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# Public Perceptions of Clean Elections in Mexico: An Analysis of the 2000, 2006, and 2012 Elections

Antonio Ugues Jr.

**Abstract:** This study explores how citizens in a newly democratized country with a legacy of electoral fraud and manipulation evaluate the cleanliness of the elections that have taken place since democratization. I argue that citizens in these contexts are more likely to express confidence in the credibility of elections when their electoral preferences are realized, due to the competitiveness of contemporary elections, but more importantly due to the legacy of electoral malpractice. Using panel data collected during the 2000, 2006, and 2012 Mexican elections, the evidence indicates that support for electoral winners is indeed associated with greater confidence in the cleanliness of election-day proceedings, whereas support for electoral losers is associated with less confidence.

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**Keywords:** Mexico, public opinion, clean elections, winner–loser effect

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## Introduction

A central concern for newly democratized countries with a history of electoral fraud and manipulation is whether the legacy of these behaviors will undermine confidence in future electoral processes. While scholars have argued that repeated elections strengthen democratic norms and practices (Mattes 2014; Lindberg 2009), the legacy of electoral malpractice may have a detrimental impact on confidence in future contests because of a lack of institutional trust (Cleary and Stokes 2006). In other words, citizens may be skeptical that their vote will be counted fairly, for instance, because of transgressions on previous election days. This is particularly true if there is significant multiparty competition, since that raises the stakes of the contest. In this respect, Norris (2015) has argued that elections are a “cumulative experience” whereby prospective evaluations of elections and election quality are based upon previous experience and memory (Norris 2015: 55). It follows that positive experiences in previous contests should produce optimism regarding future elections, while negative ones may lead to skepticism and distrust of future contests.

Based on this logic, this study posits that citizens in newly democratized countries with a legacy of electoral fraud and manipulation are more likely to express confidence in the credibility of elections when their electoral preferences are realized. In other words, citizens in these contexts are likely to give their approval to the conduct of election-day proceedings and believe that the electoral process was conducted in a clean manner because it appears that their vote has had its intended effect. As such, this study puts forth the argument that the realities of winning and losing elections in countries with a history of electoral malpractice are critical for understanding whether citizens have confidence that elections are conducted cleanly. I evaluate this proposition by exploring the case of Mexico, which is interesting for several reasons.

For one, Mexico is an example of a new democracy that underwent a process of democratization following a series of concessions and reforms negotiated by the country’s once-dominant ruling party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, PRI), and main opposition parties such as the National Action Party (Partido Acción Nacional, PAN) and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (Partido de la Revolución Democrática, PRD). Mexico’s protracted transition to democracy occurred at the ballot box and was marked by critical junctures in Mexico’s history, such as the 1997 legislative elections and the watershed 2000 presidential election. These events were facilitated by the altered institutional landscape, which sought to level the playing field

for opposition parties, and by years of opposition demands for reform. Once in place, these reforms and the resulting institutions provided opportunities for the opposition to make serious inroads into the electoral arena.

The Mexican case also provides the opportunity to evaluate the historical legacy of electoral fraud and manipulation during the period of PRI hegemony. As an “electoral autocracy” (Schedler 2002), Mexico featured a system of patronage politics in which tactics of vote buying, electoral manipulation, and outright fraud were employed to help ensure the PRI’s dominance (Cornelius 2004; Magaloni 2006; Ames 1970). Similar to other one-party systems, the PRI engaged in electoral manipulation not simply to mobilize voters and garner votes, but to evince the party’s strength to voters and potential challengers (Simpser 2013). In these ways, the ruling party often undermined electoral integrity in an effort to maintain its dominance in the Mexican political system.

Based on the features of this case and the argument presented above, this study explores attitudes on Mexican elections during the 2000, 2006, and 2012 contests. The main expectation is that confidence in the cleanliness of elections is largely explained by support for electoral winners and losers in presidential races. Using data from the Mexico 2000, 2006, and 2012 panel studies (Lawson et al. 2001, 2007, 2013), the results lend strong support to this expectation and suggest that confidence in the conduct of elections is contingent on the outcome of elections. I argue that this is due not only to the competitiveness of contemporary elections but also to the legacy of electoral malpractice in Mexico, which has left an indelible mark on the psyche of voters. These findings raise important questions regarding attitudes of democratic processes in Mexico.

The rest of this study is organized as follows: First, literature relevant to the topic of this study is reviewed. Then, the main argument and hypotheses are presented. Following that, the data and methodology of the study are outlined and the results of the quantitative analyses are discussed. Afterwards, the substantive significance of the findings are considered, and the final section concludes.

