EVEN BEFORE THE 2006 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION dissolved into a nasty street battle, it was widely perceived as strongly polarized. The two leading candidates, Felipe Calderón of the conservative National Action Party (PAN) and Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the left-wing Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), staked out starkly different positions on key economic issues. Calderón promised continuity with free-market reforms, focusing on investment as the engine of growth. López Obrador argued that the neoliberal strategy would benefit only a few, and he promised to alleviate poverty through state spending on infrastructure and social welfare. Unlike in prior presidential elections where the PAN and PRD candidates downplayed their differences to challenge the dominant PRI with broad pro-democracy appeals, in this first post-transition election, the candidates made their differences clear.

The dust usually settles and even the most polarized campaigns typically yield to institutionalized opposition after Election Day. But in this case, the razor-thin margin of victory for Calderón at just 0.57% cast doubt on the outcome and led to increasing polarization. López Obrador rejected the official results, escalated his confrontation with the state well beyond what most had expected—from marches and blockades of major streets, to efforts to paralyze the Congress and plans to establish a parallel government—and he easily secured the loyal support of top PRD leaders and the active participation of hundreds of thousands of Mexican citizens. Faced with crowds in the capital, flaring tempers, and statements like “to hell with the institutions,” some commentators rang the alarm bell. Was the hard-fought campaign the tip of an iceberg that runs cold and deep between polarized camps in society? Could Mexico’s democratic train be running off the rails, guiding it not toward the station of stable institutions found in the United States and Western Europe but toward the wreckage of instability found in other Latin American nations?

We suggest a more optimistic reading. Although ideological polarization goes well beyond the polemical campaigns of the presidential candidates and extends to the PAN and PRD’s congressional candidates, it does not extend to the voters. The voters were in fact surprisingly immune to campaigns that attempted to draw them into partisan battles, and in the post-electoral period their influence may put the brakes on political conflict. If party elites pay attention to the issue mandates given by their supporters, then they will find ways to avoid legislative gridlock in the 2006–2009 Congress.

Our analysis is based on two unique surveys that give us an extraordinary view of both elite and mass opinion. The first is the Mexico 2006 Candidate and Party Leader Survey of congressional candidates for plurality district races that we conducted in the three weeks leading up to the election. The PAN and PRD generously furnished us with contact information for their candidates, without which we could not have accomplished the study. Unfortunately, the PRI refused to participate. However, prior work shows that although the PRI has a wide range of internal opinion at the elite level, it is relatively centrist in...
the aggregate. Thus, since we are primarily interested in the degree of polarization between the two most distant parties on the left and the right, polling just PRD and PAN candidates fits our need nicely. The second survey is a more ambitious project called the Mexico 2006 Panel Survey that includes nationwide samples of voters at three points in time during the campaign. For this analysis, we use data from the May 2006 pre-electoral wave and the July 2006 post-electoral wave. Since we both participated in the design of the voter and candidate surveys, we were able to use the same questions for candidates and voters, and this correspondence improves our confidence about the findings.

Polarized Congressional Candidates

Congressional candidates from both parties agree on the key problems facing Mexico. When we asked them to name the most important problem, they spontaneously identified “jobs and unemployment” most frequently, followed by “crime and public security.” PRD candidates were more likely to name poverty first, but poverty was still the fourth most frequently cited problem among PAN candidates. Another open-ended question asked candidates to identify the theme they personally emphasized in their congressional campaigns. Again, candidates from both parties named jobs and employment as their principal focus, followed by education, health, and social spending.

Consensus about Mexico’s major problems is where agreement ends. The candidates disagreed so substantially about solutions that they represent distinct worldviews. When we asked whether the government or individuals should be responsible for citizens’ personal economic welfare, 75% of PAN candidates opted for personal responsibility, while 68% of PRD candidates stated that the government should be partly or even fully responsible for citizens’ welfare.

A question about the appropriate size of government generated fascinating responses. We took a risk by constructing a potentially double-barreled question in an attempt to force a trade-off. Specifically, we asked if candidates preferred a government with fewer services and lower taxes or one with more services and higher taxes. Fifty-six percent of PAN candidates opted for a smaller government compared to just 11.7% of PRD candidates. However, only 40% of the PRD candidates openly chose the bigger state/more taxes option. Instead, a high percentage (48.1%) apparently insisted to survey interviewers that they wanted lower taxes and more services. Their position may simply reflect the official position of their presidential candidate that he could pay for his new social programs by cutting government waste.

Yet the spontaneous refusal to recognize a trade-off between spending and taxing despite question wording designed to straitjacket their answers gives us strong evidence of their economic policy leanings. It is also, of course, precisely what had the PAN as well as many domestic and international capital-holders so worried about a López Obrador who appears as radical privatizers out-of-tune with a tepid base. On this point of stretching credibility. Our data paint a different picture. We find general agreement about the amount of disagreement. This means that despite some projection that could complicate good faith negotiations in Congress, the perceptions are not so outlandish that the two delegations should be unable to communicate.

