

## Democratic Transition and Presidential Approval in Mexico

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Can a political transition from a semi-authoritarian regime to a democratic system affect the way in which citizens evaluate the president? Using survey data that include more than 21,000 observations before and after the 2000 presidential election in Mexico, this study shows that the effects of perceptions of crime and corruption after the PRI era are stronger than those of the pre-democratic period. Since the transition, crime and corruption have become more salient, and Mexican citizens have begun to evaluate the president in terms of his determination to address these two problems.

¿Puede una transición democrática cambiar la forma en que los ciudadanos evalúan al presidente? Utilizando encuestas que incluyen en total más de 21,000 observaciones, este estudio muestra que los efectos de la percepción en torno al crimen y la corrupción sobre la aprobación presidencial después del PRI son más fuertes que aquéllos de la etapa pre-democrática. Con la transición, el crimen y la corrupción comienzan a ser más relevantes, y los mexicanos evalúan al presidente a partir de su determinación para resolver ambos problemas.

**Key words:** Mexico, presidential approval, democracy, transition, crime, corruption, autocracy, perceptions, citizens, expectations.

**Palabras clave:** México, aprobación presidencial, democracia, transición, crimen, corrupción, autocracia, percepciones, ciudadanos, expectativas.

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Political institutions affect presidential approval. Citizens have expectations about the government, and the president searches for support by addressing people's main concerns. What determines presidential approval in democratic systems does not necessarily explain approval in authoritarian regimes. This article analyzes Mexico and its democratic transition in 2000 and the determinants of presidential approval in two different political contexts: the semi-authoritarian in-transition PRI regime (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, Institutional Revolutionary Party) and the emerging Mexican democracy. This study shows that political behavior does not occur in a vacuum and that the political regime impacts presidential approval. Since the 2000 transition, corruption and crime have become salient and have had stronger effects on citizens' expectations of the president.

This research analyzes presidential approval in Mexico before and after the 2000 presidential election, the turning point of the democratic transition. It covers three presidents: Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994), Ernesto Zedillo (1994–2000), and Vicente Fox (2000–2006). Unfortunately, including observations for every year is not possible. During the Salinas and Zedillo tenures, the public's perception of economic issues was not regularly surveyed. In the case of Fox, in 2006, questions about citizens' perceptions of crime and corruption were not included in the surveys. Therefore, the article includes observations for one year of Salinas's tenure (1994), two of Zedillo's (1995 and 2000), and five of Fox's (2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005). Two research questions lead the analysis: How different are the determinants of presidential approval in two different political contexts, the semi-authoritarian PRI regime and the emerging Mexican democracy? Why are the determinants of presidential approval in Mexico different after the 2000 transition?

As a case study, Mexico provides an opportunity to examine how citizens evaluate the president in two different political contexts—before and after the 2000 democratic transition. Analyzing presidential approval after democratization takes place, it is possible to understand the process of a democratic consolidation. Citizens' support for the president may be a key determinant for the consolidation of a new democracy. A popular president may be able to implement the necessary policies to strengthen the emerging democratic regime because he or she is in a better position to bargain with congress.

The main proposition in this article is that after the 2000 democratic transition issues such as crime and corruption became relevant and have stronger effects when citizens evaluate the president. George Edwards states that “for an issue to have a significant influence on evaluations of the president, it must be salient to people and people must evaluate the president in terms of his performance regarding it” (1995, 108). There-

fore, the popular salience of issues directly affects the public's evaluation of the president. In the case of Mexico, empirical evidence reveals that citizens strongly associate democracy with combating corruption and crime. In 1998, two years before the transition, 42 percent of the Mexican people believed that corruption had been the major obstacle to democracy in Mexico. In the same year, 31 percent considered combating crime the main task of democracy (Camp 2001, 125). These findings suggest that during the PRI regime Mexicans thought that the incumbent party did not consider anticorruption and anticrime policies as central issues to staying in power. They viewed the PRI government as a synonym of corruption itself and the PRI presidents' anticrime policies as inefficient. In contrast, after the 2000 presidential election and with the emergence of a new democratic system, voters have begun to associate strongly issues such as corruption and crime when they evaluate the president (Camp 2001, 127). The main theoretical implication of this article is that democratization can affect citizens' expectations about the responsiveness of the government. In an emerging democracy, political issues become relevant. Voters consider that the new democratically elected president must be worried about people's main concerns because keeping citizens satisfied by the implementation of the government's policies is the best way to get political support, which is in contrast to an authoritarian regime that uses manipulation of election results, vote buying, fraud, and clientelism as main strategies to stay in office (Cornelius 2004).