## Literature Review

### Legacy of Electoral Malpractice

Democracy seeks to ensure equality amongst citizens; nonetheless, democratic elections often result in unequal outcomes because they reward

electoral winners at the expense of losers (Anderson et al. 2005). This dynamic is exacerbated when influenced by electoral malpractices such as electoral fraud or manipulation. While isolated incidents of electoral malpractice may threaten the legitimacy of a particular election or the authority of elected officials, continued electoral malpractices can serve to reignite long-standing grievances against incumbents and reinforce the idea that the opposition is systematically precluded from winning elections, which has important implications for political legitimacy. For instance, Norris (2014) writes, “If contests continue to be seriously flawed, or even failed, important problems are suspected to follow for the legitimacy of elected authorities” (Norris 2014: 6). This is particularly evident in electoral authoritarian systems dominated by one party (Schedler 2002). In these contexts, continued losses at the ballot box coupled with the prevalence of electoral malpractices can lead to dissatisfaction with the electoral process, specifically, but a broader sense that the political system is tilted in favor of the incumbent party.

Consider the case of Mexico, where the legacy of one-party rule and the extensive use of electoral fraud and manipulation historically (Klesner 2001; Simpser 2013) and in the post-transition period (Serra 2014; Cantú 2014) has had a significant impact on political behavior. The extensive scope of electoral malpractice in Mexico has resulted in a population largely skeptical of electoral processes and institutions and has been found to discourage voter turnout (Simpser 2013; McCann and Domínguez 1998). While electoral reforms in the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s served to diminish these concerns, the closeness of recent, key electoral contests, general distrust and polarization among Mexico’s political elite (Schedler 2007; Bruhn and Greene 2007), and concerns over the administration of electoral processes (Schedler 2009) have contributed to major sociopolitical cleavages and dramatic post-electoral conflicts in Mexico.

What is more, reports of electoral malpractices such as vote buying, voter intimidation, and voter coercion in recent elections have contributed to a political culture where these practices are perceived to be commonplace (Alianza Cívica 2012). While many of the claims of electoral malpractice have gone unsubstantiated, allegations by leading political figures such as Andrés Manuel López Obrador have called into question the integrity of Mexican elections. This has resulted in lower levels of institutionalization and lower levels of support for democratic institutions and processes as well as of other features of the Mexican political system (Crow 2010; Estrada and Poiré 2007; Schedler 2007; Cleary and Stokes 2006).

## The Winner–Loser Effect

Several studies have indicated that political winners and losers, and their supporters, respond differently to election outcomes in both established and developing democracies (see Anderson et al. 2005). For instance, winners are more likely than losers to be satisfied with democracy (Singh, Karakoc, and Blais 2012; Curini, Jou, and Memoli 2011; Blais and Gélinau 2007; Anderson and Guillory 1997), express more support for democracy (Singh, Karakoc, and Blais 2012; Bowler and Donovan 2002), and exhibit higher levels of trust in institutions (Moehler 2009; Anderson and LoTempio 2002; Holmberg 1999) and in elected officials (Craig et al. 2006). Empirical evidence also suggests that winners are more likely than losers to participate politically (Nadeau and Blais 1993) and to have more positive evaluations of government (Anderson and Tverdova 2001; Bاندucci and Karp 2003). Overall, then, support for political winners and losers seem to have an important impact on attitudes relevant for democracy.

In Latin America, the regional focus of this study, the winner–loser effect has manifested itself in various ways. In a study of voter turnout, for instance, Carreras and Irepoglu provide evidence of a relationship between political losers and attitudes regarding the fairness of elections (Carreras and Irepoglu 2013: 610). Furthermore, Hellinger suggests that political losers sometimes exploit possible cases of electoral irregularities to discredit political winners and electoral processes, but also to shore up support amongst their supporters (Hellinger 2011: 442–445). Additional studies of the region indicate that political losers are less likely both to support democracy (Vairo 2012) and to have confidence in elections (Maldonado and Seligson 2014). Indeed, Maldonado and Seligson argue that “being a winner or loser in an election seems to be a fundamental predictor of trust in elections” (2014: 243).

These region-wide findings coincide with research on Mexico, where support for specific presidential candidates and political parties and how those parties and candidates fare in recent elections is critical to understanding how citizens view the credibility of electoral institutions such as the now defunct Federal Electoral Institute (Ugues and Medina Vidal 2015; Ugues 2010).

## The Argument

The quality of elections is a concern for all democratic regimes, especially those with a history blemished by electoral malpractices, since the legacy

of undemocratic behavior has the potential to undermine confidence in future elections. While repeated experience with elections has been shown to contribute to democratic deepening, the long-term impact of electoral malpractice may have a detrimental effect on confidence in future elections because citizens lack trust in the credibility of the process. As such, this study posits that previous electoral experience has a significant impact on public attitudes towards future elections. While positive experiences in past elections are likely to produce optimism regarding future elections, negative ones may lead to skepticism and distrust of future contests.

