

MEXICO

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PREVIEW

Mexico's value as a case lies in what it can tell us about the circumstances of politics and government in Latin America, where many countries have experienced stops and starts in their recent experiments with democracy. After a long history of political instability, followed by decades of dominance by a single political party, Mexico has evolved since the 1990s into a multi-party system, but one in which some of the traditions of the past – including corruption – continue to cause problems. Mexico has also long continued to struggle with the influence of the neighbouring United States, and has been shaken since 2006 by a violent drug war that has interfered with its ability to reform itself. It offers a good example of a flawed democracy, giving us insight into the problems that a country can face as it tries to build a more democratic and transparent system of government.

KEY ARGUMENTS

- ◆ Mexico has recently undergone a political transition towards multi-party democracy, but finds itself handicapped by its inability to throw off many old habits.
- ◆ Oil, drugs, and the proximity of the United States have proved a troubling combination in Mexico's efforts to build political and economic stability.
- ◆ Formally, Mexico is a federal republic with a presidential executive. In reality, it has many nuances that give it a distinctive political personality.
- ◆ The power of the Mexican president has declined in recent decades as party competition has grown and Congress has won new influence.
- ◆ Elections have become more competitive, and the landscape of political parties has become more diverse, and yet there are still indications of electoral malpractice.
- ◆ Corruption is an ongoing problem in Mexico, made worse by the effects of its drug war and by party factionalism.

OVERVIEW

Mexico should be one of the success stories of Latin America: it has a large population with a growing middle class, it is one of the world's leading oil producers, and a programme of democratization in the 1990s had the effect of turning it from a one-party dominant system to a diverse multi-party system (something which even the neighbouring United States cannot claim). Unfortunately, it remains handicapped by a host of problems. As well as endemic corruption, a weak record on human rights, and widespread poverty, it has also been shaken since 2006 by a turf war among Mexican drug cartels that has taken tens of thousands of lives. The effects of the political reforms have been less than hoped for, and Freedom House – after upgrading Mexico in 2001 from Partly Free to Free – downgraded it in 2011 to Partly Free, with a ranking of Not Free on matters of press freedom. Meanwhile, it is ranked in the Democracy Index as a flawed democracy.

In political terms, Mexico is a federal republic with a limited presidential executive and a separately elected bicameral legislature. It also has several distinctive political features: Mexican presidents, for example, have more power than their US counterparts and the political system is one of the more heavily centralized examples of federalism. This has left political scientists undecided about how best to describe Mexico. Some call it authoritarian, while others pepper their analyses with terms such as *bureaucratic*, *elitist*, and *patrimonial*. Reforms have weakened the grip of such traditions, but some worry that the process of change has become stalled (see Tuckman, 2012). It is telling that the subtitle of a well-known textbook on Mexican politics (Camp, 2013) has changed over the course of recent editions from *Decline of Authoritarianism* (1999) to *The Democratic Transformation* (2002), *The Democratic Consolidation* (2006), and *Democratic Consolidation or Decline?* (2013).

In economic terms, Mexico is one of the 15 biggest economies in the world, with export-led growth, a service-based economy, and a rapidly developing industrial base, but it has often-startling economic and social paradoxes. It is common to hear talk of two Mexicos: one wealthy, urban, and modern and the other poor, rural, and traditional. One in ten Mexicans is illiterate, yet one in six goes on to higher education (a figure comparable to that of many wealthy democracies). Mexico City is a nightmare of congestion, yet it has an extensive subway that carries as many passengers every day as the New York City subway. Within sight of urban slums with open sewers you might see smartly dressed investment brokers driving to work in bullet-proof air-conditioned luxury cars, using mobile phones to close a deal or make a restaurant reservation.

In social terms, Mexico has few serious religious or ethnic problems. More than 90 per cent of Mexicans are Catholic and *mestizo* (of mixed Spanish and native American blood), and only about five per cent of the population is pure native American (descendants of Mayans, Zapotecs, and Tarascans). They may be few, but they have had a greater impact on Mexican society and politics than their northern cousins have had on US society. Because native identity in Mexico has cultural rather than racial connotations, it is possible to move across cultures, and there is less direct racism or discrimination in Mexico than in the United States (although racism certainly exists). But, also like their US cousins, native and African-descended Mexicans are poorer and more politically marginalized than *mestizos* and European-descended people. Their problems have been deepest in several poorer southern states, where poverty has occasionally spilled over into violence, emphasizing the economic gaps between rich and poor in Mexico.

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

Unlike either the United States or Canada – which come mainly out of the European tradition and where early colonists did not try to integrate with natives but destroyed them or pushed them aside and seized their land – Mexico is a product both of its European and of its native American heritage. It is, as the Mexican Nobel laureate Octavio Paz (1979) once put it, a 'land of superimposed pasts' and continues today to be a melding of European and native American ideas about law, government, and society. From the 12th to the early 16th century the region was dominated by the Aztecs, who ruled from their capital at Tenochtitlán (now Mexico City) with castes of religious and military leaders and a centralized tax and court system. Despite its past, modern Mexican government is mainly a product of changes that have taken place since the arrival of the Europeans.

Spanish occupation (16th century to 1821)

The Spanish arrived in 1519 under the command of Hernán Cortés, subjugating the ruling Aztecs relatively easily. Not only did the Spaniards have better weapons but they also had horses (which the Aztecs had never seen before), and were helped by fragmentation within the Aztec empire and by the resentment of tribes under Aztec rule, who

took the opportunity to rebel. By the middle of the 16th century, all of what is now Mexico and the south-western United States had been conquered and occupied. Unlike North America, where British settlers rarely intermarried with native Americans, the mixing of Spaniards and native Americans was encouraged, creating a new *mestizo* culture—overlaid Catholicism, whose principles became embedded in political culture (Camp, 2013). The Spanish also brought diseases to which the natives had no immunity, such as measles and smallpox, as a result of which the native population was almost halved.

Independence and war (1810–48)

Partly inspired by their US neighbours, Mexican revolutionaries began agitating for independence in the early 19th century. The struggle became one between Spanish administrators (the *peninsulares*) on the one hand and *mestizos* and African- and Spanish-descended Mexicans on the other. But the Mexican independence movement was aimed not so much at promoting liberalism and equality as at preserving privilege and elitism. Independence was declared on 16 September 1810, sparking a long and bitter war with Spain (1810–21). Mexico then tried to build its own empire in Central America, but its economy was weak, and there was a power struggle between liberals calling for a democratic, federal system of government and conservatives favouring a more centralized system. Politics broke down in revolution, foreign encroachment, rigged elections, and frequent changes in leadership; in the first 50 years of independence alone, there were 30 presidents.

Mexico also suffered as a result of conflicts with the United States. In 1825 it invited Americans to settle in and develop Texas, which was then part of Mexico. By 1830, about 20,000 settlers had arrived, alarming Mexico into banning further immigration and trying to tighten its control over the new arrivals in 1835. The immigrants responded in 1836 by declaring their independence and requesting US annexation. Although General Antonio López de Santa Anna defeated the defenders of the Alamo mission in San Antonio in March, he soon afterwards



Map 9.1 Mexico's loss of territory to the United States



TIMELINE

250–900	Mayan city states flourish in far south of modern Mexico
1428–1521	Aztecs establish control over central modern Mexico
1519	Spanish occupation begins
1810	Declaration of independence
1810–21	War of independence
1836	Secession of Texas
1846–48	War with the United States leads to loss of California and other territories
1876–1911	Era of the <i>Porfiriato</i>
1913–17	Revolution and civil war
1953	Women given the right to vote
1982	Debt crisis
1994	Mexico joins North American Free Trade Agreement; suppression of guerrilla rebellion in southern state of Chiapas
1996	Political reform package unanimously passed by both houses of Congress
2000	PRI loses presidency for first time in 71 years, loses majority in Senate
2006	Government crack-down on drug cartels sparks drug war
2010	200th anniversary of Mexican independence
2012	PRI regains presidency
2017	Death toll from start of Mexican drug war reaches 240,000
2018	Morena party alliance wins presidency of Mexico, office of mayor of Mexico City, and majority in Congress

lost the battle of San Jacinto and was forced to agree to Texan independence. In 1845 the United States annexed Texas over Mexican protests, precipitating what Mexicans know as the War of the American Invasion of 1846–48, which ended with Mexico ceding half its land area (including what are now California, Arizona, and New Mexico) to the United States; see Map 9.1.

Mexico saw further threats to its independence when France, Britain, and Spain demanded reparations for losses suffered during the war. Napoleon III of France took advantage of Mexico's internal weaknesses in 1864 by declaring a French-dependent Mexican empire with Archduke Maximilian of Austria as emperor. A resistance movement overthrew and executed Maximilian in 1867, and Benito Juárez became president. Many political changes were introduced, including stronger civil liberties, regular elections, reductions in the powers of the church, and expanded public education. While Juárez remains the country's most beloved president, these changes did not amount to a new liberal order, and in 1877 the military government of José de la Cruz Porfirio Díaz came to power.

The *Porfiriato* (1877–1910)

Porfirio Díaz dominated Mexican politics for 35 years, serving as president for all but one four-year term (1880–84). During the era that came to be known as the *porfiriato* (see Edmonds-Poli and Shirk, 2015), Mexico enjoyed political stability and economic expansion. National income, foreign investment, and trade all grew; the railways were expanded; and new tracts of land were opened to settlers. But economic gains came at the cost of political freedom: Díaz ended free elections, curtailed freedom of speech and the press, put down dissent in the rural areas, ignored the separation of powers and states' rights, and tried to suppress native American culture. Elections were held, but the results were rigged. Large landholders became wealthy, but the middle classes were excluded from power, peasants lost their land, and most Mexicans remained illiterate. When Díaz announced that he would step down in 1910 and then changed his mind, a rebellion broke out, and Díaz resigned and went into exile in 1911.