This study is divided as follows: The first section of this article provides background information on the determinants of presidential approval from the perspective of American politics, and a review of the comparative politics literature is offered. The second section examines the context of Mexican politics before the 2000 transition. The third section presents the rationale and hypotheses of this research. The fourth, or method, section explains how data were collected to test the effects of both corruption and crime on presidential approval. The fifth section shows the results of this research. Finally, the conclusion discusses the main findings of this paper.

### **The Literature Review**

In American politics, the economy as the main determinant of presidential approval has been the focus of most scholars (Brody 1991; Fiorina 1981; Kenski 1977; Key 1966; Kiewiet 1983; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992; Rudolph 2003). Citizens' evaluations of the president are quite sensitive to the variation of real economic conditions (Brody 1991; Fiorina 1981; Kenski 1977; Key 1966; Kiewiet 1983). Others argue that cit-

izens' perceptions of the economy and economic issues such as unemployment and inflation affect voters' behavior when they approve of the president (MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimpson 1992; Rudolph 2003). Although many scholars advance interesting and significant insights, they focus their attention on the impact of economic factors and overlook the political context. Some scholars have noticed this limitation in the study of American politics and have argued that how citizens perceive the president is affected not only by the economy but also by political variables. Jeffrey Cohen (2002), Jeffrey Cohen and Richard Powell (2005), Samuel Kernell (1978; 1997), and Charles Ostrom and Denis Simon (1989) state that foreign policies and public activities have strong effects on presidential approval. Other analyses show that media coverage, citizens' trust in the media, and political knowledge can work as the best predictors of presidential approval (Miller and Krosnick 2000; Nadeau et al. 1999). Moreover, political speeches (Ragsdale 1987), political scandals (Newman 2002), political conditions such as divided government, and the president's attributes as a political leader (Mayer 2004; Newman 2002; Thomas, Sigelman, and Baas 1984) may explain the variation of presidential popularity. These studies reveal that both the economy and political variables should be considered as key determinants of presidential approval. The key question for this article is how these two kinds of perspectives—an economic explanation and a political view—can be applied to understanding presidential approval in contexts different than that of American politics.

The empirical evidence suggests that in well-consolidated democracies, contexts similar to the United States, citizens focus their attention on the economy when they approve of the president. Bingham Powell and Guy Whitten (1993) find high unemployment and inflation have substantial effects on presidential approval in three stable democracies: the United States, Great Britain, and Germany. Cohen (2004) argues that in established democracies—Canada, France, Italy, Germany, and the United States—citizens use prospective assessments of the economy when they evaluate the president. Helmut Norpoth's analysis (1994) shows that both the economy and the Falklands War explain the popularity of the Thatcher's government. Jean-Dominique Lafay (1994) states that citizens' perceptions of the economy and economic issues such as unemployment and inflation had strong effects on the French Prime Minister' popularity from 1978 to 1987. The story would not be the same, however, in political contexts different than the United States.

Inspired by the Third Wave of Democratization, empirical investigations on the determinants of presidential approval in new democracies have started to appear only recently. Latin America scholars have found that the political context affects people's perceptions of the ex-

ecutive (Arce 2003; Geddes and Zaller 1989; Gélinau 2007; Gómez-Vilchis 2008). Moisés Arce's analysis (2003) reveals that when Peruvians evaluate the president, they focus their attention on the government's antiguerrilla policies. Barbara Geddes and John Zaller (1989) find that in Brazil those citizens who are most exposed to media effects and who have the least political knowledge are most susceptible to government influence. François Gélinau (2007) explains that in Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela when citizens evaluate the president's party their perceptions of the economy matter. However, those effects are restricted by the political context when voters can easily identify the president's responsibility. Ricardo Gómez-Vilchis (2008) shows citizens' perceptions of the responsiveness of the political regime affects presidential approval in Mexico.