Following this logic, I argue that citizens in new democracies with a history of electoral fraud and manipulation are more likely to believe that elections are conducted in a clean manner when their electoral preferences are realized. That is, citizens in these contexts are likely to express confidence in the credibility of elections and believe that the electoral process was conducted in a clean manner because it appears that their vote has had its intended effect.

In this way, I contend that confidence in the cleanliness of elections is contingent upon election outcomes, where support for winners and losers matters a great deal in explaining public evaluations of the conduct of elections. I argue that this is particularly true in Mexico where the electoral landscape has shifted from an environment dominated by a single party to one where significant multiparty competition now exists. This competition, along with the legacy of electoral malpractice in Mexico, has had an important effect on the attitudes of voters. While voters that support winning electoral candidates and parties seem to express support for the country's democracy and institutions, those who support electoral losers are often frustrated by the slow pace of change promised by democratization or because their party's candidates have never succeeded in capturing top posts like the presidency (Estrada and Poiré 2007). There is ample evidence to suggest that Mexicans are, for whatever reason, increasingly dissatisfied with (Crow 2010) and skeptical of democracy (Cleary and Stokes 2006).

Overall, this article contends that the legacy of one-party rule along with the heightened level of political competition in contemporary Mexico has resulted in a situation where winning and losing has a significant impact on public attitudes regarding the cleanliness of Mexican elections. In this way, it is expected that expressed support for presidential candidates and political parties and how those candidates and parties fare in national elections is a key predictor of confidence in the conduct of electoral processes. The expectation is that citizens expressing support

for a winning candidate or party are more likely to believe that elections are clean, whereas citizens expressing support for a losing candidate or party are less likely to believe in the cleanliness of the elections. Stated formally:

H1: Citizens who identify with the winning candidate in the presidential election are more likely to believe that elections are clean, whereas citizens who identify with the losing candidate in the contest are less likely to believe that elections are clean.

H2: Citizens who identify with the winning political party in the presidential election are more likely to believe that elections are clean, whereas citizens who identify with the losing political party are less likely to believe that elections are clean.

The following section describes the data and methods used to evaluate these hypotheses during the 2000, 2006, and 2012 elections.

## Empirical Analysis

### Data and Methods

To evaluate these expectations, I utilize the data from the *Mexico 2000 Panel Study* (Lawson et al. 2001), the *Mexico 2006 Panel Study* (Lawson et al. 2007), and the *Mexico 2012 Panel Study* (Lawson et al. 2013). These studies are survey research projects on, respectively, Mexico's 2000, 2006, and 2012 general election cycles. The panel nature of each of these studies provides the opportunity to capture the exogenous variation of the election outcome – before and after the election – on public evaluations of the cleanliness of Mexico's electoral processes.<sup>1</sup> This feature is critical to understanding not only how election results help shape perceptions of election quality, but also how public opinion changes over consecutive elections.<sup>2</sup>

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1 For the analysis of data from 2000, I regress data from Wave 1 on Wave 4; for 2006, I regress data from Wave 2 on Wave 3; and for 2012, I regress data from Wave 1 on Wave 2.

2 While previous analyses have explored public attitudes towards clean elections in specific contests, this is the first study to compare these attitudes using panel data across three consecutive elections in Mexico.



To evaluate H1 regarding candidate support and perceptions of clean elections, I modeled the perception of clean elections<sup>3</sup> (“1” if not at all clean, “2” if not very clean, “3” if more or less clean, and “4” if respondents believed that elections were totally clean)<sup>4</sup> as a function of the “feeling thermometer” of each major presidential candidate (a scale from 0 to 10, where “0” is a very bad opinion of the candidate and “10” is a very good opinion of the candidate) in each election, respectively.<sup>5</sup> Key covariates include the respondent’s belief in democracy (“1” if respondents believe Mexico is a democracy and “0” if not), ideology (left–right self-placement ranging from 0 to 10), interest in politics (“0” for none, “1” for a little, “2” for some, and “3” for a lot), education level (“1” for no formal education, “2” for primary, “3” for secondary/vocational, “4” for high school/equivalent, and “5” for college or more), age (ranging from 18 to 99), sex (“1” for male and “0” for female), and income (interval variable, ranging from MXN 0 to 1,000 to greater than MXN 20,000). To evaluate H2 regarding partisan support, I include partisanship as an indicator variable for the PAN, PRI, and PRD, respectively (“1” if respondents identify with the party and “0” otherwise). Ordered logit is employed in each model.

