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INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW

This book explains some of the ways in which deteriorating socioeconomic conditions (inequality in particular) and institutional limitations (corruption, electoral exclusion, and a weak rule of law, among others) affect political stability in extremely unequal developing countries, such as Mexico, where democracy is not yet fully consolidated. The present analysis centers on those noninstitutional practices of the political system—or “uncivil” modes of political action—that visibly challenge the coherence and cohesion of authority patterns and limit democratic progress and governability. Such practices include violent political action, massive antigovernment mobilizations, and other major manifestations of popular dissent. These practices are all considered to be “active political factionalism,” and will be referred to here as APF, or, more simply, as “political factionalism.”

The present account identifies two main explanations of political factionalism: (1) economic inequality and other forms of economic exclusion and (2) institutional limitations, primarily electoral exclusion. But which of these variables has a greater impact on political factionalism? How do inequality and electoral exclusion translate into major political conflict in the current era? Who are the main actors involved in this process? What are the specific mechanisms that explain political factionalism in the context of ineffective political/electoral institutions, on the one hand, and economic inequality, on the other? This book engages these questions and proposes an improved analytical framework to explain how the two main groups of independent variables identified above translate into political factionalism. This account also identifies initial conditions, agent-related factors, other relevant variables, and the main actors involved in major political conflicts or political violence in developing democracies today. Evidence presented here shows that institutional factors are the primary source of APF, while socioeconomic factors are significant but not predominant.
The present effort to understand the phenomenon of political factionalism and its main causes in young and unequal democracies focuses on the study of Mexico in the first six years of the twenty-first century. The year 2000 represents a turning point in terms of political development in Mexico. Vicente Fox's victory in the 2000 presidential elections marked the end of more than 70 years of single-party hegemony and the beginning of a “democratic” regime in this nation. However, Mexican democratic institutions are not yet wholly developed; they still show several limitations and are, in certain cases, quite ineffective. Moreover, Mexico is characterized by subnational variations in democratic institutionalization: the country presents relatively stable democracy at the national level and uneven democracy at the subnational level.

Political and economic inequality are defining features of Mexican society. Indeed, one can talk about the existence of “two Mexicos” within a single nation. Mexico displays two well-defined situations: (1) major political conflict and recurrent manifestations of political violence in the poor, unequal, authoritarian and divided Mexican “South” and (2) political cohesion in a rich, democratic and more equal “North.” In Mexico we can observe a correlation among three relevant factors: (1) deteriorating socioeconomic conditions, including high levels of inequality; (2) institutional limitations, particularly elements of electoral exclusion (fraud, repression, or manipulation of the electoral process); and (3) major political conflict.

The Mexican case shows a relationship between economic exclusion and major political conflict. At the same time, there is a direct correlation between the strength and effectiveness of political (especially electoral) institutions and political cohesion—that is, between electoral exclusion and political factionalism. At first sight, it is unclear what the main cause of active political factionalism in Mexico is, and what specific conditions mediate the occurrence of this phenomenon. Since Mexico features important regional socioeconomic differences, great intrastate and interstate inequalities, as well as subnational variations in democratic institutionalization, a detailed study of separate Mexican states is useful to explain the presence of major political conflict and uncivil modes of political action.

The present research design is based on a subnational rather than a cross-national comparison. It is hypothesized that the relationships between economic/electoral exclusion and political factionalism proposed in subnational comparisons also exist in cross-country comparisons. Hence, in order to understand the processes that generate political factionalism in general—or its absence in the form of political cohesion—and to identify its main causes, this book analyzes and compares two Mexican states: Oaxaca and Nuevo León. These cases represent what is referred to in this book as the “two
**Introduction**

Mexicos”: the poor and divided Mexican South and the rich and more equal Mexican North. Oaxaca is part of the extremely poor, unequal, and still-authoritarian Mexican South that shows particularly high levels of political factionalism. By contrast, the northern state of Nuevo León belongs to the rich, more equal, democratic, and stable Mexico. The analysis of these two cases draws on field research and interviews that both assess the relevant theory and survey the territory for new insights.

**Structure**

*Democracy in “Two Mexicos”* is divided into three parts. The first part presents a theoretical explanation of “political factionalism”, based on other relevant studies and empirical observations. This account is used to generate hypotheses that will be assessed in the two following parts (II and III), which analyze the cases of Oaxaca and Nuevo León in depth.

