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Research Note

Demise and Resurrection of a Dominant Party: Understanding the PRI's Comeback in Mexico

Gilles Serra

Abstract: Dominance by a single party can deteriorate the quality of political representation. Yet, surprisingly, voters sometimes support a formerly dominant party they had previously thrown out of power. As an important case, this essay studies the victory in the 2012 elections in Mexico of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Why did voters give it a new opportunity to rule the country? Accusations of fraud have been insufficient to explain the party's victory, so this research looks for electoral explanations. The paper points to fatigue with the incumbent party; unsatisfying economic and security conditions; ineffective campaigns by both the National Action Party (PAN) and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD); the PRI's popularity based on its governing experience; and a convincing PRI candidate who secured the conservative, rural, and poor voters. This conveys the mandate for Peña Nieto to produce tangible results without abandoning democracy. More broadly, these observations shed light on the perplexing phenomenon of formerly dominant parties making an electoral comeback.

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Keywords: Mexico, campaigns, elections, single-party systems, media, fraud, Peña Nieto, PRI

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Once-Dominant Parties That Return to Power

What explains the enduring dominance of certain political parties? Single-party or dominant-party regimes have been common in the developing world. Some have survived by explicitly precluding elections or legally banning the formation of a meaningful opposition. Others have held power for extensive periods of time, sometimes decades, in spite of the existence of a bona fide opposition competing in regular elections. These dominant parties are often created following a social revolution or have another popular origin (Huntington and Moore 1970). But a number of them evolve into undemocratic organizations controlling all branches of government at the expense of smaller parties with little to no chance of winning relevant office positions. These regimes have been of concern to scholars for a long time, because an imbalance between an overpowering party and a weak opposition can hinder effective representation (Duverger 1954; Sartori 1976). Indeed, when elections are too predictable, incumbents may fail to respond to voters' preferences, they may become idle and ineffective, and they may indulge in corruption and patronage with no fear of being booted out by voters.

It is therefore unsurprising that a dominant party's demise is usually hailed as a success for democracy. Sometimes, optimists will even consider the incumbent's defeat to be a doorway to prosperity. They effusively praise citizens for their wisdom in kicking the old guard out of office in favor of opposition candidates. In this view, the voters finally understood it was time to "throw the rascals out." But if this were really so, how should we interpret a return to power of the formerly dominant party? Little has been written about previously overbearing parties that seemingly lost their dominance only to start winning elections again. The classic studies focused mainly on the origins and development of one-party systems (Huntington and Moore 1970; Sartori 1976). More recent work has started analyzing their breakdown (Greene 2007; Magaloni 2006), but almost no literature exists about the resurgence of formerly dominant parties.

Yet several relevant cases exist. One prominent example occurs in Mexico, which is the subject of this paper, but other cases also exist in the Americas. For instance, the Colorado Party firmly ruled Paraguay by suppressing opposition for more than five decades. It lost power in 2008 after multi-party competition was finally enforced, but voters brought it back to govern again in 2013. The Antigua Labour Party dominated government for two decades until 1971 when it was voted out of office, accused of corruption and cronyism. But only five years later it was voted back into power as the majority party for three more decades. The Progressive Liberal Party governed the Bahamas continuously for a quarter-century until it took a

beating in the 1992 election amid accusations of receiving money from drug lords. But a landslide election in 2002 allowed it to rule the country again.

Other regions have also seen dominant parties come and go ... and come back. The Liberal Democratic Party controlled Japan's legislature for five decades until its electoral debacle of 2009. Now it is in power again, after a decisive victory in 2012. In the Philippines, the Nacionalista Party won almost every legislative and presidential election between 1907 and 1971, in spite of losing some of them. Several established democracies have also seen dominant parties wax and wane. For example, Canada, Sweden, and Norway, all had one party that was able to form government recurrently through the twentieth century in spite of losing several elections.

These cases highlight the impressive endurance of some dominant parties, even surviving a transition to democracy, the introduction of multi-party politics, and electoral defeat. Understanding this long-lasting popularity is of importance, given the representation problems that scholars have associated with one-party rule. Why do voters flock back to a formerly overpowering party they had finally routed a few years earlier? And what does such a victory say about voters' intentions and preferences? Of particular relevance is whether voters wished a return to authoritarian rule, or whether they had other motives in mind.

Insights may come from recent events in Mexico, where one party dominated politics for seven decades until it was finally voted out in 2000 – only to achieve a major comeback twelve years later. The return to power of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI, *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*) has raised concerns about the consolidation of Mexico's democracy, given the party's dictatorial past. As I will describe later, the actual reasons for its landslide victory on July 1, 2012 remain disputed. Critics of the PRI and losers of the election have claimed the results are entirely due to fraud and media manipulation (Wood 2012). However, as separate work has argued, while cheating certainly did occur, it does not seem nearly as significant as some of the losing candidates have claimed (Serra 2013b). In fact, millions of Mexicans who had previously voted for other parties supported the PRI candidate on this occasion, granting him a victory margin that is too large to be attributed to vote-buying alone. Convincing explanations of the PRI's victory need to inquire who these voters were and what their reasoning was.