## Results

Mexico has been an electoral democracy since 2000; however, the evidence presented here suggests that the legacy of the nondemocratic era along with the fierceness of electoral competition have had an important impact on public evaluations of elections in the country. For instance, while over 80 percent of respondents believed that elections were “more or less clean” (41.58 percent) or “very clean” (44.62 percent) in 2000, the evidence indicates that support for electoral winners was key to explaining perceptions of election quality in the 2000 elections. Specifically, the

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- 3 The “clean elections” measure is used because of its availability in each of the panel studies, which allows for a consistent analysis across the three consecutive elections.
  - 4 The 2012 survey asked respondents whether they agreed that the elections were clean (“1” if respondents disagreed completely, “2” if respondents disagreed somewhat, “3” if they agreed somewhat, and “4” if they agreed completely). While this measure of “clean elections” is slightly different from those in the analyses for 2000 and 2006, the author maintains that this measurement essentially captures the same concept – the cleanliness of election-day proceedings.
  - 5 In 2000 the top contenders were Cárdenas, Fox, and Labastida; in 2006 they included Calderón, López Obrador, and Madrazo; and in 2012 they were López Obrador, Peña Nieto, and Josefina Vázquez Mota.

results indicate that support for electoral winners – Vicente Fox and the PAN – were significant predictors of clean elections in 2000 (see Table 1). In the full model specification (Model 2), the coefficient for the Fox feeling thermometer is positive and statistically significant.

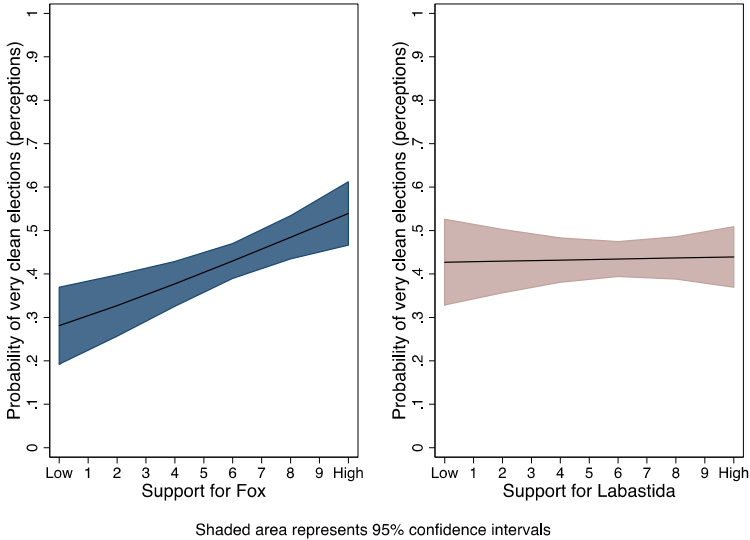
Table 1. Public Evaluations of Clean Elections in 2000

	Model 1	Model 2
Feeling thermometer for Labastida	-0.0201 (0.0257)	0.00493 (0.0306)
Feeling thermometer for Fox	0.151*** (0.0300)	0.110*** (0.0332)
Feeling thermometer for Cárdenas	-0.0589** (0.0281)	-0.0461 (0.0304)
PRI identification	--	-0.143 (0.232)
PAN identification	--	0.414* (0.237)
PRD identification	--	-0.185 (0.321)
Democracy	0.145 (0.161)	0.149 (0.164)
Ideology	-0.0596** (0.0264)	-0.0558** (0.0268)
Political interest	0.0223 (0.0910)	0.0149 (0.0924)
Education	0.116 (0.0874)	0.116 (0.0898)
Age	0.00142 (0.00612)	0.00318 (0.00626)
Sex	0.573*** (0.160)	0.589*** (0.163)
Income	0.0818 (0.0513)	0.0852 (0.0518)
Cut 1 Constant	-2.511*** (0.516)	-2.409*** (0.541)
Cut 2 Constant	-1.033** (0.475)	-0.927* (0.503)
Cut 3 Constant	1.493*** (0.474)	1.579*** (0.503)
Observations	653	636
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.0441	0.0491
Log likelihood	-637.0	-620.6

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. \* p<.10, \*\* p<.05, \*\*\* p<.01.