Empirical data indicate that some of these new Latin American democracies have failed to reduce problems such as crime and corruption (Camp 2001; Hagopian and Mainwaring 2005). First, most Latin American governments have done a poor job of addressing crime and citizen security. El Salvador, Guatemala, and Colombia have among the highest murder rates in the world today, and crime is a serious problem in virtually every major Latin American city (Hagopian and Mainwaring 2005). In the Mexican case, Wayne Cornelius and David Shirk (2007) suggest that democratization coincides with a significant increase in crime rates in the last decades. Second, according to the Transparency International Corruption Score, some of these new Latin American democracies are among the most corrupt nations (Nef 2001).

In the new democracies of Latin America, public tolerance for governmental lack of efficiency in addressing political problems has varied, which has affected the eventual consolidation of the democratic systems. Some analyses show that Latin-American citizens strongly associate political demands as the main duties of democratic regimes (Camp 2001; Klesner 2001). Alejandro Moreno's work (2001, 43) demonstrates that, although in the United States Americans consider elections to be the main task of democracy, in Latin American the story is different. Chileans and Costa Ricans regard addressing crime as the main task of a democratic system. Mexicans' opinions are divided: 33 percent view elections as the main task of democracy, whereas 31 percent consider combating crime the main duty of a democratic government. In relation to corruption, 46 percent of Costa Ricans perceive corruption as the main obstacle for a democratic consolidation, whereas in Chile only 20 percent and in Mexico 42 percent see this as the main obstacle (Clark 2001, 87; Klesner 2001, 127). Moreover, Latin American people strongly associate politicians with corruption. Seventy-five percent of Costa Ricans, 58 percent of Chileans, and 76 percent of Mexicans state that almost all government officials are corrupt and accept bribes (87; 127).

Although corruption and crime have been two of the most salient issues in Mexican politics, on the whole scholars have focused their studies on the economy (Buendía 1996; Domínguez and McCann 1995; Magaloni 2006; Villarreal 1999). In one of the seminal studies of presidential approval in Mexico, Charles Davis and Ronald Langley (1995) reveal that Mexican citizens evaluate the president based on partisan cues and their perceptions of anticorruption policies. This important finding in presidential approval has been ignored in recent analysis because scholars have focused their attention on people's perceptions of economic issues. These studies have significantly improved our understanding of presidential approval in Mexico, yet they ignore the effects of political variables on approval. Jorge Buendía (1996) and Beatriz Magaloni (2006) argue that real variation of economic conditions affect presidential approval in Mexico. Jorge Domínguez and James McCann (1995) and Andrés Villarreal (1999) explain that citizens' assessments of the economy and economic policies have strong effects on people's political opinions. The present analysis tests the impact of both crime and corruption on presidential approval, before and after the Mexican democratic transition.

### **The Context**

A semi-authoritarian regime and an emerging democracy created two different kinds of political imperatives. First, the PRI was in power for more than 70 years using vote buying, fraud, clientelistic policies, and selective repression as its main mechanisms. Second, the new regime considered keeping citizens satisfied was the best way to get political support and stay in office.

The PRI government established close relationships with peasants, organized labor, and the military—the three major sectors of society. The peasant sector endorsed PRI candidates for office in exchange for land distribution. Organized labor expressed support through mass demonstrations, campaign rallies, and voter registration drives in exchange for nonwage benefits such as subsidized food, clothing, housing, healthcare, and transportation. The military endorsed the PRI government in crisis situations through the use of armed repression of dissident groups, counterinsurgency campaigns against rural guerrillas, and the breaking of major labor strikes. In return, the military received regular salary increases and a variety of generous nonwage benefits such as housing, medical care, loans, and subsidized consumer goods (Cornelius and Craig 1991, 85–95). These interchange-relationships of political support and the allocation of private benefits through clientelistic strategies allowed the PRI to stay in office.