It is tempting to interpret this vote as an endorsement of autocracy. Such hypothesis would be consistent with ostensibly low levels of support for democracy among Mexican citizens in recent years (Latinobarómetro 2011). Nevertheless, I will argue that voters had other compelling reasons to support the PRI based on competence and experience rather than a desire to

withdraw from democracy. The difference between these two hypotheses matters in our understanding of the Mexican electorate, but also in interpreting the PRI's mandate. The former interpretation implies a mandate for an iron-fist rule, or *mano dura* in Spanish, while the latter interpretation, which is outlined in this paper, implies a mandate for effective governance and economic reform. More broadly, this analysis sheds light on the puzzling examples of dominant parties around the world re-emerging after having been previously repudiated by voters.

In short, the goal of this essay is to identify the most plausible reasons for the PRI's recent support among voters. I start by providing some context for the 2012 election. Then the paper discusses the most likely factors in the PRI's victory and evaluates their significance using available evidence from existing polls, statistical analyses, and expert opinions. I organize these factors in two categories: the weakness of the PRI's rivals and the strength of its campaign assets. The analysis unveils a mandate that is quite different from a return to autocracy. Rather, it seems Mexican voters had reasons to believe the PRI and its presidential candidate were the best option for solving economic and security problems. Accordingly, while more research is needed to fully understand the endurance of dominant parties, I will suggest in the conclusion that voters do not necessarily support them on account of their domineering reputations, but rather based on their governing experience.

Context of the PRI's Return

The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) used to control politics at every level, including all branches of government and nearly all national and sub-national offices in Mexico, thus conforming for many years to Sartori's definition of a *hegemonic party* (Sartori 1976). The PRI's reign lasted for seventy-one uninterrupted years until 2000, making it the longest-serving party in the world. The party's endurance can partially be explained by its popularity. The PRI has traditionally embodied the ideals of the Mexican Revolution such as empowering landless peasants and urban workers while integrating indigenous communities. Its nationalistic ideology, which led, for example, to the expropriation of the oil industry from foreign companies, has always resonated with large sectors of the population. The party's long tenure produced significant achievements such as national unity, the creation of lasting institutions, and several decades of robust economic growth. Importantly, the PRI oversaw a period of remarkable peace compared to other regimes throughout Latin America suffering guerrilla warfare and bloody repression. As I will argue in subsequent sections, nostalgia for an era of effective gov-

ernance seems to have loomed large in the minds of many voters who supported the PRI in 2012.

However, one-party rule also led to disappointments. The PRI steadily lost credibility as a governing institution since the seventies. Resentment about authoritarian rule grew deeper as patience with corruption and cronyism ran low. Following a series of painful financial crises in 1976, 1982, 1987, and 1994, the PRI could not claim to be a sure promoter of economic development anymore. Losing its reputation for fiscal management cost the party many votes (Magaloni 2006: 151–174). The PRI's vote-getting operation also waned as it lost the ability to deliver patronage jobs and clientelistic resources upon privatizing state-owned firms (Greene 2007: 33–70). Even the PRI's claim to national peace was dented with the Zapatista uprising and high-profile assassinations in 1994 (Wuhs 2008: 19). As a consequence, large numbers of citizens gradually flocked to the opposition camp.

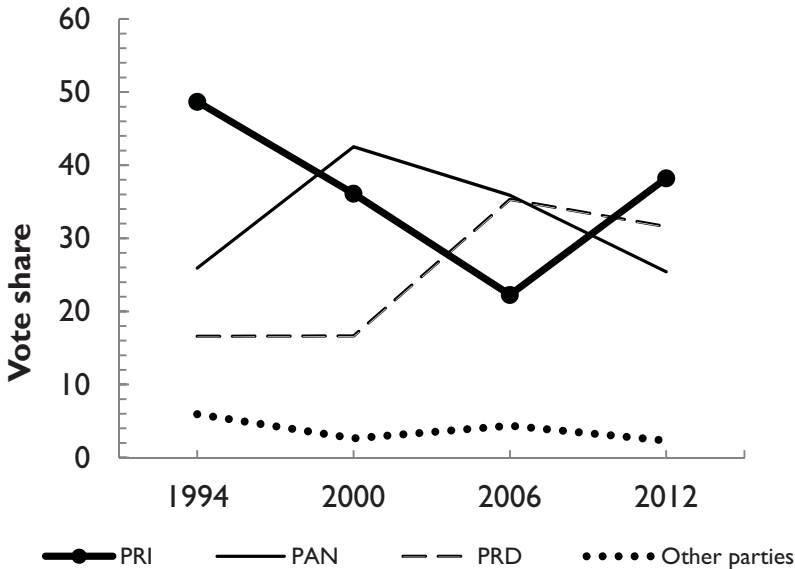
During the PRI's tenure, elections were duly held every six years to renew the Presidency and the Senate, and every three years to renew the Chamber of Deputies, exactly as mandated by the Constitution. Most of these elections were neither fair nor balanced, however. The government made heavy use of clientelism, patronage, and control of the media to boost its nominees while hampering or blocking opposition candidates. Allegations of ballot stuffing and vote-count alterations would surface recurrently. And while accusations of fraud and vote-buying were often exaggerated, as explained by Lehoucq (2003), opposition parties were clearly competing in unfavorable conditions. Nevertheless, two opposition parties, the National Action Party (PAN, *Partido Acción Nacional*) and the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD, *Partido de la Revolución Democrática*), were able to grow into serious organizations with cohesive structures and a nationwide presence.¹ While being located on opposite sides of the ideological spectrum, the PAN on the right and the PRD on the left, both opposition parties agreed on the need for higher levels of democracy. Together they pushed a number of democratizing bills through Congress, most notably creating an autonomous electoral institute, which considerably leveled the playing field (Estévez, Magar, and Rosas 2008).