The analyses indicate that moving from very low support to very high support for Fox on the candidate feeling thermometer increases the probability of high confidence in the cleanliness of elections by about 27 percent (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Predicted Probabilities of High Confidence in Clean Elections for 2000



The coefficient for PAN identifiers is also positive and statistically significant, suggesting that partisanship is an important predictor of clean elections for respondents that identified with the PAN. Respondents that identified with the PAN were about 10 percent more likely to express high confidence in the cleanliness of elections. While the statistical results indicate that support for the electoral losers was not a significant predictor of clean elections, the coefficients for some of the contenders and their respective parties were trending in the expected direction. Overall, the analyses of the 2000 elections lend partial support to H1 and H2.

The results of the analysis of the 2006 elections provide much stronger support for the argument presented above. Following a raucous campaign for the presidency, Felipe Calderón (PAN) narrowly defeated Andrés Manuel López Obrador (PRD and the Coalition for the Good of All) by a margin of 0.58 percent, which resulted in calls for a recount and

boycott of the election by the López Obrador camp. Polling data revealed that Mexicans were generally confident in the cleanliness of elections – 60 percent reported that elections were “more or less clean” (37.7 percent) or “very clean” (21.64 percent) – but this marked a decline from the 2000 election, where more than 80 percent of the citizenry expressed confidence in the cleanliness of the election.

Overall, the results indicate that differences in support for presidential candidates and parties were indeed important predictors of clean elections in 2006 (see Table 2). The full model (Model 4) shows that the coefficient for the Calderón feeling thermometer (the victor) was positive and significant, while the coefficient for the López Obrador feeling thermometer (the runner-up) was negative and significant, suggesting that support for presidential candidates was an important predictor of clean elections. Predicted probabilities indicate that going from very low support to very high support for Calderón increases the probability of high confidence in the cleanliness of elections by about 36 percentage points, while the corresponding shift for López Obrador decreases the probability of high confidence in clean elections by about 21 percentage points (see Figure 2). Overall, the findings lend strong support to H1.

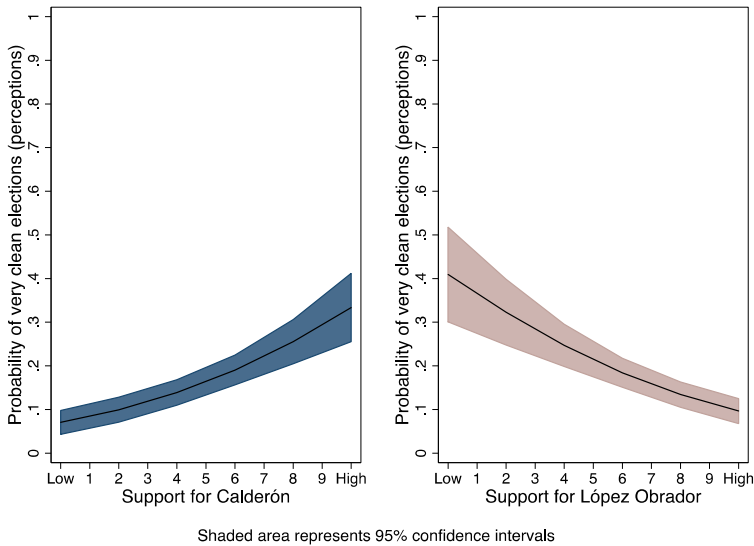
Table 2. Public Evaluations of Clean Elections in 2006

	<b>Model 3</b>	<b>Model 4</b>
Feeling thermometer for Madrazo	0.00915 (0.0279)	0.00902 (0.0305)
Feeling thermometer for Calderón	0.223*** (0.0310)	0.189*** (0.0322)
Feeling thermometer for López Obrador	-0.249*** (0.0299)	-0.187*** (0.0324)
PRI identification	--	0.00387 (0.244)
PAN identification	--	0.459* (0.237)
PRD identification	--	-0.793*** (0.219)
Democracy	0.712*** (0.166)	0.660*** (0.167)
Ideology	0.203*** (0.0459)	0.179*** (0.0467)
Political interest	0.0399 (0.0844)	0.0884 (0.0856)
Education	0.00576 (0.0401)	0.0134 (0.0413)
Age	-0.0148** (0.00586)	-0.0145** (0.00591)

	<b>Model 3</b>	<b>Model 4</b>
Sex	0.0768 (0.158)	0.105 (0.160)
Income	0.0450 (0.0317)	0.0303 (0.0321)
Cut 1 Constant	-1.107** (0.454)	-1.107** (0.478)
Cut 2 Constant	0.0965 (0.451)	0.141 (0.474)
Cut 3 Constant	2.140*** (0.458)	2.243*** (0.483)
Observations	608	608
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.1284	0.1443
Log likelihood	-716.8	-703.7

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. \* p<.10, \*\* p<.05, \*\*\* p<.01.