Revolution and civil war (1910–17)

The **Mexican Revolution** is often described as one of the first great social revolutions of the 20th century, predating both its Russian and Chinese equivalents. But while Russian revolutionaries claimed that they wanted to end inequalities and spread political and social justice, those in Mexico proved to be mainly interested in creating opportunities for themselves and reducing the power and influence of foreign capitalists. The first revolutionary leader of Mexico was Francisco Madero, a member of a wealthy landowning family. Although he restored freedom of the press and individual property rights, he allowed many officials from the Díaz era to stay in office and ultimately failed to win over the peasants. In 1913 he was murdered in a US-sponsored coup led by the brutal and corrupt Victoriano Huerta. A violent civil war broke out, with three competing groups ranged against Huerta: a peasant army led by Emiliano Zapata, an army of workers and cattlemen led by Francisco ‘Pancho’ Villa, and a group of ranchers and businessmen led by Venustiano Carranza. More than a million people died during the course of the war, Carranza emerged victorious by 1915, and Villa and Zapata were both later assassinated.

In 1917 a new constitution was drawn up that has been the basis of Mexican government ever since. Radical and progressive, it included many core democratic ideals, such as religious freedom, and freedom of the press, of speech, and of peaceful assembly. It went further, though, in outlining a right to universal public education, rights for workers, state control over natural resources, and the power of the federal government to redistribute land. Many Mexicans have long argued that the goals of the revolution have not yet been met, pointing to the remaining authoritarian qualities of Mexican politics, the number of people still living in poverty, the political and economic disadvantages faced by women, the unequal distribution of land, and concerns about Mexico’s economic independence.

Stabilizing the revolution (1924–40)

Of the early post-revolutionary presidents, two in particular made key contributions to Mexico’s political development. The first was Plutarco Elías Calles (1924–28), who in 1929 created the National Revolutionary Party as a way of quelling opposition, preventing armed insurgencies, and perpetuating his political influence. Its name was changed in 1945 to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (producing, in Spanish, the acronym PRI, pronounced ‘pree’), and it went on to govern Mexico for the rest of the century. Even more influential was Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–40), the most left-wing of Mexico’s presidents. He redistributed more land than his seven predecessors combined, supported labour unions, and – most important – launched a programme of economic nationalization. Concerned at the extent to which Mexican companies were controlled by foreigners, particularly British and US investors, he brought several industries under state control (compensating the affected corporations) and in 1938 created the state oil corporation, today called *Petróleos Mexicanos* (or **Pemex**). For all these changes – aimed at economic and political equality and stability, and at asserting Mexican independence – Cárdenas remains the most revered of Mexico’s post-revolutionary presidents.

The oil crisis and its implications (1976–94)

Mexico’s political development paved the way for economic growth in the 1960s and 1970s, but underlying structural problems began to make themselves felt. Falling agricultural exports indicated a loss of competitiveness, leading in turn to middle class discontent. The government clamped down, killing and torturing dissidents, and when students used the media spotlight provided by the 1968 Mexico City summer Olympics to demand political liberalization, as many as 500 were killed by the army, sparking political crisis.

To make matters worse, Mexico’s economy was in trouble. The discovery of vast new oil reserves in the 1960s and 1970s encouraged the government to make heavy investments in transport, industry, communications, health care, and education. However, high spending brought inflation and when the price of oil began to fall, Mexico borrowed to cover its spending, building a large national debt. Chastened, the government began a shift away from centralized economic management to a more open and competitive free-market system. The fragility of Mexico’s economic situation was emphasized by the collapse of the peso in 1994, prompting an international rescue package of loan guarantees to again help Mexico avoid defaulting on its debt. In that same year, Mexico joined in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with the United States and Canada.

The fragility of Mexico’s political situation, meanwhile, was emphasized by unrest in the poor southern states of **Chiapas**, Oaxaca, and Guerrero. Complaining about being cheated out of their land and being denied basic services, and feeling the effects of falling coffee prices, peasants in Chiapas rebelled in January 1994 (see

Oppenheimer, 1998, and Preston and Dillon, 2004). Troops were despatched to put down the rebellion, resulting in more than 150 deaths, and while a peace agreement was eventually signed, the military presence continued. Even more worryingly, drug trafficking was growing in response to demand in the United States, and made more difficult to control by police and political corruption, which in turn harmed US–Mexican relations.

Democratization takes hold (1990s–early 2000s)

The changing character of Mexican society and the rise of an urban middle class made it more difficult for PRI administrations to resist demands for greater democracy. A series of electoral reforms was made, which encouraged the rise of opposition parties and gave them more seats in the national Congress. The share of the PRI vote fell steadily as the governing party lost the support of unions and of a middle class hurt by Mexico's worsening economic problems. In 1997, PRI lost its majority in the lower chamber of Congress (the Chamber of Deputies) for the first time since 1929, and in 2000 lost its majority in the Senate and – most remarkable of all – lost the presidency of Mexico. The new president, Vicente Fox, came from the opposition National Action Party (PAN), and promised fiscal reform, sustainable economic growth, more social spending, political decentralization, and a more assertive foreign policy. He found, though, that reforming the system was more difficult than he had anticipated, thanks to the persistence of entrenched political and economic interests.

Questions remained about the extent to which Mexico had changed. In 2006, the candidate of PAN, Felipe Calderón, won a bitterly contested presidential election over his liberal opponent Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). The margin of victory was barely 250,000 votes, leading to charges by the opposition of vote rigging. It took a court decision to confirm Calderón in office, and his agenda reflected the many problems that Mexico continued to face: he launched a programme to create new jobs so as to stem the flow of migration to the United States; launched an anti-poverty drive aimed at Mexico's poorest urban areas; and promised to address the problems of corruption, violent crime, and tax evasion. He also made the fight against Mexico's drug gangs a priority, as a result of which a bitter and violent **drug war** broke out that caused a dramatic increase in homicides. From 2006 to the end of 2017 there were more than 240,000 murders, raising troubling questions about the underlying stability of Mexico's political reforms.

Mexico today

Mexico has undergone a major political and economic transformation in the last three decades. On the political front, it launched a series of changes that moved it in the direction of a multi-party democracy, taking powers away from the executive. However, one of the results has been occasional gridlock, with much-needed tax, energy, and labour reforms falling prey to partisan bickering. On the economic front, the state has retreated from the marketplace in the wake of an extensive programme of privatization, under which inefficient state-owned monopolies have been replaced by more competitive privately owned businesses better placed to take on international competition. The Mexican marketplace, however, remains far from open, and continues to fail to create as many well-paying jobs as it needs.

Mexico is not yet a full democracy. Its political institutions have not developed the necessary consistency and predictability, there is still much to be done to improve the quality of life for its people (especially those living in rural areas), corruption is still a problem in government and public services, public safety is not all it should be, and Mexico's record on human rights and media freedom needs improvement.

Finally, no assessment of Mexico can ignore the way it is influenced by – and influences – the United States, with which it shares a 3,000km land border. Few pairs of neighbouring countries anywhere in the world have such a closely intertwined relationship, summarized in the famous quip by Mexican dictator Porfirio Díaz: 'Poor Mexico. So far from God and so close to the United States.' The two have a long and troubled history, and the relationship today is political, economic, cultural, and personal in nature, leading Selee (2018) to describe it as more like a seam than a barrier. Americans worry about migration and drug imports from Mexico and other countries in Latin America, prompting Donald Trump to promise the building of a border wall. At the same time, the United States relies heavily on seasonal labour from Mexico, from which it also imports much of its oil and many agricultural products. Hispanics make up the largest ethnic minority in the United States, which is also home to an estimated 13 million undocumented migrants from south of the border. What one country does has long mattered to – and affected – the other.



A stretch of the border wall separating Mexico from the United States. The relationship between the two countries has long been both important and troubled, with significant political, economic, and social implications for them both.

Source: [iStock.com/Rex_Wholster](https://www.istock.com/Rex_Wholster).

POLITICAL CULTURE

It was once said that while North American political culture is driven by the values of John Locke and liberalism (see Chapter 3), Latin American political culture is ‘elitist, hierarchical, authoritarian, corporatist, and patrimonialist’ (Wiarda and Kline, 1990). Thanks to the rising demand for political modernization in the wake of economic modernization, Mexican political culture has become a mix of the old and the new. At its heart is the idea of the unfinished revolution: while Americans tend to focus on the future, Mexicans hark back to the past, to missed opportunities and unfulfilled dreams. Revolutionary principles and national aspirations are perpetuated by the myths built around heroes as varied as Cuauhtémoc (nephew of the Aztec emperor Moctezuma and leader of the opposition to the Spanish conquistadors) and Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, the priest who declared Mexico’s independence, and was executed for treason.

The contradictions are reflected in the hierarchical and elitist nature of Mexican society, based in part on the influence of the Catholic Church. Spanish Catholicism was based on the idea that political authority emanated from God, and all lower levels of society had progressively less power and status. Mexican society is still class-based, with real power held by an elite whose attitudes remain paternalistic and authoritarian. The elite was once made up almost exclusively of the military; today it consists mainly of technocrats and of the entrepreneurs who have benefited most from privatization. The new wealth of Mexico’s elite was illustrated in 2007 when the *Forbes* list of the world’s wealthiest people declared that Carlos Slim – a businessman with extensive holdings in telecommunications – had overtaken Bill Gates to become the world’s wealthiest person. (He had slipped to number 7 on the list by 2018.)