The PRI was finally unseated in 2000 in the first acceptably equitable and transparent presidential election in modern Mexican history. The winner was the PAN candidate, Vicente Fox, who had generated much enthusiasm as a non-traditional politician. In 2006, the PAN won the presidency again, consigning the PRI to the opposition for a second six-year term. The PAN candidate was Felipe Calderón, who narrowly beat the PRD candidate An-

1 For a more detailed account of this period, see McCann (2012).

drés Manuel López Obrador, with the PRI candidate earning a disastrous third place (Langston 2007). The steep decline in support for the PRI since the nineties can be seen in Figure 1, where the vote for its presidential nominees rapidly decreased, reaching an all-time low in 2006.

Figure 1: The PRI's Decline and Comeback in Presidential Elections



Source: Federal Electoral Institute (IFE).

Hence the PAN had the opportunity to govern for twelve consecutive years, with the presumed mandate to democratize politics and modernize the economy further. Transferring power after seven decades of one-party rule generated high expectations – perhaps unrealistically high. To be sure, the Fox and Calderón administrations can claim several important milestones. The PAN changed much of the political culture. Communication with voters became more direct, less formal, less hierarchical, and more frequent. The media became significantly freer from government pressure and influence. And a landmark transparency law was passed in an attempt to reduce corruption and abuse by public servants. On the economic side, policy was characterized by fiscal prudence, macroeconomic stability, and large investments in infrastructure such as housing and highways. In addition, the far-reaching impact of the PAN’s social programs for the poor such as Opor-

tunidades and Seguro Popular has been much lauded by international organizations such as the World Bank and the United Nations. Yet, in spite of these achievements, the PAN failed to meet the expectations with which it came to power. For reasons that I will elaborate throughout the paper, a sense of disappointment with the PAN had permeated the country by the end of its tenure.

The PRI's recovery started to be clearly observed in the 2009 midterm election, where it had an impressive showing: in a 500-member Chamber of Deputies, the PRI increased its number of seats by 133. This assertive comeback was confirmed in the 2012 presidential election.² The main candidates were Enrique Peña Nieto from the PRI, Andrés Manuel López Obrador from the PRD, and Josefina Vázquez Mota from the PAN. Peña Nieto carried the day by winning a solid seven percent plurality over López Obrador and 13 percent over Vázquez Mota. The PRI did well in Congress, too, where it became the largest party in both houses. Local elections were also favorable, such that PRI governors are now twice the number of governors from other parties combined. After twelve years of relative hiatus, this formerly hegemonic party recovered much of its influence by holding the executive, leading the legislature, and dominating subnational politics. Why did voters give the PRI a second chance at ruling the country? I will outline two general answers: the party faced weak rivals and it counted on strong campaign assets.

Weak Rivals

If the PRI won the 2012 presidential election, it was in large part due to faint competition. In this section, I document the main shortcomings of the PAN and PRD campaigns, which, as I will explain in the subsequent section, compounded the several strengths of the PRI campaign.

Frustration with the Economy

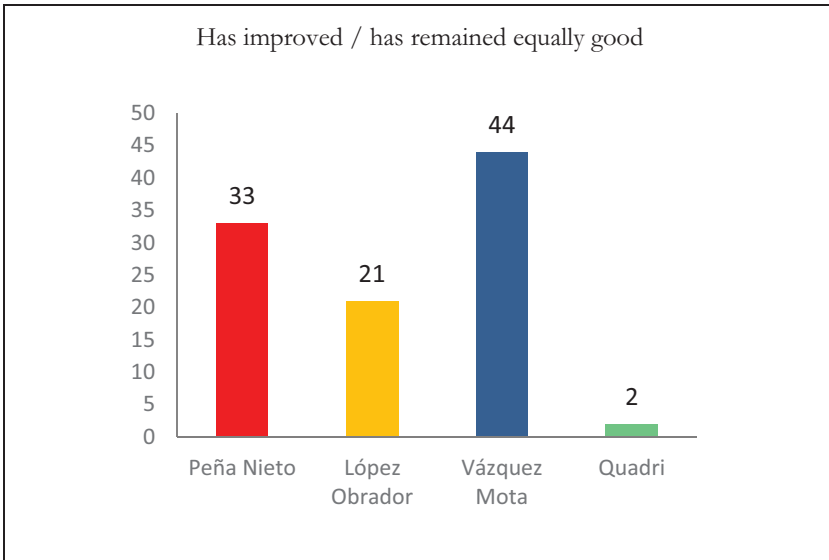
Most Mexicans endured economic hardship in the years previous to the election. The country's growth was dismal while the PAN was in government, averaging less than two percent between 2000 and 2011. Figures on poverty and inequality also remained too high. 2009 was a particularly bad year, not only due to the economic slowdown of its main trading partner, the United States, but also given the effects of the swine flu pandemic on tourism. As a result, GDP decreased by six percent – the worst recession in