Figure 2. Predicted Probabilities of High Confidence in Clean Elections for 2006



Partisanship was also important in explaining attitudes of election-day proceedings in 2006. Consistent with theoretical expectations, the coefficient for *panistas* (PAN identifiers) is positive and statistically significant

while the coefficient for *perredistas* (PRD identifiers) is negative and statistically significant. Moreover, PAN identifiers had a 22 percent chance of expressing high confidence in the cleanliness of elections, whereas PRD identifiers had only about a 10 percent chance of expressing high confidence in the cleanliness of election. These findings also lend strong support to H2. The results of the analysis of the 2012 election tell a similar story.

In 2012 a resurgent PRI nominated Enrique Peña Nieto to lead the party back to Los Pinos (the official residence of the Mexican president). Peña Nieto, the governor of the state of Mexico, squared off against López Obrador (PRD) and Josefina Vázquez Mota (PAN), the latter President Calderón's education secretary and a member of the Chamber of Deputies. In spite of the concerns over his capacity to govern and fears of a return to authoritarian rule under a PRI-led government, Peña Nieto won a plurality of the vote (38.21 percent). Assertions of media bias in favor of Peña Nieto and allegations linking his campaign to numerous vote-buying schemes, however, undermined the legitimacy of the president-elect and perceptions of electoral integrity in Mexico. In fact, polling data revealed that a majority of Mexicans (53 percent) did not believe that election-day proceedings were clean. Ultimately, many questioned the integrity of the electoral process and the long-term impact this would have on Mexico's democracy (see Serra 2016).

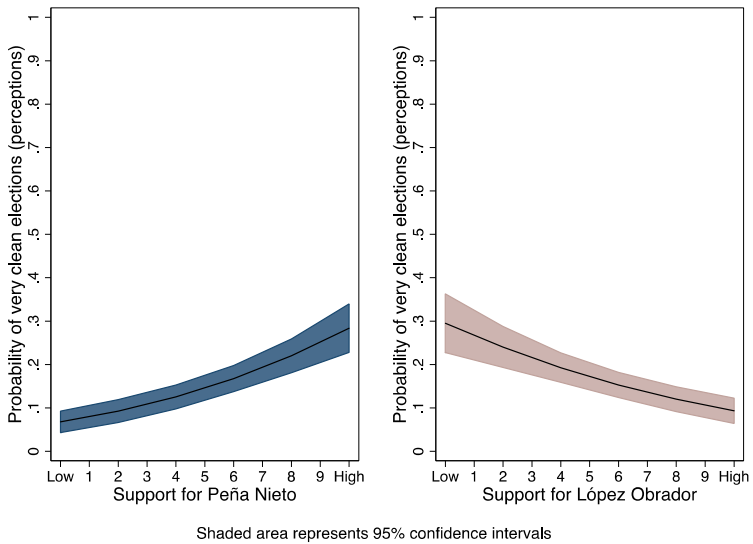
The statistical analyses indicate that Mexicans were divided about the cleanliness of the electoral process depending on whom they supported in the presidential race (see Table 3). Consistent with the expectations of H1, the results show that the coefficient for Peña Nieto (the winner) was positive and significant, while the coefficient for López Obrador (the runner-up) was negative and significant. In a practical sense, moving from very low support to very high support for Peña Nieto increases the likelihood of believing that elections were very clean by about 22 percent, while the corresponding shift for López Obrador decreases the probability by about 22 points (see Figure 3). Overall, these results provide strong support for H1.

Table 3. Public Evaluations of Clean Elections in 2012

	<b>Model 5</b>	<b>Model 6</b>
Feeling thermometer for Peña Nieto	0.169*** (0.0257)	0.145*** (0.0297)
Feeling thermometer for Vázquez Mota	-0.00427 (0.0272)	0.0143 (0.0309)
Feeling thermometer for López Obrador	-0.140*** (0.0263)	-0.143*** (0.0281)
PRI identification	--	0.396* (0.224)
PAN identification	--	-0.0557 (0.235)
PRD identification	--	0.232 (0.275)
Democracy	0.338** (0.160)	0.317** (0.162)
Ideology	0.134** (0.0526)	0.136** (0.0546)
Political interest	0.157* (0.0804)	0.143* (0.0811)
Education	-0.0248 (0.0391)	-0.0148 (0.0395)
Age	0.00592 (0.00532)	0.00485 (0.00538)
Sex	0.0540 (0.155)	0.0763 (0.155)
Income	0.0209 (0.0841)	0.0278 (0.0845)
Cut 1		
Constant	0.786 (0.483)	0.834* (0.499)
Cut 2		
Constant	1.832*** (0.487)	1.886*** (0.504)
Cut 3		
Constant	3.143*** (0.499)	3.210*** (0.516)
Observations	603	603
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.0669	0.0694
Log likelihood	-765.9	-763.9

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. \* p<.10, \*\* p<.05, \*\*\* p<.01.

