory. Within the latter, individuals are motivated to "balance" their attitudes to avoid the negative feelings of inconsistency. In social cognition theory, (specifically the heuristic-systemic processing model) individuals are persuaded by messages because it is easier to use information shortcuts than to engage in systematic evaluation of the message (Fiske and Taylor 1991). Factors that can influence persuasion are the communicator, the message, and the audience.

There are a number of factors, embedded in the institutional power of the president that may establish him as critical cue giver. First, the president is the most salient political figure in Mexico. Second, the president may be the most credible communicator. And third, the president's message may be the most accessible.

As discussed before, the president stands alone among political elites in Mexico. He has an incredible amount of political power. The president may therefore be the natural person to look to for political cues. Because of his political power, particularly the power to enact his agenda, the president may also be the most credible communicator. Any discussion of the party agenda or of the national agenda from outside of the presidency may be seen as non-credible since only the president can make such broad changes in either. Finally, the message of the president may be the most obvious choice to many because it is easily accessible. The president and major media outlets are notoriously close. Much of the national coverage of the president, especially in prime time

television news, is extremely favorable. Competing opposition elites, even during election time, are given less favorable time slots and coverage. The result is heavy coverage of a single elite.

Presidential Influence on Public Opinion – An Empirical Analysis

The attention given the president and the domination of the PRI has not produced an electorate that gives unconditional support to president. Rather, for the citizens of Mexico, the president becomes the focus of both support and opposition. Therefore, in an empirical analysis, one would expect to see that evaluations of the president would be more strongly associated with political issue positions than would evaluations of other political institutions, namely the PRI. The influence of persuasion is expected to be seen in the following manner. If an individual approves of the cue giver, then he will respond positively to the cue giver's message (an issue position). If, however, the evaluation of the cue giver is negative, then the individual will respond negatively to the issue position. The following models provide some support for this hypothesis. In these four models the independent variables are evaluation of the president (PRES) and evaluation of the PRI (PRI). Included in each model are control variables for sex (SEX), age (AGE), education (EDUC), income (INCOME), union membership (UNION), and population of residence (POP). The dependent variables of the first two models are economic issue positions: NAFTA (NAFTA), and privatization of government enterprises (PRIV). The dependent variable of the third model is evaluation of the level of democracy (DEMO). The last dependent variable is an evaluation of an opposition party leader Cardenas (CARD). Question wording and coding of variables are located in the appendix.

The data used in this empirical test is the Los Angeles Times poll conducted in 1991. This data was chosen because it allows an analysis of the president during his term in office. In 1991, Salinas had been in office three years thus allowing him to establish himself in the presidency. This data set provides both evaluations of the president and public opinion on issue positions. Other

available data (1994) is primarily focused on the presidential election, either immediately prior to or after. Therefore the 1991 data is most appropriate.

Table 1 shows both the standardized and unstandardized beta coefficients from an OLS regression for each model. While both evaluations of the president and party are significant at p values of less than .05, and in the expected direction, the coefficients for presidential evaluations are consistently higher. These models show that the association between presidential evaluations and issue positions is greater than that between party evaluation and issue positions. The more favorable one's opinion toward the president, the more favorable one is toward NAFTA and privatization. Likewise, the greater the support for the president, the more likely one is to feel that the country has become more democratic and are less likely to support an opposition leader. Socio-economic variables play an important role in the formation of attitudes toward issue positions, particularly education and income which are significant for all models except for DEMO. The models each explain between eleven and twenty-two percent of the variance (R-squared). While this is not extremely high, the models are not designed to explain the entire basis of public opinion. Rather, they are simply testing the hypothesis that the president influences public opinion more than the dominant political party. Furthermore, the relationship is shown to be consistent across several issues.

The Changing Presidency

The Mexican political system has undergone substantial changes in the past ten years. The role of the president has been among those changes. The increasing competitiveness of political parties, and the decentralization of political power have changed the powers of the president. Political support for opposition parties in the 1988, 1991, 1994, and 1997 elections has changed the makeup of the national legislature and state governments. As a result of the 1997 election, the PRI has lost its majority in the legislature. While Salinas was able to build coalitions after 1988,

the PRI still enjoyed a large majority in the legislature. Now, however, the power of the presidency vis-à-vis the legislature is uncertain.

Additionally, decentralization of political power also has the potential to directly threaten the primacy of the president. Most notable is the popular election of mayor of the Federal District. Last year (1997), for the first time, the mayor of the Federal District is of an opposition party. The first elected mayor, C. Cardenas, is perceived by many to be the most promising presidential candidate for 2000. While Cardenas is not a new rival for the PRI, his expanding power base will not be as easily controlled by the president with so many of Cardenas' party members in Congress.