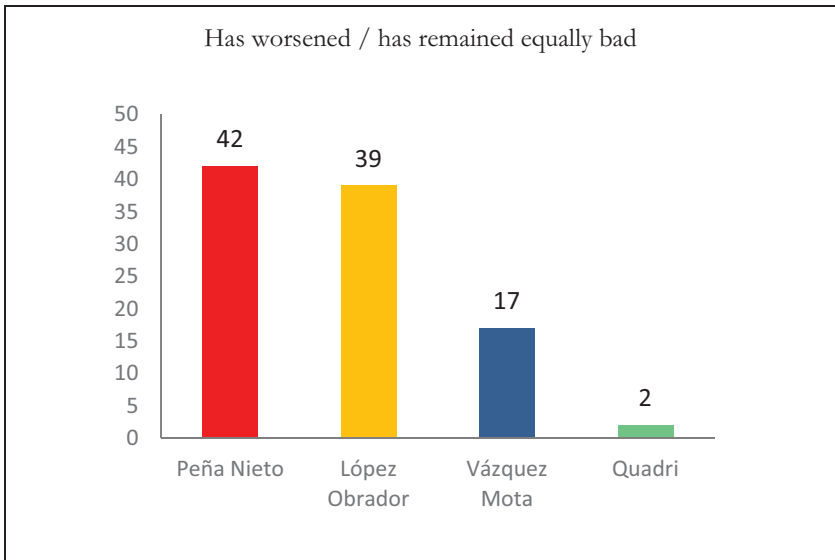
2 For election data see Serra (2013a) and the sources therein.

Latin America. So it should not be a surprise that two-thirds of voters considered the economy to be in bad shape (Beltrán and Cruz 2012a). Stagnation was especially vexing given Calderón’s campaign promises in 2006. Many voted for him, trusting he would honor his slogan of being the “President of employment.” Therefore, any disappointed citizen wishing to vote retrospectively is likely to have punished the PAN.

In fact, this is exactly what polls have found. As shown in Figure 2, Vázquez Mota handily won the vote of those with a positive perception of the economy while coming a distant third among those with a negative perception. In contrast, López Obrador did well among economic pessimists while doing poorly among optimists. Peña Nieto had strong support among both groups, irrespective of economic evaluations.

Figure 2: Vote According to Views on the Country’s Economic Situation





Source: BGC-Excelsior's exit poll, as reported by Beltrán and Cruz (2012a).

The PAN's defeat can thus be attributed in good measure to a bad economy. In this sense, Mexico can be said to have joined the long list of countries, which include Great Britain, Greece, Portugal, and Spain, whose incumbents were booted out in large part as a consequence of the global economic crisis. In the event, the economic vote lost by the PAN was captured by the PRI, which was evaluated by most people as the best party to deal with unemployment (30 percent), followed by the PAN (23 percent) and lastly the PRD (15 percent), according to the Pew Research Center (2012). This was the culmination of the PRI's two-decade-long strategy of marketing itself on the economic dimension to compensate its inevitably poor image on the democracy dimension.

Insecurity and War on Drug Traffickers

Security questions also loomed large in voters' minds. Narcotics-related violence increased sharply since former president Calderón declared war on drug lords by sending the army to patrol cartel-dominated regions. During his administration, the annual number of murders saw a sixfold increase.³ Although public opinion overwhelmingly backed Calderón's strategy of

3 Rising from 2,119 in 2006 to 12,366 in 2011, according to Reforma's *ejecutómetro* available at <<http://gruporeforma.reforma.com/graficoanimado/nacional/ejecutometro2012/>>.

relying on soldiers, there was significant pessimism about the way the war between drug traffickers and the government was going. Asked who was winning, three times more people responded “drug traffickers” (59 percent) than “the government” (29 percent), according to Parametría (2012a).

How might this pessimism have affected vote intentions? A key consideration among voters was identifying the leader most able to bring security back to bearable levels. But the choice was not obvious, as all candidates made fairly similar policy promises such as keeping the army in the streets while improving economic conditions of at-risk youth. The security cleavage seems to have been defined as approval or disapproval of the administration’s results. Vázquez Mota was the easy winner among those who thought the security situation was improving, but she came a distant third among those who thought it was worsening (42 percent versus 19 percent according to Beltrán and Cruz 2012a). On the other hand, López Obrador did poorly among optimists and well among pessimists (22 percent versus 38 percent). Meanwhile, Peña Nieto was able to do well among both types of voters (34 percent and 41 percent respectively). Hence Peña Nieto came across as a safe pair of hands to a larger fraction of Mexicans, perhaps due to memory of more peaceful times when the PRI was in power. Indeed, some voters seemed to privately long for a time when the government was alleged to have made peace pacts with cartels (Camp 2013: 468). These observations coincide with conclusions in Wuhs (2013) that “voters appeared drawn to the longstanding ability of the PRI to maintain order – giving Peña Nieto an early and substantial lead in the polls.”

Vázquez Mota’s Lackluster Campaign

Initially, Vázquez Mota’s nomination as the first female candidate from a major party to run for president generated excitement. She was also the only candidate issued from a primary election. However, her primary bounce did not last long: a number of blunders revealed her team was suffering from mismanagement. In particular, her campaign failed to make a salient enough issue of her gender. As explained by Roderic Camp, Vázquez Mota should have capitalized on the image of women being more honest and compassionate than men. But her attempt at leveraging her advantages over male candidates was ultimately unsuccessful.⁴ Finding her message was also a struggle for her: she attempted to strike an uneasy balance between differentiating herself from a relatively unpopular Calderón while defending the

4 See Camp’s interview given to Gómez Vilchis (2013).

PAN's record in government. In the end, the balance pleased no one, and her polling numbers declined.