Figure 3. Predicted Probabilities of High Confidence in Clean Elections for 2012



The results indicate that partisanship is an important predictor of clean elections for PRI identifiers, but not for those who identify with the PAN or PRD. The coefficient for PRI identifiers is positive and statistically significant, suggesting that respondents who identify with the PRI are more likely to support the notion that elections were clean in 2012. Predicted probabilities indicate that PRI identifiers have an approximately 20 percent chance of believing that elections are very clean. These results lend partial support to H2.

## Discussion

While several factors shape citizens' attitudes of election cleanliness, this study finds that public evaluations of clean elections are significantly shaped by the outcome of elections. In particular, the evidence indicates that support for electoral winners is associated with greater confidence in the cleanliness of election-day proceedings while support for electoral losers is associated with less confidence. This study contends that the winner–loser dynamic identified in these contests can be largely attributed to both the competitiveness of contemporary elections and the legacy



of electoral malpractice in Mexico, which has produced a great deal of skepticism and dissatisfaction with democracy.

Indeed, this study has argued that Mexicans seem to lack confidence in the credibility of election-day proceedings because of previous negative experiences with the cleanliness of elections as well as ongoing concerns over the integrity of the electoral process. In light of these concerns, it is argued that citizens may overcome their skepticism and exhibit confidence in election-day proceedings when their preferred candidate or political party is elected to office. The evidence supports this assertion: in each of the elections analyzed, supporters of victorious presidential candidates and political parties were consistently more likely to express confidence in the cleanliness of election-day proceedings. This finding holds not only across elections but also across variations in candidacies and political parties. For instance, in 2006 supporters of Calderon and the PAN were very likely to believe that elections were clean, but so too were supporters of Peña Nieto and the PRI in 2012. This is not surprising, given the plethora of research exploring the relationship between electoral winners and support for democratic processes. What is interesting, though, is that electoral winners are more likely to view the electoral process as credible in spite of the fact that fewer and fewer Mexicans believe that elections are indeed clean.

Extending this logic, this study has argued that citizens are likely to question the cleanliness of elections when their preferred candidate or political party is *not* elected to office. The evidence indicates that respondents with an affinity for electoral losers are consistently less likely to believe that elections are clean. This is particularly true of those with strong attachments to presidential candidates and especially in contests with close margins of victory. Whether this is due to general dissatisfaction with the outcome of elections or because voters see losing as business as usual, it is clear that support for electoral losers produces negative feelings toward the electoral process. This study argues that this dissatisfaction and possible resentment is based on not only the immediate impact of election outcomes but also the long-term impact of previous electoral malpractices. For instance, one of the driving forces behind López Obrador's efforts to demand a recount of each ballot in the 2006 presidential election was the assertion and perception that the electoral process was fraudulent, which was bolstered by his claim of unfair treatment of the PRD and its candidates historically. Hence, there is a harkening back to previous electoral experiences, such as the 1988 presidential election or the 1994 election for the governorship of Tabasco; the

effect of such perceptions of fraud is then compounded by the lack of alternation in power at the highest levels of government.

An additional consideration is the significance of attachments to presidential candidates rather than partisan attachments. The findings indicate that supporters of presidential candidates are more likely than individuals with a partisan identification to be influenced by the outcome of elections and thus have strong opinions on the cleanliness of elections. As noted above, the coefficient for PRI respondents in 2000 (the party of the runner-up) and the coefficient for PRD respondents in 2012 (the party of the runner-up) failed to reach statistical significance. While the coefficient for PRI respondents in 2000 was signed in the theoretically expected direction (negative), the coefficient was positive for PRD respondents in 2012. I offer two potential interpretations of these trends.

One interpretation is that partisanship is a particularly important predictor of attitudes regarding election-day proceedings when elections are hotly contested and result in razor-thin margins of victory. This is certainly the case with the 2006 presidential contest, where Calderón narrowly defeated López Obrador by a margin of 0.58 percent of the total vote. In the 2000 and 2012 elections, however, the difference between the victor and runner-up was 6.41 percent and 6.62 percent, respectively.<sup>6</sup> Based on this interpretation, the results suggest that close election outcomes may activate partisanship in a way that may alter the public's perception of the cleanliness elections, either negatively or positively. A second interpretation is that the 2006 presidential contest was uniquely situated in Mexican political history and that the larger finding in these analyses is the importance of candidate appeal in the aftermath of key elections. Because presidential elections highlight the characteristics of individual candidates for the presidency and thus increase the likelihood of an individual-based rather than partisan vote, respondents are more likely to express strong opinions on the cleanliness of elections depending upon the electoral success of the candidate they support. There is robust evidence of this claim in the analyses of each election, especially the 2006 and 2012 contests.