One explanation for the failure of democracy fully to take hold in Mexico can be found in the persistence of corporatism – see Comparing Political Culture 9. Another and related explanation can be found in the phenomenon of the *camarilla*: a group of people who have political interests in common and rely on one another for political advancement. Each has a single leader or mentor at its core, as a result of which personalities become more important

than ideology or policies in determining political behaviour, and power revolves around patron–client relationships, with followers providing support in return for political favours. Political careers often depend heavily on ‘old-boy networks’, which contribute to the corruption that is a common feature of Mexican politics. (Compare this with similar networks in Japan and Nigeria.)

The foundation of that corruption lies in the tradition of elitism and political centralization that provides tempting opportunities for the misuse of power for personal gain. The complexity of regulations and laws combines with the inefficiency of the bureaucracy to make many people conclude that it is cheaper to bribe than to be honest; less scrupulous police and junior officials make matters worse by sometimes demanding *una mordida* (a bite) to take care of business. The extent of the problem is difficult to measure because it usually involves influence peddling and the trading of favours rather than open bribery or embezzlement, but it persists in government, the bureaucracy, labour unions, and the police, hampering Mexico’s efforts to become a successful democracy. As a result, Mexico has fallen steadily down the ranking of countries in the Corruption Perceptions Index: from 72nd in 2007, to 98th in 2010, to 135th in 2017.

Yet another explanation for the problems of democracy in Mexico lies in the persistence of *machismo* (assertive masculinity). It expresses itself most obviously in the political marginalization of women, who won the right to vote only in 1953 and still rarely move into positions of authority within government. In 2006 a new federal post of special prosecutor was created to address the problem of violent crime against women, which had been highlighted by the unsolved murders over a period of 12 years of more than 300 women in the city of Ciudad Juarez. *Machismo* can also be seen more broadly in political violence, such as demonstrations, riots, kidnappings, political assassinations, and the drug war.

The stakes in the drug trade are substantial, involving billions of dollars in profits from exports to the United States, and the extent of the violence involved has been remarkable. In some small towns in northern Mexico, entire police departments have resigned and drug gangs rule the streets. Gun battles have broken out between gangs



COMPARING POLITICAL CULTURE 9

Corporatism

Mexico offers an example of a phenomenon often found in several Latin American and European societies: **corporatism**. A corporatist state is one in which groups representing major social and economic interests are incorporated by government, and are given privileged official positions, access to government, and permission to bargain with the government on public policies, in return for which their members must respect and support the policies agreed on. It traces its origins to the Catholic Church in Europe, the term deriving from the Latin word *corpus* (meaning ‘the body’), and describing efforts made by the church to coordinate civic groups and unions that were not formally part of the church (Edmonds-Poli and Shirk, 2015).

Corporatism

An arrangement by which groups in society are incorporated into the system of government.

The effect is to create a system that is based on patronage and that works against political or economic liberalism. In the Mexican case, the most important groups are workers, peasants, and the ‘popular’ sector (mainly the middle classes, small businesspeople, government employees, and the professions). But the signs of corporatism in Mexico are fading: economic changes have opened up the Mexican marketplace, and democratic changes have coupled with improved education to make Mexicans more difficult to manipulate. The result has been a move toward the pluralist ideas associated with liberal democracy.

Corporatism is also found in other parts of the world, with similar effects. In several continental European countries, for example, including Austria, the Netherlands, and the Scandinavian states, there has been a tradition of business and labour working closely with government to negotiate wage increases, tax rates, and social security benefits. Industrial associations and labour unions have been particularly active in this, reaching agreements with government and undertaking to ensure the compliance of their members. The effects have weakened in recent years as union membership has fallen and free-market thinking has strengthened, but corporatist thinking has not entirely gone away.



PROFILE MEXICO



Name	United Mexican States (Estados Unidos Mexicanos)	
Capital	Mexico City	
Administration	Federal republic, with 31 states and the Federal District of Mexico City.	
Constitution	State formed 1821, and most recent constitution adopted 1917.	
Executive	Limited presidential. A president is elected for a single six-year term, and there is no vice president.	
Legislature	Bicameral Congress of the Union: lower Chamber of Deputies (500 members) elected for three-year terms, and upper Senate (128 members) elected for six-year terms. Members may not serve consecutive terms.	
Judiciary	Supreme Court of 11 members nominated for single 15-year terms by the president and confirmed by the Senate.	
Electoral system	A simple plurality vote determines the presidency, while a mixed-member system is used for the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate: 300 single-member plurality (SMP) seats and 200 proportional representation seats in the Chamber, and a combination of SMP, first minority, and at-large seats in the Senate.	
Party system	Multi-party. Mexico was long a one-party system, but democratic reforms since the 1990s have broadened the field such that three major parties now compete at the national and state level, with a cluster of smaller parties.	



Population



Gross Domestic Product



Per capita GDP

- ✗ Full Democracy
- ✓ Flawed Democracy
- ✗ Hybrid Regime
- ✗ Authoritarian
- ✗ Not Rated

Democracy Index rating

- ✗ Free
- ✓ Partly Free
- ✗ Not Free
- ✗ Not Rated

Freedom House rating

- ✗ Very High
- ✓ High
- ✗ Medium
- ✗ Low
- ✗ Not Rated

Human Development Index rating

fighting over turf, and the gangs have taken on the police and the army, occasionally using grenade launchers and automatic weapons, and typically ignoring any members of the public (including children) who become caught in the crossfire.

POLITICAL SYSTEM

Superficially, the Mexican political system looks much like that of many other federal republics with presidential executives: it has an elected president, a bicameral legislature, an independent judiciary, a system of checks and balances, competing political parties, and states with their own powers and elected local governments. Like most political systems, though, the Mexican system has several features that make it distinctive:

- ◆ The presidency is a powerful office, with Congress and the judiciary playing mainly supporting roles. As well as serving a single six-year term, which removes the need to worry about re-election and changes the way that incumbents think about public opinion, the president also has wide-ranging control over appointments to key positions in government, can – like Russian presidents – issue decrees and declare states of emergency, and has substantial powers of patronage.
- ◆ The Mexican federal model involves a high degree of centralization of power. This is partly due to the constitution, which gives the federal government opportunities to intervene in the affairs of Mexico's 31 states, and partly due to economic and political realities: Mexico City is so big and dominant that its influence over national affairs far outstrips that of most other federal capitals in the world, with the exception of Moscow.

To be sure, the degree of centralization has declined in recent decades. The end of PRI's monopoly meant that presidents could no longer appoint their successors as they once did, and can no longer control government as actively as they once did through patronage and through managing the electoral process. There is now multi-party competition in Mexico, elections are more honest and competitive, the checks and balances between president and legislature are more meaningful, and power has been redistributed to a broader base.

Not all, however, is as it seems, and Tuckman (2012) takes a particularly bleak view of the opportunities that Mexico has missed. If defined in the narrow sense of having free and fair elections, she argues, Mexican democracy is solid. However, if defined in the broader sense of there being systematic means by which citizens can hold elected representatives accountable, then democracy has not yet been achieved. The sense that something has gone 'terribly wrong', she observes, reflects the problem of 'weak and malleable state institutions at all levels – institutions that cannot cope with the tasks at hand'. Politics, she continues, is rarely about the promotion of a vision or the search for solutions to problems, and instead continues to be bogged down in 'corruption, nepotism, clientelism, ineptitude, authoritarianism, cynicism, and impunity'. Mexico's democratic transition is, at best, partial and interrupted.

The constitution

Adopted in 1917, the Mexican constitution is one of the oldest in Latin America. Its adoption marked a radical change in direction; where its predecessors had drawn heavily on the US constitution and were seen less as blueprints for government than as outlines of goals to which Mexico aspired, the 1917 constitution was grounded more firmly in the realities of Mexico. One of its core principles is **economic nationalism**, prompted by worries about the looming economic power of the United States. To protect Mexican interests, the authors of the constitution included limits on foreign investment and foreign ownership of land and other natural resources, denied anyone but Mexicans the right to own land or water resources, and – in the controversial Article 27 – vested ownership of all minerals and other underground resources in the state. Ideas like these have become difficult to defend as Mexico has had to open up its market under the pressures of globalization and free trade.

Economic nationalism
Attempts made by a country to protect its economy from foreign control by limiting access.

Another distinctive principle is the effort to make clear the gap between church and state. The constitution's effort to limit the influence of the Church and military represents a major difference between Mexico and other Latin American countries, large and small alike. Until reforms to the constitution in 1992, the church had no legal standing in Mexico, which meant that priests could not vote (although many did anyway), and it was barred from owning property or taking part in politics. This did not stop church leaders from campaigning for social justice, however; priests have long been active in defending the rights of native Mexicans, in criticizing electoral fraud, and in speaking out about the problems of poverty. During the PRI era, Mexicans frustrated with the weakness of opposition parties often turned to the church as a vehicle to express their political demands (Camp, 2013).

The Mexican constitution is not difficult to change: amendments need the support of only two-thirds of members of Congress and a majority of state legislatures. The result is that Mexican leaders will sometimes propose packages of constitutional amendments. For example, long-held criticisms of Mexico's judicial system prompted overwhelming support in 2008 for an amendment designed to provide for a more open system of trials, including a presumption of innocence until guilt is proven and a guarantee that suspects would be represented by qualified public defenders. The change followed years of criticism that Mexico had a criminal justice system marked by arbitrary detention, fabrication of evidence, unfair trials, and abuse of human rights.