Vázquez Mota also suffered from a lack of internal support due to antagonisms within her party, including Calderón's faction, which had supported a different primary candidate. PAN fissures reached their climax when former president Vicente Fox called to vote for the PRI instead of his own party. Fox suggested a vote for Vázquez Mota was wasted in the ultimate goal of preventing an allegedly ominous victory for López Obrador (Johnson 2013). In addition to losing elite support, Vázquez Mota also lost the vote of many PAN sympathizers. An exit poll revealed that having voted for the PRI or the PRD in 2006 was a striking predictor of supporting the same party in 2012, but having voted for the PAN in the previous election did not equally predict a vote for the same party in this election (Moreno 2012). Perhaps from strategic considerations, more than half of previous PAN voters switched to other parties, mainly to the PRI.

López Obrador's Polarizing Reputation

López Obrador was a candidate with baggage. He had previously achieved enormous popularity as a hands-on mayor of Mexico City, and his appeal grew further in 2006 as a presidential candidate with an unyielding discourse in defense of the poor. Perhaps like no other politician in Mexico, López Obrador has been able to articulate the grievances about Mexico's endemic social injustice in a way that resonates with people. This earned him a loyal following, especially among left-wing audiences. But he gradually lost the support of many moderates after organizing street protests for several months in an attempt to invalidate the results of the 2006 election and prevent Calderón from taking office. Upon learning the election results, López Obrador claimed a large-scale fraud had robbed him of his legitimate victory.⁵ He also filed a lawsuit to the electoral tribunal with arguments similar to the ones he would use upon losing the election again in 2012.

Meanwhile, his opponents accused him of being an old-school Latin American populist. They pointed to López Obrador's nationalistic economic program opposing private investment in state industries and proposing to increase tariff protections. His image was not helped by some messianic undertones in his demeanor, such as insisting that large images likening him to Mahatma Gandhi and Jesus Christ be posted at the podiums where he spoke.⁶ This made him an easy target for negative attacks from the media

5 A number of statistical analyses have since challenged López Obrador's fraud accusations (Schedler 2009).

6 Such as in the *Zócalo* on 12 August 2012.

and political rivals. Six years later, 62 percent of Mexicans still remembered the negative slogan from the 2006 campaigns, “López Obrador is a danger for Mexico,” and one third of the population considered the slogan to still be true in 2012 (Parametría 2012c).

Accordingly, López Obrador was facing the biggest challenge in running for the presidency in 2012. The main competitor for the PRD’s nomination was Marcelo Ebrard, his successor at the helm of Mexico’s capital. Ebrard’s more liberal policies and modern style of governing made him a more appealing option to moderate voters, but López Obrador’s stronger support with the base allowed him to win an internal poll among PRD members. Kenneth Greene explains that López Obrador needed to overcome his previous image as a sore loser unwilling to play by democratic rules. He should have used his significant moral standing to champion changes to an imperfect democracy without sounding like someone intending to dispose of institutions and overturn the state.⁷ He also needed to soften his bellicose image, which he did to some degree. To counteract his reputation, López Obrador’s strategy was based on proposing a “Republic of Love,” which consisted in a new rhetoric where he professed to love all his detractors. But he was facing an uphill battle, having entered the presidential race a distant third. While he was eventually able to surpass Vázquez Mota, his polling numbers never came close to those of Peña Nieto who consistently enjoyed a double-digit lead. And although results on election day were much closer than anticipated, López Obrador still lost by 3.3 million votes, corresponding to 6.6 percent.

Strong Campaign Assets

The PRI could not have capitalized on its rivals’ weakness without having some serious merits of its own. The party’s victory, as argued in this section, was also based on a combination of traditional strengths and newfound appeal.

Having the Most Convincing Candidate

In spite of being snubbed by some groups of voters, such as young university students, Peña Nieto was positively regarded by a substantial majority of Mexicans. Young and polished, he was meticulously groomed by some of the most prominent party bigwigs. Indeed, for renovation the PRI had identified a new generation of pragmatic and sophisticated party members,

7 See Greene’s interview given to Gómez Vilchis (2013).

sometimes called the Golden Boys (Wood 2012). Among them was Peña Nieto, who was trained and advised by powerful State of Mexico politicians. At the age of 39, he achieved a landslide victory to become governor of the state with largest share of the population (13 percent) and second-largest GDP (nine percent) in the country. Though some of the facts were later disputed, his administration claimed to have completed hundreds of infrastructure projects, improved health standards, and stabilized security levels while reducing government debt.

In 2012, Peña Nieto campaigned on his record as governor, presenting himself as an able public servant who can be trusted. His campaign slogan was “This is my commitment, and you know I will honor it.” At the same time, he refrained from defining a specific political ideology. In other words, Peña Nieto chose to campaign on his *valence* rather than his *positions* on issues.⁸ This allowed him to take advantage of the PAN’s reputation for incompetence while remaining vague on his policy promises. Such a communication strategy proved to be effective.⁹

Peña Nieto’s credibility was buttressed by competent advisors for eventual cabinet positions. As explained by Duncan Wood, “Peña Nieto’s team sensed the hunger for reform better than the other major campaign teams” (as quoted in Johnson 2013: 19). The international media was also impressed. For example, British news magazine *The Economist* praised Peña Nieto’s “team of bright technocrats from the world’s best universities.” In fact, while regretting the PRI’s authoritarian inclinations, the magazine, which is influential among Mexican elites, chose to endorse Peña Nieto as the best option for Mexico (*The Economist* 2012).