Further decentralization of formal presidential powers include the establishment of an independent electoral commission. With such a commission, the president is no longer the arbiter of electoral disputes. In the past, the office of the president was charged with mediating disputes over electoral matters. The president could declare an election void and call new elections. Now, however, the commission removes the president and party system from this process.

Increasing pressure within the PRI may also decentralize party power. There is support within the party to open the party lists to more grass roots input. That is, nominating conventions may have more influence on party ballots than in the past. The power of the president to enforce party loyalties may be reduced as political candidates will be forced to be more responsive to the public than to the president. This may also produce political rivals to the president within the party.

The changes to the presidential power in Mexico are a result of a culmination of factors. The informal powers of the president may be challenged by both the changing composition of the national and state legislatures, and the changing power structure within the party. Both of these may produce political rivals to the president. The formal powers of the president have also changed. The decentralization of political power from the national level to state and local levels may also produce not only institutional or intra-party rival, but, as shown in the case of Cardenas,

opposition party rivals. All of these factors may combine to have the effect of a further diminution of power vis-à-vis other parties and the legislature.

Conclusion

The president in Mexico is able to use his formal and informal powers to dominate other political actors within the party, within the legislature, and across other parties. This institutional power establishes the president as the single dominant elite within Mexican politics. By virtue of this distinction, the president has the power to influence public opinion. Individuals look for cues and messages in the political world to make sense of political information. Rather than systematically processing information, citizens use short-cuts. One such short-cut is to look to the information that political elites provide. The empirical analysis of this paper provides support for the hypothesis that it is to the president that the public looks for political cues.

The changing presidential role in Mexican politics suggests that this relationship may be attenuated. As the political system becomes more competitive or as other elites become more prominent, the public may choose to take its cues from the parties or from local and state elites. Thus, further research on this matter is necessary to determine whether this finding is unique, or has changed with the presidency. The expected findings of such research might be an attenuated relationship, with party becoming the critical cue giver in the political arena. However, if socialization and practice has an influence on the way that individuals process information, the effects of the changing presidency may not be readily apparent. The public may be accustomed to focusing on the president for cues and continue to do so until the president is discredited as a source, or a fundamental change in the political system occurs (such as a non-PRI president).

Additional reasons for furthering this research are to confirm the relationship between presidential influence and public opinion in more issue domains and extend the analysis to other institutional arrangements. The lack of additional issue positions circumscribed this analysis to the

issue covered here. However, as Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock (1991); and Zaller (1992) indicate, persuasion may be more effective in some issue domains than in others. Likewise, the strength of the president varies across countries. Future research should analyze this relationship across different countries and institutional systems.

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Appendix

Sex

- 0) male
- 1) female

Age

- 1) 18-24
- 2) 25-29
- 3) 30-39
- 4) 40-49
- 5) older

Income (in 1991 pesos)

- 1) nothing
- 2) < 150,000
- 3) 150,000 - 300,000
- 4) 300,000 - 600,000
- 5) 600,000 - 1,500,000
- 6) 1,500,000 - 2,500,000
- 7) 2,500,000 - 4,000,000
- 8) more

Educ (in years)

- 1) no education
- 2) 1-6
- 3) 7-9
- 4) 10-12
- 5) 13-17
- 6) more

Union

Are you or is anyone in your family a member of a labor union or ejido?

- 0) no
- 1) yes

Pop

- 1) <10,000
- 2) 10,000 - 20,000
- 3) 20,000 - 50,000
- 4) 50,000 - 100,000
- 5) 100,000 - 250,000
- 6) 250,000 - 500,000
- 7) 500,000 - 1 million
- 8) > 1 million

PRI

What is your opinion of the PRI?

- 1) very good
- 2) good
- 3) bad
- 4) very bad

Pres

What is your opinion of the way Carlos Salinas is handling his position and his job as president of Mexico?

- 1) very good
- 2) good
- 3) bad
- 4) very bad

Demo

In general, during the last three years, has Mexico become more democratic, less democratic or hasn't it changed much?

- 1) more democratic
- 2) somewhat more democratic
- 3) no change
- 4) somewhat less democratic
- 5) less democratic

Priv

As you may know, many banks, companies and industries that were once owned by the government have been sold recently to private investors. Do you believe the sale of these government enterprises to the private sector will ultimately help, hurt, or have no effect on people like you?

- 1) help a lot
- 2) help a little
- 3) no effect
- 4) hurt a little
- 5) help a little

NAFTA

Are you in favor or opposed to the free trade agreement between Mexico and the United States, or have you not heard enough about the proposal to say?

- 1) totally favor
 - 2) somewhat favor
 - 3) somewhat oppose
 - 4) totally oppose
- not aware - coded as missing

Card

What is your opinion of Cuauhtemoc Cardenas?

- 1) very good
- 2) good
- 3) bad
- 4) very bad