The executive: president

Presidents dominate the Mexican political system, but not to the extent that they once did. During what Weldon (1997) describes as the era of hyperpresidentialism, a combination of unified government, strong party discipline, and presidential control of the ruling party meant that presidents could lead forcefully, and none ever had their legislation turned down by Congress. The powers of the office have since declined, but it is still described with the term *presidencialismo* (presidentialism) (Camp, 2013). The formal powers of the Mexican presidency in several areas go beyond those of most other presidents:

- ◆ Presidents can appoint and dismiss cabinet members, control party nominations for Congress and state governors, appoint the leadership of Congress, and appoint the heads of state-owned banks and industrial enterprises.
- ◆ They can introduce bills to Congress, and through the power of decree (the *reglamento*) can decide how a law passed by Congress is enforced.
- ◆ They command the military and have the power to declare war and to use the armed forces both for external defence and for internal security, to declare a 'state of siege', and to assume emergency powers.
- ◆ They have the power to direct foreign policy, to control and regulate foreign investment in Mexico, to control the supply of newsprint to the press and to give concessions for radio and TV channels, and even to oversee the writing and updating of primary school textbooks.

Informally, the power of appointment allows presidents to build a powerful *camarilla*, dispensing offices and influence in return for loyalty. Presidents can also exploit the aura of their office for political ends, attracting the kind of attention reserved in parliamentary systems for monarchs or non-executive presidents. This was long carried to the extreme in Mexico, where care was taken to immunize the president from criticism and to hold cabinet ministers or others in government responsible for policy failures. Now that the one-party monopoly is over, presidents are more open to criticism and to challenges from the opposition, and more often need to make use of the presidential veto.

The terms of eligibility for Mexican presidents are demanding: a candidate must be Mexican by birth, have a mother or father who is Mexican by birth, must be at least 35 years old, must have been resident in the country for at least a year prior to the election, cannot be an official in a church or religious organization, and cannot have been on active military service in the six months prior to the election. Once elected, they are limited to a single six-year term, or *sexenio*, and govern with a cabinet consisting of nearly two dozen secretaries and the Attorney General. Secretaries usually have past political experience as governors or senators, and only the Attorney General is subject to confirmation by the Senate. The cabinet meets rarely and plays only a marginal role in national politics.

All Mexican presidents so far have been men, they have come mainly from politically prominent, urban, upper-middle-class families, and – particularly in recent years – they have served apprenticeships not as *políticos* (elected officials) but as *técnicos* (government bureaucrats). For many years, they were typically graduates of the National Autonomous University (UNAM) in Mexico City, and several also attended graduate school in the United States. Vicente Fox broke the mould in several ways, having been raised in a rural part of Mexico and coming to the presidency with experience as a state governor. Calderón continued the trend, having served in the Chamber of Deputies and coming to the presidency with a background in law, while Enrique Peña Nieto was a state deputy and a state governor. Meanwhile, the current president – Andrés Manuel López Obrador (known by his initials as AMLO) – was active in state politics before rising to prominence as mayor of Mexico City. He won the presidency in 2018 at the head of Morena, a new party created in 2012.

The process by which presidents are chosen has undergone a radical overhaul in recent years. Until 2000, the PRI candidate always won, and was chosen as candidate through a secret selection process within PRI known as *dedazo*, or pointing the finger. As incumbents approached the end of their term, they would look for someone who had the qualifications needed to deal with Mexico's most pressing problems (which were usually economic) and who had the support of key political leaders, notably former presidents, party leaders, and leaders of the military,

Table 9.1 Modern presidents of Mexico

Start of term	Name	Party
1946	Miguel Alemán Valdés	PRI
1952	Adolfo Ruiz Cortines	PRI
1958	Adolfo López Mateos	PRI
1964	Gustavo Díaz Ordaz	PRI
1970	Luis Echeverría	PRI
1976	José López Portillo	PRI
1982	Miguel de la Madrid	PRI
1988	Carlos Salinas de Gortari	PRI
1994	Ernesto Zedillo	PRI
2000	Vicente Fox	PAN
2006	Felipe Calderón	PAN
2012	Enrique Peña Nieto	PRI
2018	Andrés Manuel López Obrador	Morena



Andrés Manuel López Obrador – popularly known as AMLO – waves after being sworn in as Mexico’s new president in December 2018. His victory at the head of a new political party represented a widely felt desire by Mexicans to bring an end to the country’s drug war and to address the persistent problem of corruption.

Source: Alfredo Estrella/AFP/Getty Images.

the labour movement, and the business community. The name of the successor was then made public, a party convention ratified the choice, and a national campaign was launched to build public recognition.

An attempt was made in 1988 to make the nomination process more democratic, a dissident group within PRI demanding greater openness in selecting a successor for Miguel de la Madrid. When it failed, one of its leaders – Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas – broke away from PRI and ran against Carlos Salinas, the anointed PRI candidate. Heading a coalition of parties on the left, Cárdenas officially won 31 per cent of the vote, while the right-wing National Action Party (PAN) candidate (Manuel Clouthier) won nearly 17 per cent. Although most independent estimates suggest that Cárdenas probably won, Salinas was declared the winner, but with the slimmest margin of any PRI candidate for president (50.7 per cent) and only after a lengthy delay in announcing the results, blamed on a ‘breakdown’ in the computers counting the votes (Preston and Dillon, 2004). Fulfilling a promise made soon after coming to office in 1994, President Ernesto Zedillo ordered a review of the selection process, which resulted in the replacement in 1999 of the *dedazo* system with open party primaries.

The process by which presidents are replaced, if needed, is unusual. Most presidential executives include a deputy or vice president who can take over the office in the event of the death, resignation, or impeachment of the incumbent. In Mexico, there is no vice president. Instead, if a president leaves office during the first two years of their term, Congress is transformed into an electoral college that appoints an interim president by majority vote, and elections are then organized to decide a new president to see out the remainder of the six-year term. If the president leaves office during the last four years of their term, Congress elects a substitute president to see out the remainder of the term. Neither has ever so far happened.

The legislature: Congress

Mexico’s national legislature – formally the Congress of the Union – has traditionally had little power, prestige, or influence over the president and, until recently, did little more than legitimize the actions of the president and confirm the policies of PRI. This began to change in the late 1970s as PRI altered the electoral system to give opposition parties more seats in Congress. As opposition numbers grew, and as PRI’s share of the vote fell, Congress became more openly critical of the president and won more power.

It became a major political actor as a result of the 1997 elections, when PRI lost its majority in the Chamber of Deputies for the first time. Although opposition parties were divided among themselves, PRI could no longer rely on Congress to support the programme of the president, whose grip on power began to loosen. With Vicente Fox’s victory in 2000, the role of Congress changed again; instead of rubber-stamping the president’s policies, it became the chief source of opposition. With no one party any longer winning a majority of seats in the Chamber of Deputies, presidents must now work harder to build a consensus in support of their programme and their policies.

The new dynamic was on show with the victory of the Morena party in the 2018 elections. AMLO – having brokered deals with his coalition parties and with the Green Party – won the presidency, while Morena also took the mayorship of Mexico City, the second most important position in Mexican politics. It failed to win majorities in either chamber of the Mexican Congress, however, meaning that the initial excitement about López Obrador’s victory was likely to wear off as he found himself having to work with a divided legislature: Morena held only 43 per cent of the seats in the Senate and only 38 per cent of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies, with the remainder in both cases divided among eight other parties.

Among the structural features of Congress, one in particular stands out: consecutive terms in either chamber are forbidden. This means that a new crop of legislators enters both chambers after each election, and senators and deputies must skip a term before being eligible for re-election. Members of Congress who cannot get enough of politics move alternately from one chamber to the other, and even have spells in state or local government. The ban on consecutive terms, note Edmonds-Poli and Shirk (2015), is of great historical significance to Mexicans, given the abuse of elective office during the *porfiriato*, but it creates at least two problems:

- ◆ Members of Congress have few opportunities to build extended political experience. True, this means that Mexico does not face the same problem as many other political systems of the emergence of a political class (see Chapter 8). However, a more effective balance between building experience and ensuring turnover might better be sought in limiting the number of terms legislators can serve.
- ◆ Political parties are strengthened at the expense of voters, who have little opportunity to reward or punish legislators for their job performance. Legislators instead see themselves as more responsible to parties, which control their political futures, and are more likely to reward legislators who respect party discipline.

The Mexican Congress has two chambers.

Senate (*Cámara de Senadores*)

The Senate represents the 31 states and the Federal District of Mexico City. Each is represented directly by three Senators elected using a mixed-member electoral system, and an additional 32 at-large Senators are elected from Mexico as a whole, for a total of 128. Senators serve six-year terms, but cannot serve more than one term consecutively; this means that every election produces a new line-up of Senators. Elections are held at the same time as the presidential election (a system of staggered elections was introduced in 1991 but suspended in 1993).

PRI had a monopoly of Senate seats until 1976, when the Popular Socialist Party was given a seat in return for keeping quiet about fraud in a state election. In 1988 the opposition Cárdenas Front won four Senate seats, and in 1993, electoral reforms not only increased the number of seats in the Senate from 64 to 128 but also changed the electoral process to the system used today. As a result, the 1994 elections saw 32 opposition senators elected, a number that grew to 51 in 1997, and to 68 in 2000, when PRI lost its Senate majority for the first time. By 2018, nine parties were represented in the Senate, with none holding a majority.