Positive views of Peña Nieto were also common in the Mexican population at large. When voters were asked their opinion in terms of favorable/unfavorable views instead of vote intentions, Peña Nieto still came across as a well-appreciated candidate. A significantly larger proportion said they saw him favorably (56 percent) than those who saw him unfavorably (38 percent). This stands out against the public’s view of Vázquez Mota, which was more negative than positive (Pew Research Center 2012). The contrast is even starker with López Obrador, who generated the lowest

8 See Stokes (1963) for a definition of valence in contrast with ideological positions.

9 Peña Nieto did make campaign gaffes, such as embarrassingly failing to name books that had influenced him. But overall, his demeanor was exceptionally disciplined.

number of positive opinions (34 percent) and the highest number of negative ones (60 percent), even at the end of the campaign season.¹⁰

Critics of Peña Nieto claim that television networks are responsible for manufacturing his positive image. There is indeed much indication that media moguls attempted to favor the PRI in this election, as they had during its hegemonic period (Hughes and Lawson 2004). But as argued in parallel research, the existing evidence suggests the actual effect of this media bias on voters was not as significant as the losing candidates have claimed (Serra 2013b). Therefore Peña Nieto's victory can, at least in part, be attributed to his personal appeal, his governing record, and a credible platform designed by savvy associates.

A Still Popular PRI

The PRI has repeatedly proved to have the best-oiled political machine. With decades as a catch-all party, the PRI has developed the most far-reaching territorial structure of all parties (Langston, Rosas, and Benton 2013). Notably, the PRI still governs more states and municipalities than all the other parties combined, affording it a priceless resource advantage during elections. According to Wuhs (2013), Peña Nieto's victory owed much to his party's expansive territorial structure and its 20 sitting governors. But beyond material resources, the PRI still enjoys genuine enthusiasm in public opinion.

Indeed, the formerly hegemonic party remains popular among a broad cross-section of the population. In contrast with today's legislative gridlock, small government, and internal strife, many older voters miss the PRI times of quick decision-making, generous government subsidies, and national peace. Furthermore, the PRI has cleverly branded itself as a centrist party located between the so-called extreme-left PRD and extreme-right PAN. Perhaps for these reasons, the PRI enjoys the highest rates of party identification, which is a strong predictor of the vote in Mexico. In this election, a full 28 percent of the electorate identified as *Priistas*, while only 19 percent and 16 percent identified as *Panistas* and *Perredistas* respectively (Moreno 2012).

The PRI's experience at governing was an especially prized quality. The scarce reforms of Vicente Fox, regarded by many as a well-intentioned but novice president, highlighted the importance of electing seasoned deal brokers. In this regard, the PRI has always counted on a slew of consummate

10 The fact that at the end of the campaign season Vázquez Mota was more positively regarded than López Obrador, in spite of getting a lower vote, is further indication of strategic voting against her.

politicians with deal-making skills (Flores-Macías 2013). It is also possible that a number of voters relied on their memory (perhaps their biased memory of particularly good periods) to conclude that the PRI had the best chance of reducing violence and stimulating economic growth. So it seems that on this occasion, many were willing to tolerate the PRI's potential for corruption and despotism in exchange for its governing know-how.

Luring the Conservative Vote

These perceived advantages in managing the economy and solving insecurity seem to have secured the conservative vote for Peña Nieto. The wealthy, the old, and those with center-right ideology voted for him copiously. The wealthy are a particularly new constituency. The PRI has not done well in high-income brackets in past elections: in 2006, high earners all but ignored its candidate Roberto Madrazo. A different story occurred six years later, as shown in Figure 3. Peña Nieto did not exactly win the rich citizen's vote, which he lost to López Obrador, but he did make remarkable progress in this demographic. The PRI's vote in the top-income bracket more than doubled in six years, rising from 13 to 33 percent. More generally, the figure below shows the PRI's significant growth in the middle and upper classes – to the detriment of the PAN, which dramatically lost their support in this election.