In order to provide the theoretical framework and methodology used to explain political factionalism in Mexico, the first part consists of two chapters. Chapter 1 describes the phenomenon to be analyzed, identifies the main variables involved, and evaluates relevant analytical frameworks generally utilized to explain uncivil modes of political action in new democracies (e.g., Mexico). Taking into consideration limitations of existing theories, the first chapter develops an alternative theoretical model that illustrates the relationship among economic exclusion, institutional fragility, and political factionalism. This chapter also provides a detailed description of the variables utilized in the study and explains the hypothesized relationships that will be tested. Chapter 2 describes the methodology employed to apply the proposed analytical framework to two case studies—Oaxaca and Nuevo León—that represent what have been called the “two Mexicos.”

The following two parts of *Democracy in “Two Mexicos”* (chapters 3–7) detail two cases. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 in part II examine the case of Oaxaca—a state that shows high levels of political factionalism and represents the poor, authoritarian, and extremely unequal Mexico, while chapters 6 and 7 in part III explain the phenomenon of political cohesion (or the relative absence of political factionalism) in the rich, democratic, and more equal Mexico exemplified by the state of Nuevo León.

In each case study, I present a brief overview of the socioeconomic and political situation in each state in the first six years of the twenty-first century. Subsequently, I assess the relative importance of socioeconomic and institutional factors that cause or prevent major political conflict in each state. In other words, I identify the most significant group of factors that creates political factionalism in Oaxaca and prevents it in Nuevo León. This evaluation is the result of an analysis of elite interviews and data on conflicts in the two states. The purpose of this effort is to identify the main actors,
as well as their means and motivations for either preventing or bringing about political factionalism, and to propose a general explanation of these phenomena.

**Main Findings**

The evidence presented in *Democracy in “Two Mexicos”* confirms the greater relative weight of institutional variables in explaining political factionalism/cohesion in Mexico. In the case of Oaxaca, social demands or redistributive issues were not apparently the major motivations of political factionalism during the first six years of the twenty-first century. Major civil conflict and political violence in the southern state seem to be related more to institutional limitations, and particularly to corruption, electoral exclusion, and a weak rule of law. Similarly, Nuevo León’s case shows a higher relative influence of institutional factors as an explanation for political cohesion and stability. Among the most relevant (informal) institutional factors furthering political stability in Nuevo León were a series of “pacts” (or some sort of “corporatist arrangements”) formed by the main local economic-political-social groups (entrepreneurs, politicians, labor unions, universities, etc.).

These findings suggest that institutional improvements could lessen political violence and popular rebellion, notwithstanding the structural problem of prevailing inequality in certain regions, countries, or states. In fact, the design of effective institutions to properly channel the demands and political preferences of dissident groups appears to be crucial to preserving social peace and political stability/cohesion. Among these institutions, electoral ones seem to be fundamental, and their degree of development and effectiveness generally reflects the weakness or strength of the whole national institutional framework. Despite the key role of institutions, it is important to recognize the relevance of socioeconomic factors—and structural inequality in particular—in any explanation of extra-institutional protest politics and political society manifestations. Even if they are not the main cause of active political factionalism in Oaxaca, deteriorating economic conditions are important contributing factors and, moreover, have been often utilized to justify acts of protest and political violence. Likewise, favorable socioeconomic conditions certainly contributed to generate political cohesion in Nuevo León during the first few years of the twenty-first century.

In sum, the present work assesses the contribution of two major explanatory/independent variables (socioeconomic conditions and institutional strength/weakness) to political factionalism—or, in the case of Nuevo León, political cohesion—and assigns a larger relative weight to institutional considerations. However, it should be noted that the presence of these two main
explanatory variables is a “necessary,” but “not sufficient,” condition to explain major political conflict or explain its absence. One must take into account further variables, as well as agent-related factors, such as (1) the organizational capacities available to rebellious groups—material resources, political opportunities, adequate choices and strategies of political leaders, effective use of communication media, among others and (2) government reactions to popular protest (or the role of the government in the formation of “corporatist arrangements” or economic-political-social “pacts”).

**Important Note**

The present study concludes on December 1, 2006, when Felipe Calderón assumed the Mexican presidency. The political panorama in Mexico has changed substantially since then, particularly as a result of the war on drugs declared by the Mexican government and the escalation of the drug trafficking problem in the country. The sociopolitical situation has particularly changed in the state of Nuevo León. Stability does not characterize the life of this state today. Drug violence has spread all across the country, and has predominantly affected the northern states of the Mexican Republic.

The present analysis does not consider violence provoked by organized crime. The phenomenon studied in this book is quite different and does not have to do with drug trafficking or any other form of transnational organized crime. Hence, the book includes an Epilogue explaining Nuevo León’s current situation derived from the escalation of drug violence and the war on drugs declared by the Mexican government.
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