Chamber of Deputies (*Cámara de Diputados*)

Much like the US House of Representatives, the Chamber of Deputies represents the people rather than the states, and has many of the standard features of a law-making body, along with the sole ability to approve the federal budget. Its 500 members are elected for three-year terms using a mixed-member system. As with the Senate, PRI once had a lock on the chamber, winning as many as 85 per cent of the seats in the Chamber in the 1970s. The number of seats in the Chamber was increased in two stages to its current total of 500, and a breakthrough came in 1988 when opposition parties won enough seats to at least temporarily meet their long-held demands for a meaningful role in government, and to deny PRI the two-thirds majority needed to amend the constitution. Opposition parties went on to win majorities in 1997, 2000, and 2003, and by 2006 PRI had been reduced to the third-biggest party in the Chamber. Like the Senate, the Chamber by 2018 had members from nine parties, with none holding a majority.

The judiciary: *Supreme Court*

The Mexican judiciary long played only a supporting role in government and was more apolitical than its US counterpart. Its 25 members were hand-picked by the president, and could be removed only by the president, which had the effect of keeping the court firmly under executive control. It occasionally – and usually reluctantly – passed down decisions against the executive, but it did little to limit executive power or to control electoral fraud, and generally protected the interests of political and economic elites. However, President Zedillo launched efforts to change its role by replacing all its members in 1995, bringing the Senate into the appointment process, introducing the power of judicial review, and appointing a member of the opposition party PAN as attorney general.

The Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation has 11 members, including a president, each appointed for single 15-year terms. Members are nominated by the president and confirmed by two-thirds of the Senate, and can be removed by the Mexican president only with the approval of the Senate. The president of the court is elected by the membership of the court, and is limited to a four-year term that can be repeated, but not consecutively. Below the Supreme Court there is a system of circuit courts of appeal and district courts. The Supreme Court appoints circuit and district judges for renewable four-year terms.

While most English-speaking countries base their legal systems on English common law, Mexico uses the Roman civil law tradition. The former tends to be adversarial or accusatorial rather than inquisitorial, and relies heavily on precedent (the principle of *stare decisis*, or standing by previous decisions) while the latter is based on written codes and the written opinions of legal scholars (Avalos, 2013). One of the most important types of cases heard by Mexican federal courts is an *amparo* suit, a concept invented in Mexico and for which there is no direct equivalent elsewhere. *Amparo*, which literally means favour or protection, is designed to protect individual rights other than physical liberty (protected by the principle of *habeas corpus*), and can be used in several ways: as a defence of rights, as protection against unconstitutional laws, or to force examination of the legality of judicial decisions (Avalos, 2013).

Sub-national government

Mexico has a federal system of administration, with the country divided into 31 states and the government of Mexico City. Each state has its own constitution and judiciary, along with a governor elected for a non-renewable six-year term, a small unicameral Chamber of Deputies whose members are elected using a mixed-member plurality and PR system for non-consecutive three-year terms, and nearly 2,500 municipalities (*municipios*), which may be towns, counties, or consolidated city-county governments.

The Mexican constitution somewhat grandly declares that the states are ‘free and sovereign’ (Article 40), but this claim is much less than it seems, because the Mexican federal model is more centralized than is the case with many

other federal systems. For example, although Mexican state governments have independent powers, it has been unusual for a state government to contradict or defy a federal government decision or ruling. Also, the federal Senate has the power to remove an elected governor, whose successor may be nominated by the president and confirmed by the Senate. Because each state has its own electoral cycle, and because the *sexenios* of governors do not necessarily coincide with those of presidents, incoming presidents always inherit incumbent governors, over whom they may not have as much control as they would like. Despite this, governors are dismissed much more rarely today than they were during the turbulent 1920s and 1930s, and state governments generally have a larger measure of autonomy over their routine functions, the federal government usually intervening only in cases of extreme corruption or abuse of power.

Municipal government in Mexico is defined under the Constitution (Article 115) and has most of the standard duties associated with administration at the local level, including the provision of public services. At the same time, the growing power of local administrators has combined with their immediate exposure to the drug war and the shortage of police in Mexico to make their lives unusually dangerous. Whether it is because they have decided to take on the drug gangs, or are seen to be threatening the power of local drug lords, or because they have chosen to side with one gang over another, mayors – as well as mayoral candidates and former mayors – find themselves being the target of the gangs. Between 2010 and 2017, a total of 42 mayors were killed in Mexico, along with 61 former mayors (*The Economist*, 2018).

The other notable point about Mexican local politics is the size and influence of Mexico City. The capital is home to 9 million people, and the surrounding state of Mexico to a further 16 million, meaning that just over one in five Mexicans lives in or near the capital. One of the effects of its size has been to create inequalities in the distribution of public investment and in access to public services: the Mexico City area is the source of more than half of all federal government revenues and receives more than half of all spending on education, health, and public housing. Mexico City is also home to many in the political elite; about 40 per cent of all federal government officials are born in Mexico City.

Little surprise, then, that the position of mayor of Mexico City (strictly speaking, head of government or *Jefe de Gobierno*) is considered the second most important political office in Mexico. The position was created in 1997 after decades of resentment that the city was governed by a Head of the Federal District Department (popularly known as the ‘regent’) appointed by the president of Mexico. This had the effect of making it an extension of the federal government. Since the creation of the elected mayor, who – once again – serves a single six-year term, PRD has had a lock on the office, with both its most recent presidential candidates – Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and Andrés Manuel López Obrador – holding the position. In 2018, Claudia Sheinbaum of Morena became the first woman elected mayor of Mexico City. Only nine women have ever been elected to state governorships, including Claudia Pavolovich Arellano, elected governor of the north-western state of Sonora in 2015.

POLITICAL PROCESSES

The way in which Mexicans are represented in national politics has changed out of all recognition in recent years. PRI once manipulated the system to ensure continued control, meddled with the results of elections, adjusted the electoral system to give opposition parties enough seats in Congress to keep them cooperative but to deny them power, and was careful to incorporate any groups that might pose a threat to the status quo. In short, key political decisions were made more as a result of competition within PRI than of competition among different parties and interest groups. Elections were used less to determine who would govern than to mobilize support for those who already governed; that is, they were used to legitimize power rather than to distribute power (Camp, 2013).

Reforms to the electoral system have since allowed opposition parties to win more power. With majorities in both chambers of Congress, and their victory in the 2000, 2006, and 2018 presidential elections, those parties have now become a more important force in government, and politics has moved outside PRI to a broader public constituency. The result has been a vibrant three-party system, the centrist PRI competing for influence with the more conservative National Action Party (PAN) and the more liberal Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), the latter recently superseded by the National Regeneration Movement (Morena).

The electoral system

The process of electoral reform first moved into high gear in 1977–78, when the number of legal political parties grew from four to seven, a mixed-member plurality and PR electoral system was introduced, and a quarter of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies were effectively reserved for opposition parties (provided that they ran candidates



COMPARING GOVERNMENT 9

The government of cities

With more than half of all humans now living in towns or cities (a tipping point that was reached in 2007, according to the United Nations), urban government has taken on a new significance in our definition and understanding of what is politically important. Compared to those who live in rural areas, city-dwellers tend to be wealthier, better educated, and more active in politics, while having easier access to the resources and networks needed to be politically influential, having a wider variety of priorities and values, and acting as a major source of government revenues. (Urban life, though, comes with more than its share of transience, exposure to crime, and weakened connections to traditional networks, such as family.)

Most of the world's largest cities by population also tend to be in the world's most populous countries, notably China, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Nigeria. As a result, they exert less influence, proportionally, over the countries in which they are situated. In other cases, such as Moscow in Russia, London in the UK, Cairo in Egypt, and Tehran in Iran – a combination of history, geography, and sheer size combines to increase the reach and influence of urban government, sometimes creating an 'us and them' mentality in which those outside the capital city come to resent its dominance. This applies to some extent to Mexico City, which is further to the political left than most other parts of Mexico, and is big enough to have acted as a base for the presidential campaigns of candidates from the PRD and Morena.

Another kind of influence is brought to bear by the rise of the **global city**, or one whose wealth or role in trade and communications has grown in reach and significance such that it transcends national borders. Such cities are more likely to take a global outlook than other parts of the countries in which they are situated, perhaps leaving them with different perspectives not just from their rural neighbours but also from the residents of other cities in the country. Recent examples of this phenomenon at work include the way in which London has become a multicultural city that voted heavily in favour of Britain remaining part of the European Union in the 2016 Brexit referendum, and the way in which New York City has taken positions on immigration and climate change in direct contrast to those of the Trump administration.

Global city

A city that holds a key place within the global system via its financial, trade, communications, or manufacturing status. Examples include Dubai, London, Moscow, New York, Paris, Shanghai, and Tokyo.

in at least one-third of electoral districts). Subsequent changes included adding another 180 PR seats in the Chamber of Deputies, doubling the number of Senate seats (from 64 to 128), creating an independent Federal Electoral Institute, introducing tamperproof photo ID cards for voters, and broaching the idea of allowing expatriate Mexicans (as many as 10–15 million in all) to vote in presidential elections. Elections are now subject to such close domestic and foreign scrutiny that it has become difficult for parties to manipulate the outcome.