From a wider perspective, the key findings of the study raise important questions regarding attitudes toward democratic processes in Mexico. On one hand, these findings are not entirely surprising, since scholars have noted these trends among mature democracies, including the United States (Anderson and LoTempio 2002; Craig et al. 2006) and

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6 See <[http://portalanterior.ine.mx/archivos3/portal/historico/contenido/Historico\\_de\\_Resultados\\_Electorales/](http://portalanterior.ine.mx/archivos3/portal/historico/contenido/Historico_de_Resultados_Electorales/)> (20 May 2017).

Canada (Blais and Gélinau 2007; Nadeau and Blais 1993), and in newer democracies, such as those in Latin America (see Maldonado and Seligson 2014). Hence, one would expect to find evidence of these dynamics in Mexico, where the alternation of power has been limited. On the other hand, these findings are concerning due to the fact that allegations of electoral malpractices have served as the basis for post-electoral challenges in Mexico, which have threatened to undermine the legitimacy of elected governments.

This is important not just because of the volatility of post-electoral challenges but also because of the significance of “losers’ consent” (Anderson et al. 2005). Electoral losers and their supporters are critical to the long-term survival of democratic regimes because, as Anderson and coauthors argue, they must agree to “overcome any bitterness and resentment and be willing, first, to accept the decision of the election and, second, to play again next time” (Anderson et al. 2005: 4). They argue, however, that repeated losses on election day can undermine democratic legitimacy and disincentivize participation by losers. This study concurs with this assessment, but adds that this dynamic is compounded when there is a history of electoral losses predicated on electoral malpractice.

## Conclusion

This study has explored how citizens in newly democratized countries with a legacy of electoral fraud and manipulation evaluate the cleanliness of elections since democratization. This work has put forth the argument that citizens in these contexts are more likely to express confidence in the credibility of elections when their electoral preferences are realized, since this serves to attenuate concerns of previous electoral improprieties. The main expectation is that citizens who support electoral winners are more likely to believe that elections are clean, whereas those who support electoral losers are less likely to do so. Using survey data collected during the 2000, 2006, and 2012 Mexican elections, the analysis provides systematic evidence for the theoretical expectations. This study posits that these findings are due to the competitive nature of contemporary elections, but more importantly the legacy of electoral malpractice in Mexico, which has significantly shaped public evaluations of elections.

One important feature of this study is the data employed in the analyses. By exploiting the unique before-and-after feature of the panel study data, this study is able to explore the exogenous impact of election outcomes on attitudes towards clean elections. This feature is critical to understanding how public evaluations of clean elections change over

time but also how these opinions may be influenced by the outcome of elections. Another strength of this study is that it tracks public evaluations of clean elections across multiple election cycles. By exploring three successive elections, this study provides valuable insights into how the Mexican populace has viewed the cleanliness of elections since democratization, which can in turn provide insights for future contests.

Future research should explore what steps can be taken to help build confidence in election-day proceedings. While the nation's electoral authorities and international observers maintain that elections are free and fair, there are clearly different perceptions of election quality between electoral winners and losers. The general expectation is that attitudes and behaviors that are beyond the formal avenues of participation (e.g. post-election protests) should attenuate with more democratic experience; however, it is not clear that this is the direction that Mexico is heading. Future research should explore how the country can overcome the detrimental aspects of the winner-loser dynamic but still emphasize participation and confidence in Mexico's democratic processes.

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### **Percepciones Públicas de Elecciones Limpias en México: Un Análisis de las Elecciones de 2000, 2006 y 2012**

**Resumen:** Este estudio explora cómo los ciudadanos de un país recientemente democratizado, con antecedentes de fraude electoral y manipulación, evalúan la limpieza de las elecciones desde la democratización. Sostengo que en estos contextos los ciudadanos tienen probabilidades más altas de expresar confianza en la credibilidad de las elecciones cuando sus preferencias electorales se realizan, debido a la competitividad de las elecciones contemporáneas; pero de manera más importante, debido al legado de las malas prácticas electorales. Utilizando datos de panel recopilados durante las elecciones mexicanas de 2000, 2006 y 2012, la evidencia indica que el apoyo a los ganadores electorales se asocia con una mayor confianza en la limpieza de los procedimientos electorales, mientras que el apoyo a los perdedores electorales se asocia con menos confianza.

**Palabras clave:** México, opinión pública, elecciones limpias, efecto ganador-perdedor