All of this evidence indicates that ideological polarization extends beyond the presidential candidates at least to congressional candidates in the PAN and the PRD who are spread throughout the country. In both parties, legislative candidates were mostly drawn from the local political elite. They had resided in their districts for about thirty years on average, and they were more likely to have served as municipal or state party leaders than national ones. As a result, the differences we document are not limited to a potentially insular Mexico City elite, but represent real, substantive, and widespread ideological differences between these two parties both nationally and locally.

Moderate Voters

Elite polarization on the issues should have sent clear cues to the voters, potentially drawing them into highly charged partisan battles and cementing walls of difference between social groups. But voters by and large did not respond. Even with respect to their own partisan voters, candidates were more extreme on the issues of privatization, abortion, and social welfare. They were even more clearly out-of-step with independents and with the electorate in general. Since candidate-voter comparisons are so easily communicated graphically, we show alignments on four of the main issues in Figure 1.

PAN and PRD candidates endorse very different positions on the question of privatization of the electricity sector, but the voters are clustered fairly close together toward the center and against privatization. This creates a strikingly large distance between PAN candidates who appear as radical privatizers out-of-tune with a tepid base. On this issue, PRD candidates are much closer to the average voter, as well as to their own constituency.
Similar dissonance between candidates and voters appears on the issue of abortion in the case of rape. The PAN is closer to the voters in general, but finds itself on the opposite side of the issue. Perhaps the biggest surprise is that PRD candidates are much more in favor of individual responsibility for citizens’ social welfare than are their own core voters. While PAN candidates are much more in favor of government assistance than their core voters, we would typically expect voters to place more demands on government and for prospective legislators to hold back, knowing the real constraints on government spending. Not only does this not appear to be the case, but the rightward skew in preferences suggests that Calderón’s campaign for jobs may have resonated more broadly than AMLO’s call for poverty alleviation.

We found much more consensus between congressional candidates over the question of commercial relations with the United States, but this consensus put the PRD group in conflict with its presidential candidate and both groups in conflict with the voters. The bigger surprise, however, is that PRD candidates are in fact more in favor of government assistance than their core voters. We would typically expect voters to place more demands on government and for prospective legislators to hold back, knowing the real constraints on government spending. Not only does this not appear to be the case, but the rightward skew in preferences suggests that Calderón’s campaign for jobs may have resonated more broadly than AMLO’s call for poverty alleviation.

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There are important groups of voters who place themselves on the left and the right; yet, by far the largest group is centrist. We make no claims about the particular meaning of “left” and “right” in these data and want to draw attention to the fact that 27.5% of voters either could not place themselves on the scale or responded that they had no position. Nevertheless, those who do identify a position are far less polarized than candidates.

**Conclusion**

Mexico’s political class is deeply divided over ideology and major issues of national importance. These divisions extend beyond the rhetorical campaigns of the presidential candidates and to elites in both parties. Candidates from the PAN combine fiscal and social conservatism, much like Republicans in the United States. They are pro-life, favor privatization of the electricity sector and expanded commercial relations with the United States, and believe that voters are strikingly resilient to ideological overtures by candidates who have tried and failed to “mobilize bias” on the most salient political issues.

Second, the type of representation in government we can expect from PAN and PRD candidates is one of “acting for” rather than “standing for.” Instead of striving to represent the average voter or even their slightly more polarized identified voters, the PAN and PRD seek to lead public opinion on the issues. While these elite divisions give voters clearly distinguished partisan options, they also yield parties that are out-of-step with the electorate and in some sense seek to contravene the public will.

Finally, the lack of severe polarization among the voters makes us cautiously optimistic about the prospects for passing legislation on contentious issues. Although Mexico’s combination of presidentialism with a multi-party Congress could continue to yield the kind of gridlock that plagued the Fox administration, the mandate from the voters would appear to underwrite compromise. Much will depend on legislators’ responsiveness. To be sure, the prohibition on re-election diminishes incentives for constituency representation; however, unless the PAN and PRD can claim the middle ground and prove able custodians of the public will, voters may reject their brand of politics and return to the centrist party that quietly waits out the storm in control of more Mexican governorships than any other party: the PRI.

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**Notes**

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2) Kenneth Greene and Kathleen Bruhn, Co-Principal Investigators. Funding was provided by the Faculty Research Grant, University of Texas at Austin, and the University of California, Santa Barbara. Additional support for Greene’s field research was provided by the Mellon Summer Research Grant.

3) Senior Project Personnel include (in alphabetical order): Andy Baker, Kathleen Bruhn, Roderic Camp, Wayne Cornelius, Jorge Domínguez, Kenneth Greene, Joseph Klesner, Chappell Lawson (Principal Investigator), Beatriz Magaloni, James McCann, Alejandro Moreno (Pollster), Alejandro Poiré, and David Shirk. Funding for the surveys was provided by the National Science Foundation (SES-0517971) and Reforma newspaper. See http://web.mit.edu/polisci/research/mexico06/index.htm. ✹