Political scientists initially theorized that the motive behind all these changes was to build a bipartisan system in which PRI and its main conservative opposition, PAN, became the permanent parties of government, leaving the left-wing Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) marginalized (Alcocer, 1995). PAN proved less willing to cooperate than PRI had hoped, however, and the PRD did better than expected in elections, creating a fluid situation. The PRI hegemony is clearly long gone, Mexican elections are fairer than they have ever been, and voter interest has been piqued.

Mexicans take part in three main sets of elections.

Presidential elections

The presidential election is held every six years. Each of the major parties fields a single candidate, and there is a straight winner-take-all contest among those candidates. Although PRI once routinely won with an 85 to 95 per cent share of the vote (peaking in 1976 with a remarkable but barely believable 98.7 per cent share), its dominance has steadily diminished, and in 1994 Ernesto Zedillo became the first PRI candidate to win with less than 50 per cent of the vote (see Figure 9.1). In the landmark 2000 election, the PRI share of the vote fell to 36.7 per cent as Vicente Fox of PAN won the presidency, and in 2006 it fell to just over 22 per cent. Turnout at recent presidential elections, meanwhile, has been in the range of 58–80 per cent.

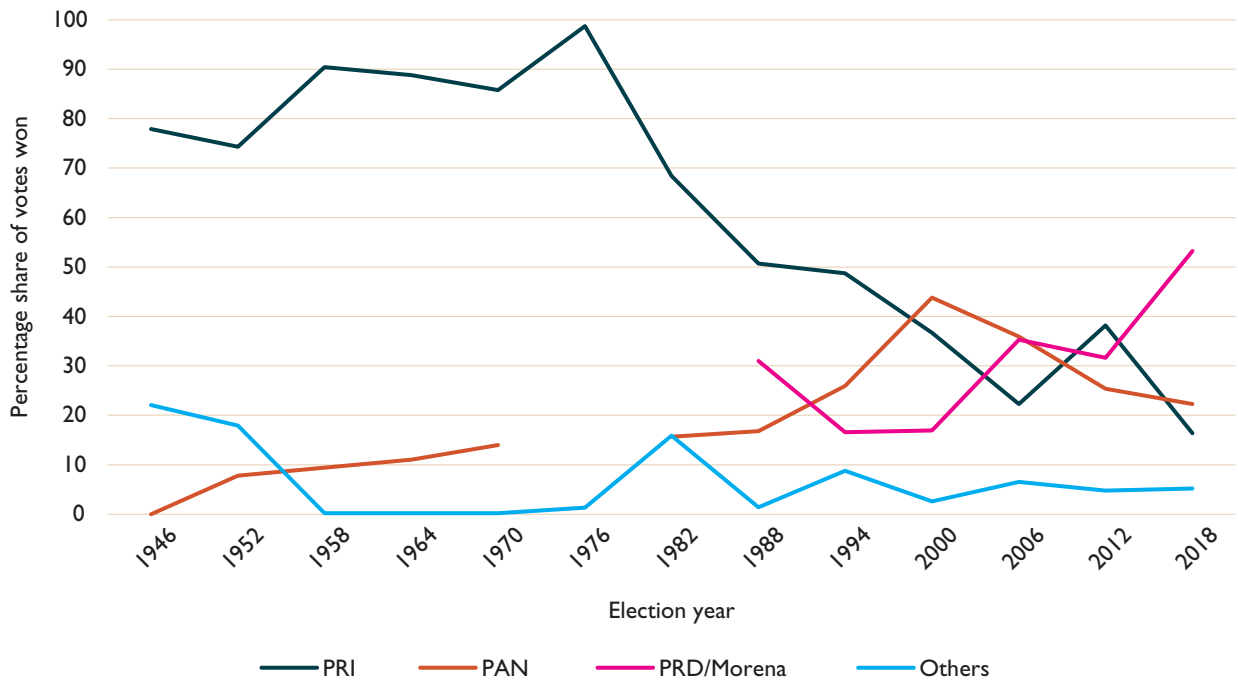


Figure 9.1 Executive electoral trends in Mexico

The election itself is held in July, but the president does not formally take office until the following December. This gives Mexican presidents one of the longest **lame duck** periods in the world. In parliamentary systems, new prime ministers typically take office within hours of winning an election; in the United States there is a period of two months between the election and the presidential inauguration. Five months may have suited Mexican presidents during the PRI era, giving incumbents plenty of time to work with successors on ensuring policy continuity and giving PRI officials plenty of time to learn about their new leader. It is doubtful, however, whether such a long period of transition is any longer useful.

Lame duck

A term describing elected officials or institutions whose successors have already been elected or appointed, and that are seeing out the closing days of their term.

Legislative elections

Elections to the Mexican Senate are held every six years, at the same time as the presidential election, and all Senate seats are contested at the same time. Changes introduced in 1993 produced the current unusual variation on a mixed-member electoral system: the party that wins the most votes in each of the 31 states and in the Federal District of Mexico City wins two of the three seats from each electoral district, the second-placed party (the ‘first minority’) wins the third seat, and a separate group of 32 Senators is elected on an at-large national basis, with seats distributed among political parties using a system of proportional representation. This arrangement is unique, its design coming as a result of early efforts to change the electoral system so as to give minority parties a better chance of winning seats.

For their part, elections to the Chamber of Deputies are held every three years. All 500 seats are contested at the same time, using a mixed-member electoral system similar to that used in Germany (see Chapter 4): 300 seats are decided on the basis of single-member plurality, and 200 are decided by proportional representation (PR). Voters cast two votes: one for the so-called ‘uninominal’ member for their district and one for a party list of so-called ‘plurinominal’ candidates running at large in the local electoral region. Mexico is divided into five such regions, and the formula is designed so that no party can win more than two-thirds of the seats altogether. Voter turnout at congressional elections has ranged as high as 78 per cent (in the presidential election year of 1994), but has fallen to about 60–63 per cent in recent presidential election years and as low as 41 per cent in non-presidential election years. While there was once barely a difference between turnout in presidential election years and mid-term elections years, turnout in the latter is now consistently lower than in the former.

Table 9.2 Results of recent presidential elections in Mexico

Year	Candidate	Party	Number of votes (millions)	% share
2000	Vicente Fox Quesada	PAN	16.0	43.8
	Francisco Labastida Ochoa	PRI	13.6	36.7
	Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas Solórzano	PRD	6.2	16.9
	Gilberto Rincón Gallardo	PDS	0.6	1.7
	Others		1.1	1.0
	2006	Felipe Calderón	PAN	15.0
Andrés Manuel López Obrador		PRD	14.7	35.3
Roberto Madrazo		PRI	9.3	22.3
Patricia Mercado		Social Democrat	1.1	2.7
Others			1.2	3.8
2012		Enrique Peña Nieto	PRI	19.2
	Andrés Manuel López Obrador	PRD	15.8	31.6
	Josefina Vázquez Mota	PAN	12.7	25.4
	Gabriel Quadri de la Torre	New Alliance	1.1	2.3
	Others		1.3	2.5
	2018	Andrés Manuel López Obrador	Morena	30.1
Ricardo Anaya		PAN	12.6	22.3
José Antonio Meade		PRI	9.3	16.4
Jaime Rodríguez Calderón		Independent	3.0	5.2
Others				

Note: *Morena* National Regeneration Movement

PAN National Action Party

PDS Social Democratic Party

PRI Institutional Revolutionary Party

PRD Party of the Democratic Revolution

State and local elections

Mexican states operate on their own electoral cycles, which rarely coincide with national cycles. Elections are held for the governors of states and for single-chamber state assemblies, and for municipal governments headed by presidents (the equivalent of mayors) and councils. During the PRI era, states had minimal impact on national politics because almost all governors were from the party, which also held large majorities in state assemblies. With opposition parties winning more state elections in recent years, however, results have come to matter more. PRI has continued to play a dominating role in state politics, although the number of governorships it held fell from 19 in 2011 to 14 in 2018.

Political parties

As discussed earlier in the chapter, Mexico has been a multi-party system since 1929, but PRI held a majority in both houses of Congress until 1997, won every presidential election until 2000, and until recently controlled almost every state government. Five parties then won seats in Congress in 1997, and with the PRI stranglehold weakening, the significance of parties has changed. In recent years, three major parties have dominated Mexican politics, with smaller parties gaining ground.

Institutional Revolutionary Party (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*) (PRI)

For decades the only party that mattered in Mexico, PRI has recently fallen on hard times. During its heyday, it was not a political party in the liberal democratic sense because it was created less to compete for power than to



COMPARING POLITICS 9

Term limits

One of the recurring themes in this book has been declining faith and trust in government, a problem addressed in more detail in Chapter 7. One of the causes of this decline has been the rise in many countries of a political class of politicians who often spend many years in office, becoming professional politicians whose lives and interests might be removed from the daily realities of their constituents (see Chapter 8). One solution to this problem, assuming we define it as a problem, is to institute **term limits**. This would prevent the development of a political class or a political elite, encourage more frequent turnover in the membership of government institutions, encourage the injection of new ideas into government, and help address the problem of low turnover discussed in Chapter 5. Ultimately, it might also help address the problem of declining trust.

Term limits

The placing of limits on the number of terms that can be served by elected officials, either consecutively or in total.

We have seen in our cases that term limits are imposed on judiciaries in many countries, including a restriction on the number of terms judges can serve or limits on their maximum age. Most presidential executives are also limited in the number of terms they can serve, whether it is two terms in total (as in the United States) or a maximum of two consecutive terms (as in France, Iran, and Russia). There are also countries that have imposed term limits at the sub-national level, as in the case of 15 of the states in the United States (Caress and Kunioka, 2012). When it comes to national legislatures, though, it is rare to find limits imposed on the number of terms that can be served. Mexico is one of the exceptions, with its limit of a single six-year term on the president and state governors, and a long-time ban on consecutive terms for members of Congress and state legislatures lifted in 2015 by the Peña Nieto administration.