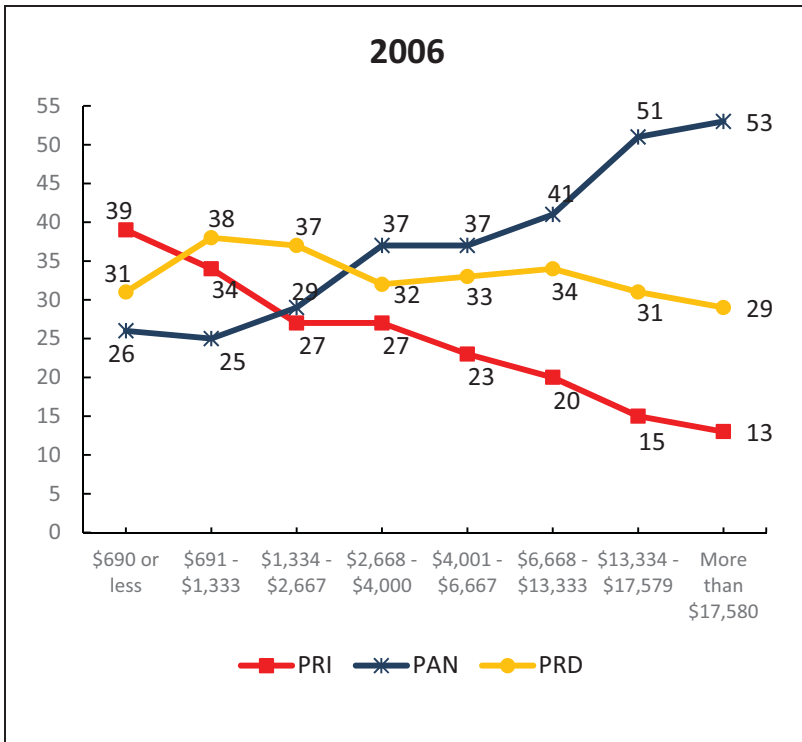
Vote by age is also interesting to look at. Before the election, it was often assumed that younger voters would be the most susceptible to supporting the PRI due to them not remembering autocracy and the monetary crises of the 1980s and 1990s. According to this common hypothesis, youngsters should have been more inclined to vote for the PRI than their parents, who fought for democracy. But data shows otherwise. In fact, Peña Nieto's vote *increased* with age.¹¹ His largest victory margin was among the elderly, seizing this demographic from the PRD, which had won it six years earlier. He was able to lure the “gray vote” in part by promising to replicate, at the national level, a popular pension plan that López Obrador had pioneered in Mexico City. More generally, there might have been nostalgia in this age group for an era of peace and economic growth under the PRI. So it was not the elders but the youth, especially university students organizing mass rallies, who took it upon themselves to remind the rest of the population of darker sides of the PRI's past.

Another demographic where Peña Nieto did remarkably well is the center-right electorate. Reforma's exit poll divided respondents according to

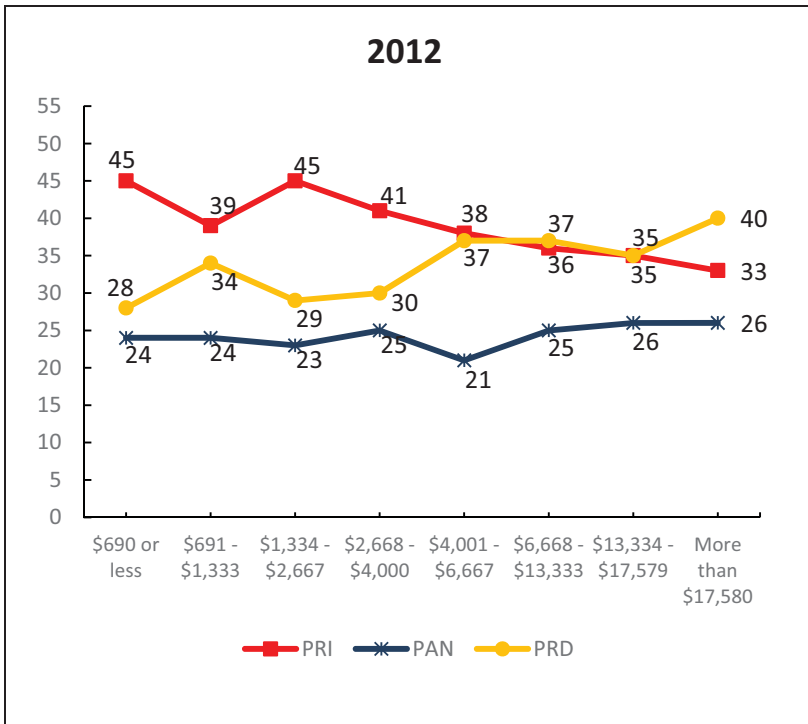
11 Increasing from 31 to 36 to 38 percent across three age categories (Consulta Mitofsky 2012).

their self-classification as leftist, centrist, or rightist. It found that Peña Nieto’s vote increased as voters were more rightist.¹² So while the PRD overwhelmingly won the left-wing vote, Peña Nieto handily won the centrist and the right-wing vote, even displacing the PAN among those with conservative ideologies. Thus, he clearly benefited from the endorsement – and probably much material support – from conservatives. On this occasion, the old, the rich, and right-wingers gave the PRI ample backing.

Figure 3: Vote in 2006 and 2012 According to Income Level (Annual Income in USD)



12 Going from 20 percent among leftists to 40 percent among centrists and 50 percent among rightists (Moreno 2012).



Source: Parametría's (2012b) exit poll.

Securing Traditional Constituencies: Peasants and the Poor

The PRI was also able to keep two of its historical bastions: peasants and the poor. PRI candidates have always found particular support in rural communities. Land reform was one of the causes fought for in the Mexican Revolution – and a main achievement of the party. Besides endowing landless farmers with communal plots of land known as *ejidos*, the PRI also spent decades structuring rural communities through corporatist organizations such as the National Peasant Confederation (CNC, Confederación Nacional Campesina). As a result, some rural areas are considered pockets of die-hard *Priísmo* – the so-called *voto duro* in Mexican parlance. Such loyalty was again patent in 2012, when Peña Nieto won the rural vote (44 percent) much more comfortably than the urban vote (37 percent) according to Moreno (2012).