Although term limits may have advantages, they also have disadvantages:

- ◆ They might discourage people from running for office.
- ◆ They would prevent good leaders and legislators from staying in office.
- ◆ They would limit the abilities of elected officials to develop the experience and contacts needed to do the best job for their constituents.
- ◆ They would weaken the institutional memory of legislatures, because there would be regular injections of novice representatives who would have to learn on the job.
- ◆ They would create lame duck legislators whose terms have a defined end point.
- ◆ They would weaken the powers of elected officials relative to lobbyists and bureaucrats, who can build many years of experience in government and so can be at an advantage over elected officials.

Surprisingly little research has been done on the topic, though, and comparative politics has much to offer by taking – for example – the large body of research on term limits in US states, or in national executives and judiciaries, or the more modest research on the Mexican case, and extrapolating to see what might happen if limits were imposed more widely.

decide how power would be shared; it served as a political machine designed to mobilize voters and to give the impression of overwhelming support for the regime (Edmonds-Poli and Shirk, 2015). It kept its grip on power by being a source of patronage, incorporating the major social and economic sectors in Mexico, co-opting rival elites, and overseeing the electoral process. It had no obvious ideology, but instead shifted with the political breeze and with the changing priorities of its leaders. Politics in Mexico was not so much about competition among different parties as it was about competition among different factions within PRI – in this sense it was much like Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (see Chapter 6).

The signs of PRI's decline date back to the 1970s, when turnout at elections fell and the party could no longer argue that people had faith in the system. In order to encourage greater turnout, PRI increased the number of seats in Congress and the balance between those chosen using SMP and those using PR, but while turnout increased, more people started voting for opposition parties. At the same time, Mexicans were becoming better educated,

more affluent, and more worried about Mexico’s economic problems, and because PRI had governed for so long, it had no one else to blame. Meanwhile, as workers saw their real incomes falling, they became less pliant and more demanding, and PRI lost its once-strong base among labour unions.

A political earthquake struck in 1997 when PRI lost its majority in the Chamber of Deputies for the first time in its history. It was now obliged to negotiate, bargain, and compromise, something that it had never really had to do before. At the 2000 congressional elections its share of seats in the Chamber of Deputies fell yet further, it lost its majority in the Senate for the first time, and it lost the jewel in the crown of Mexican politics, the presidency. PRI initially had a crisis of confidence, but then found a new role for itself as the party of opposition. In the run-up to the 2003 congressional elections, PRI decided that at least 30 per cent of its candidates would be younger than 30 years old and at least half would be women. This tactic seemed to work, because PRI increased its share of congressional seats. But then it chose a party traditionalist named Robert Madrazo for its candidate in the 2006 presidential race, and he won just over 22 per cent of the vote, while the party lost more than half its seats in the Chamber of Deputies.

PRI scrambled to respond, with Beatriz Paredes in 2006 becoming only the third woman ever to be chair of the party. It recovered some ground in the 2009 mid-term and state elections, and then recaptured the presidency in 2012 with the victory of Enrique Peña Nieto. At first, matters went well for Peña Nieto, with efforts to break up Mexico’s monopolies, to liberalize the energy sector, and to reform public education. But the drug war sparked in 2006 by PAN president Felipe Calderón continued, pushing public safety to the top of the list of concerns in opinion polls; Mexico’s murder rate rose to 16 per 100,000 people, which was lower than several other countries but still placed it in an unenviable position – see Figure 9.2. Combined with persistent corruption, the violence pushed Peña Nieto’s approval rating down to just 12 per cent in 2017, the lowest for any Mexican president since polling began in 1995, and the party reached a new all-time low in 2018: its presidential candidate won just over 16 per cent of the vote, and the party lost more than 75 per cent of its seats in the Chamber of Deputies.

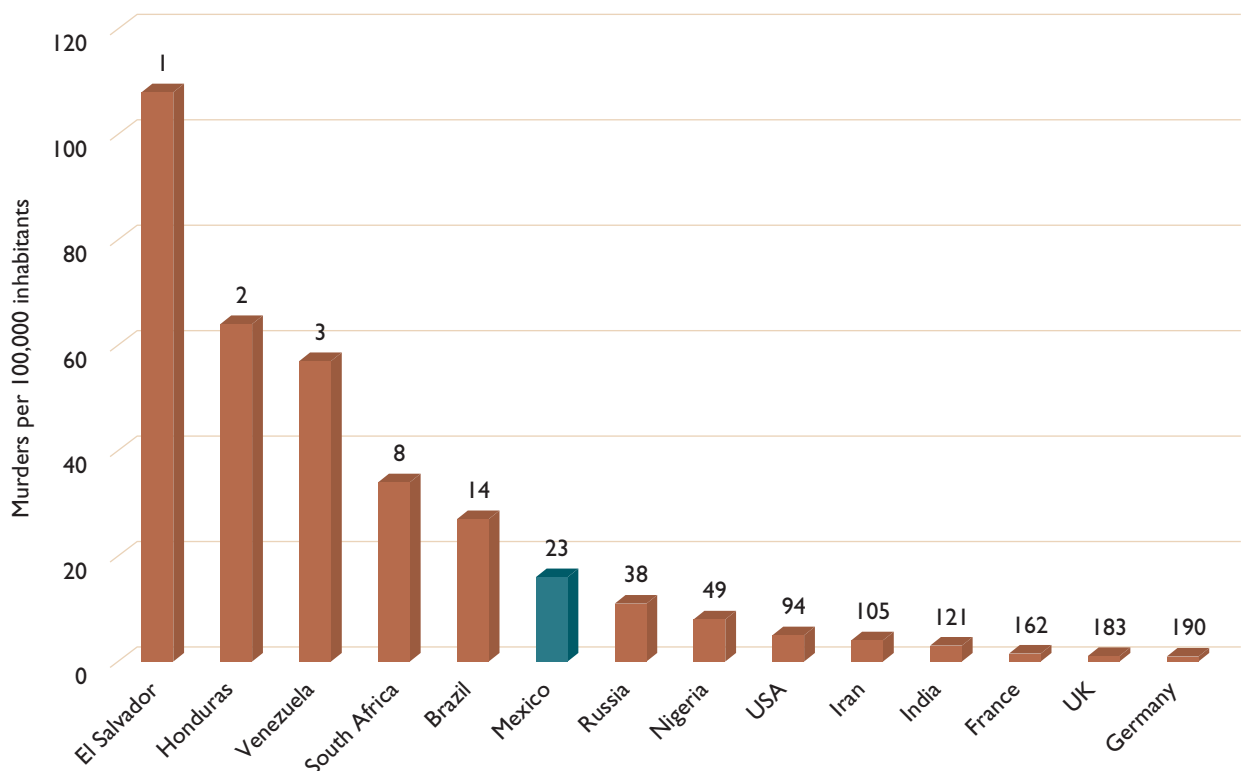


Figure 9.2 Comparing murder rates

Source: UN Office on Drugs and Crime at <https://data.unodc.org> (retrieved May 2018).

Note: Data are for 2015. Numbers on columns indicate global ranking out of 219 states and territories.

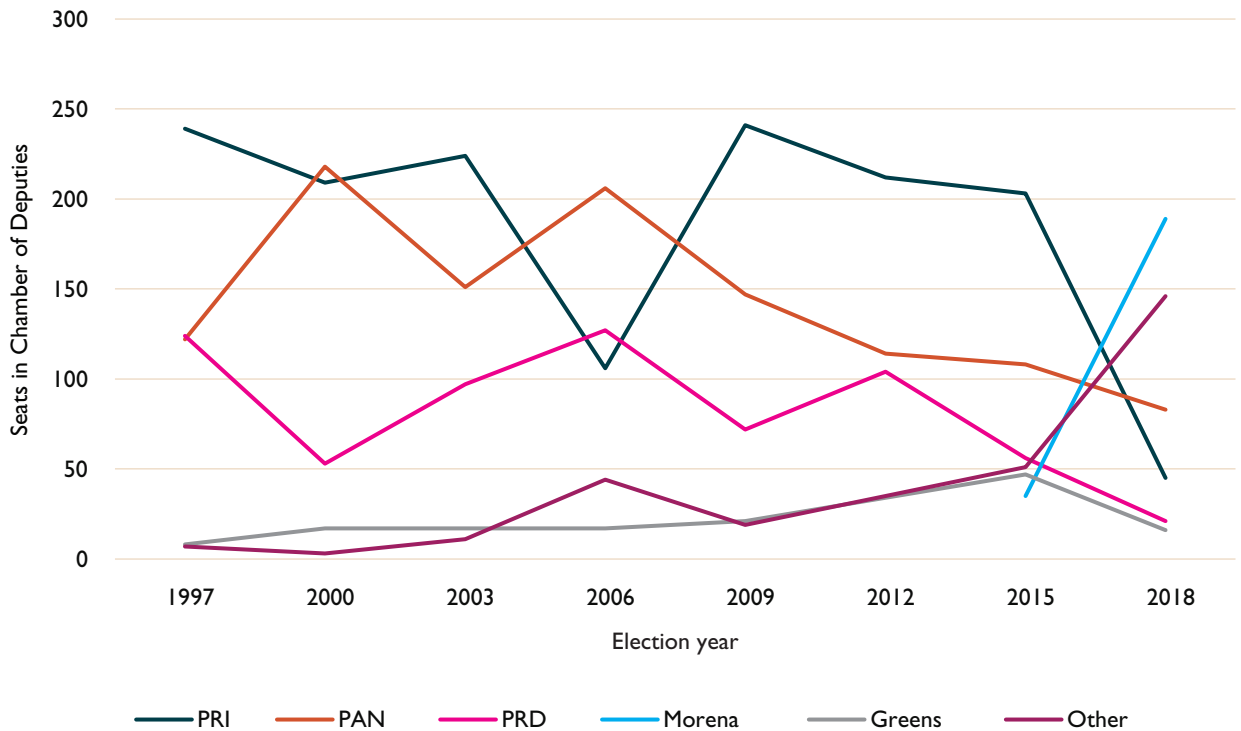


Figure 9.3 Legislative electoral trends in Mexico

National Action Party (*Partido de Acción Nacional*) (PAN)

A conservative party, PAN was founded in 1939 and until the early 1990s played the role of loyal opposition. It was pro-clerical, pro-American, and pro-business, favouring a limited government role in the economy and the promotion of private land ownership rather than communal ownership. It was strongest in the urban areas of the wealthier northern and central states but was seen as the party of money and drew little support from rural or working-class voters. This began to change in the late 1980s when a new and younger generation of pro-business members joined the party, promoting new policies and irking the old-style party members known as *panistas* who had dominated its leadership until then.

In 1989, PAN took control of the government of the northern state of Baja California, becoming the first opposition party officially to win a state election in Mexico since the Revolution. It went on to take three more state governments, and in 1994 its candidate Diego Fernandez came second in the presidential election, and PAN won the second biggest block of seats in the Chamber of Deputies. Its steady rise to power was capped by its victories in the 2000 and 2006 presidential elections and its gains in Congress, where it became the biggest party. In 2006 it won enough seats in Congress to take back the plurality that it had lost in 2003. It then lost this in 2009, a comment by voters on the worsening public security situation in Mexico, and lost the presidency in 2012.

It continues to be the major conservative party in Mexico, being opposed to abortion, for example, and having a strong religious tilt to its positions on education and morality. It also continues to promote free-market economic policies, favouring private property and opposing state intervention, and enjoying its strongest support from socially conservative and wealthier middle- and upper-class urban Mexicans. Having said this, though, it is undermined by factionalism and often finds itself internally divided on policy.

Party of the Democratic Revolution (*Partido de la Revolución Democrática*) (PRD)

Founded in 1988, PRD soon became the major opposition party on the left of Mexican politics. It grew out of mergers involving small left-wing parties and defectors from PRI. In 1988 the PRD joined with three smaller parties and a group of PRI dissidents to form an electoral alliance that provided a platform for the presidential candidacy of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and contested that year's congressional elections. Cárdenas had high name recognition, being the son of President Lázaro Cárdenas, the hero of the oil nationalization of the 1930s. Officially, Cárdenas won 31 per cent of the vote (the best result ever for an opposition candidate), but he may in fact have won

the election, losing only because of fraud. His alliance also won four Senate seats and more than tripled its representation in the Chamber of Deputies.

The 1997 electoral season saw PRD's numbers in the Chamber of Deputies nearly double, but Cárdenas came a disappointing third in the 2000 presidential election, and the party lost more than half its seats in the Chamber of Deputies. It subsequently broke down in factional fighting, its major bright spot being that it has held the office of mayor of Mexico City since its creation in 1997: Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas was followed by Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), who stepped down as mayor in July 2005 for his presidential run. Although he fell just 244,000 votes short of Felipe Calderón, he won more than twice as many votes as any previous PRD candidate. He refused to recognize Calderón's victory, launched legal challenges to the outcome, and even had himself sworn in as the 'legitimate' president of Mexico in a symbolic alternative inauguration.

In preparing for the 2012 presidential election, AMLO set up a cross-party National Regeneration Movement (Morena). Following his defeat, he left PRD and registered Morena as a political party, raising concerns that he would split the left-wing vote. Morena made modest gains in local elections, and then won 35 seats in the 2015 mid-term Congressional elections. AMLO became its presidential candidate for 2018, the PRD combining in a marriage of convenience with PAN to support the candidacy of Ricardo Anaya Cortés. The strategy worked for AMLO, who also benefitted from the unpopularity of Peña Nieto and his failure to resolve the drug war or to address corruption, and he romped home with more than 53 per cent of the vote. Morena also made major gains in the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies.

Other parties

Mexico has long had a cluster of smaller political parties, some of which have hovered on the brink of extinction. They include the Worker's Party – whose candidate Cecilia Soto Gonzalez in 1994 became the first woman ever to make a showing in a Mexican presidential election – and the Popular Socialist Party, which was for many years the main opposition party on the left. The Ecological Green Party of Mexico (founded in 1986) surprised almost everyone by winning nine congressional seats in 1997 and finally establishing a national presence. Its representation in the Chamber of Deputies reached a new peak of 47 seats in 2015, but it then fared poorly in 2018. This was an election that not only saw the emergence of Morena as the newly dominant party in Mexico, but also saw the re-emergence of the Worker's Party and a strong result for a new conservative party, the Social Encounter Party. The days of a system dominated by PRI, with smaller parties winning a few token seats, were long gone.

THE FUTURE OF MEXICAN GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS

Mexico's political development has been driven in recent years by the tensions arising out of two competing sets of forces: the need for political liberalization against a background of the changing expectations of Mexican consumers and voters, and the need for economic liberalization against a background of fragile economic growth. Democratic reform and economic modernization have come, but while the clock cannot be turned back, the changes are far from complete, and there is growing impatience within the Mexican middle class with the slowness of recent reforms. To some extent Mexico has become the victim of its own success, because opposition parties have used their new powers and influence to block much-needed economic change, fearing that the wealthy will benefit and the poor will suffer. Mexico also faces critical structural problems, ranging from corruption to over-centralization, and challenges to public order posed by the activities of drug cartels and the desperation of Mexico's poorest citizens.

Although Mexico's democratic credentials are stronger today than they were even two decades ago, many questions hang over its future. More than many other countries in the world, Mexico is influenced by the presence of a powerful neighbour: the overwhelming impact of the United States has had mixed results for Mexico in the past, and continues to make itself felt today as Mexico's major trade partner, major source of foreign investment, and major target for drugs and undocumented migrants. The United States also continues to rely on Mexico as a source of cheap labour and a market with large unmet potential. Mexico's future depends on how well it continues to adapt to the evolution of its democracy, and how soon it can make sure that the benefits of its economic development can be more widely and equitably spread.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. To what extent, and with what effects, is Mexico still influenced by its proximity to the United States?
2. Using the United States, France, Mexico, and Iran as cases, what evidence is there to suggest that revolutions never fully achieve their goals?
3. How does corporatism in Mexico compare with that in Scandinavia, and does it present any unique problems or opportunities?
4. Is the one-term limit on Mexican presidents a model that could be usefully exported? If so, why? If not, why not?
5. What are the political implications of the rule that for many years Mexican legislators could not serve consecutive terms?
6. What have been the costs and benefits of Mexico's shift from a one-party-dominant to a multi-party system, and what lessons could be learned more broadly from this?



CHAPTER CONCEPTS

- ◆ *Camarilla*
- ◆ Chamber of Deputies
- ◆ Chiapas
- ◆ Congress
- ◆ *Dedazo*
- ◆ Drug war
- ◆ *Machismo*
- ◆ *Mestizo*
- ◆ Mexican Revolution
- ◆ Pemex
- ◆ *Políticos*
- ◆ *Porfiriato*
- ◆ *Presidencialismo*
- ◆ Senate
- ◆ *Sexenio*
- ◆ *Técnicos*



KEY TERMS

- ◆ Corporatism
- ◆ Economic nationalism
- ◆ Global city
- ◆ Lame duck
- ◆ Term limits



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- Office of the President:** www.gob.mx/presidencia
Senate: www.senado.gob.mx ★
Chamber of Deputies: www.diputados.gob.mx
National Action Party: www.pan.org.mx ★
Institutional Revolutionary Party: www.pri.org.mx ★
Party of the Democratic Revolution: www.prd.org.mx ★
Mexico Daily: www.mexicodaily.com

★ *Spanish only*



FURTHER READING

- Camp, Roderic Ai (2013) *Politics in Mexico: Democratic Consolidation or Decline?* 6th edn (Oxford University Press) and Roderic Ai Camp (2017) *Mexico: What Everyone Needs to Know*, 2nd edn (Oxford University Press). The standard introduction to the history and politics of Mexico, and a more recent assessment by the same author.
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- Edmonds-Poli, Emily, and David A. Shirk (2015) *Contemporary Mexican Politics*, 3rd edn (Rowman & Littlefield). Another overview of Mexican politics, looking at its history, institutions, and policies.

- Deeds, Susan M., Michael C. Meyer, and William L. Sherman (2017) *The Course of Mexican History*, 11th edn (Oxford University Press). A general history of Mexico, taking the story from the pre-Columbian era to the present.
- Tuckman, Jo (2012) *Mexico: Democracy Interrupted* (Yale University Press). An assessment by an American journalist with long experience in Mexico of the possibilities and problems following in the wake of recent political developments.
- Selee, Andrew, and Jacqueline Peschard (2010) *Mexico's Democratic Challenges: Politics, Government, and Society* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press). An edited collection looking at the effects of Mexico's democratic reforms, with a focus on institutions and parties.



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