Through economic-assistance programs such as *Solidaridad*, PRI governments also endeavored to mobilize the poor, who have remained surpris-

ingly loyal. As can be seen in Figure 3, the extremely poor are the only category the PRI was able to win in 2006. Six years later, even though Peña Nieto significantly improved the PRI's presence in the middle and upper classes, his vote was still largest among the poor. The PAN has made significant inroads with voters in the lower income brackets since taking power in 2000, but the PRI still commands much of their loyalty. The PRD does not fare particularly well among the poor, as also shown in the figure. This fact is even clearer when looking at precinct data instead of opinion surveys: Díaz Cayeros et al. (2012) found the vote for López Obrador in economically marginalized areas to have been well below that for Peña Nieto and Vázquez Mota. This failure of the left-wing party to recruit the poor is a paradox of Mexican politics – and a pattern that has benefited the PRI.

Conclusions: Why Did Voters Bring the Dominant Party Back?

Some cheating and manipulation of the vote undoubtedly occurred in the 2012 national election in Mexico. In fact, fraud accusations seem more credible than they did in 2006, reinforcing some existing fears of a possible democratic backsliding in the country (Serra 2012). But foul play is unlikely to have been the only or even the main factor behind the remarkable return to power of the PRI. As other research has documented, the PRI certainly engaged in clientelism, illegal financing, and media manipulation, but probably to a lesser extent than was so vocally claimed by its detractors. Furthermore, other parties committed similar offences, which to some degree cancelled the PRI's advantage (Serra 2013b). Public opinion agrees with these statements: even a majority of López Obrador voters considered the election clean compared to those who did not (41 percent versus 29 percent); and the perception of cleanliness is much larger among those who voted for Peña Nieto or Vázquez Mota (Beltrán and Cruz 2012b). Blatant electoral fraud has occurred in Mexico's history and still occurs around the world, but scholars have also proved that many fraud accusations have been consciously exaggerated by the losing candidates (Lehoucq 2003). Fraud allegations during Mexico's 2012 election seem to fall in this latter category.

In fact, the PRI has genuinely enjoyed increasing support in the electorate. Compared to the previous election of 2006, the PRI increased its presidential vote by 16 points while increasing its share in the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies by 15 points and 21 points respectively. These major victories are perplexing, not least given the enthusiasm with which Mexican voters repudiated the PRI in 2000. Corruption and economic mismanagement loomed large in voters' minds when they deserted the PRI. Why did

they give it a new chance at ruling the country twelve years later? Research for this paper revealed a number of plausible reasons. I divided them in two. On one hand, competition was weak. Citizens displayed fatigue with the PAN after twelve years of slow economic growth and rampant insecurity. Disappointment with the incumbent party was compounded by a muddled campaign on behalf of its presidential candidate. Meanwhile, the PRD failed to fully attract independent and undecided voters by nominating an eroded candidate with a polarizing reputation. On the other hand, the PRI ran a strong campaign. Not only does it remain popular due to its governing experience, but it was also able to unify around a charismatic candidate with an apparent image of competence. Confidence on economic and security matters gained the party newfound support among conservative voters, while carefully-cultivated loyalties allowed it to retain traditional bastions among rural and poor voters.

Such conclusions convey a clear mandate for Peña Nieto, namely to produce tangible results by governing effectively. A longing for bold structural reforms is likely to have tilted public opinion toward the ambitious governor and his expert team. This differs from an alternative hypothesis that voters endorsed retreating from democratic practices in favor of vertical decision-making. Reported disappointment with democracy seems consistent with this latter view. But while reaching such a conclusion is tempting, this paper has provided evidence in favor of a different hypothesis based on Mexicans' desire for competent governance.

These observations shed light on the broader phenomenon of formerly dominant parties making a comeback, for which almost no literature exists. The Mexican case suggests that a previously undemocratic party that was expelled by voters may resurge if it can turn its governing experience into an appealing enough asset. It may additionally try shedding a bad reputation by identifying a new generation of young leaders. But success is likely to come from de-emphasizing democratic issues where the party is disadvantaged while introducing the issue of experience and effectiveness into the public debate.¹³ The degree to which these propositions can travel beyond Mexico is a matter of future research. Another future matter is whether dominant parties can abide by a new mandate for competence while consolidating democracy – or whether they will inevitably succumb to despotic instincts from a hegemonic era. In the Mexican case, the PRI's hopes of becoming a dominant party again have been resurrected, so the verdict is still out.

13 Which William Riker called a heresthetical move (as elaborated in Greene 2008).

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Declive y Resurgimiento de un Partido Dominante: Entendiendo el Regreso del PRI en México

Resumen: La dominancia por un partido único puede deteriorar la calidad de la democracia. Sin embargo, sorprendentemente, los votantes a veces apoyan un antiguo partido dominante que anteriormente habían sacado del poder. Como caso importante, este ensayo estudia la victoria del Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) en las elecciones de 2012 en México. ¿Por qué le dieron los votantes una nueva oportunidad de gobernar el país? Se ha demostrado que las acusaciones de fraude son insuficientes, así que esta investigación se concentra en buscar explicaciones electorales. El análisis apunta al cansancio con el partido gobernante; a condiciones económicas y de seguridad insatisfactorias; a campañas poco efectivas de los candidatos tanto del Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) como del Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD); a la popularidad del PRI basada en su experiencia en el gobierno; y a un candidato del PRI convincente que logró asegurar el voto conservador, rural y de bajo ingreso. Esto implica un mandato para que Peña Nieto produzca resultados tangibles sin abandonar la democracia. De manera más general, estas conclusiones ayudan a entender el sorprendente fenómeno de los antiguos partidos hegemónicos que logran volver a ganar elecciones.

Palabras clave: México, campañas, elecciones, partido único, medios de comunicación, fraude, Peña Nieto, PRI