The PRI succeeded in attending to most demands. Between 1940

and 1960, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) more than tripled, and during the 1960s, Mexico achieved a solid per capita growth rate averaging 3.3 percent per year. That came to be known as the “Mexican miracle,” an exemplary combination of economic progress and political stability within the developing world (Cornelius and Craig 1991, 90). However, the situation began to change in the early 1980s. In 1981, the expansion of the public sector was threatened by a decline in oil prices, a dramatic increase in the interest rates on the loans that Mexico had used to fuel its growth, and increasing signs of runaway inflation. The economy went into a tailspin. Annual production per capita declined by 2.9 percent, the deficit reached 16.9 percent of the GDP, prices increased by almost 60 percent per annum, and President López Portillo devalued the peso (Centeno 1999, 189). As a consequence, the PRI regime had difficulty maintaining its political support. Because of the erosion of the PRI’s support, the opposition was able to advance through electoral reforms (1977, 1986, 1990, 1994, and 1997) (Becerra, Salazar, and Woldenberg 2000, 11–63), creating convenient conditions for democracy. The opposition favored the context for a different kind of political regime, and citizens did not see the PRI as the best choice for their demands.

In 1994, opposition parties jointly controlled 11 percent of 32 gubernatorial posts, 40 percent of the seats in the national Chamber of Deputies, and 26 percent of the Senate positions. In June 2000, just weeks before the election, opposition parties controlled 34 percent of governorships, 52 percent of deputy positions, and 41 percent of senate seats (Camp 2004, 28; Domínguez 2004, 336). Even the PRI contributed to establishing a positive atmosphere for democracy. In the 2000 presidential election, its supporters established an open primary system for nominating the 2000 PRI’s presidential candidate, breaking the tradition in which the outgoing president had the right to handpick the presidential candidate (Lawson 2004, 3).

The 2000 presidential election was framed as being about “change.” The salience of “change” as a national issue in Mexican politics in the 2000 presidential elections raised Mexican citizens’ expectations about the determination of the next president to address not only economic but also political problems. All candidates, including the PRI candidate (Francisco Labastida), accepted this framing. The PAN presidential campaign (candidate Vicente Fox) identified democracy in terms of change, meaning alternation in power, and distinguished its candidate as the only one capable of beating the PRI. Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the PRD candidate, attempted to identify change as a kind of alternation in policy rather than in party terms. The *Prísta* strategy identified change as an internal reform of the PRI, as its slogan reveals: “A new PRI, closer to you” (Bruhn 2004). If “change” was the most salient issue in the 2000 presi-

dential election, it was natural that Mexican citizens looked for an opposition candidate capable of bringing this change to Mexico. Because of the victory of a non-Priísta presidential candidate after 70 years, the 2000 presidential election was a determinant political event that affected how citizens began to evaluate and view the president.

### **Theory and Hypotheses**

The 2000 electoral process served as a critical election that altered citizens' perceptions of the political regime and the president (Key 1955, 4). Voters began to trust the president and his determination to address corruption, which they considered the main obstacle to democracy (Klesner 2001, 127), and to combat crime, which they viewed as one of the main tasks of a democratic government (125). President Fox's anti-corruption and anticrime policies reinforced this association between an eventual democratic consolidation and the eradication of corruption and crime from Mexican politics. Voters, therefore, began to evaluate the president in terms of his capacity to address these two problems.

The 2000 presidential election significantly affected citizens' perceptions of democracy. Roderic Camp's analysis (2004) reveals that only 40 percent of the people thought that Mexico was a democracy in February 2000, four months before the presidential election; in contrast, in July 2000, some days after the election, 63 percent of the citizens believed that Mexico was a democratic regime.

This political transition encouraged citizens to associate democracy with the eradication of corruption and crime. Figure 1 reveals that before the 2000 election, 42 percent of people considered corruption to be the main obstacle to democracy (Klesner 2001, 127). The PRI government attempted to convince voters that it was able to address these concerns. The evidence showed, however, that citizens did not see these efforts as credible. Moreover, they considered the PRI itself to represent the main symbol of corruption. In 1998 during the PRI regime, 76 percent of Mexicans perceived that most government officials were corrupt and accepted bribes (128). Stories of Mexican politicians and their "vulnerability" to corruption explain why Mexican people strongly associate corruption with politics and mainly with the PRI. In 1982, Arturo Durazo Moreno, head of the Police Department and transit of Mexico City, was arrested and accused of illegal acquisition of nearly 30 million dollars. In May 1987, Jorge Diaz Serrano, former head of the Mexican state oil monopoly Pemex (*Petróleos Mexicanos*), was sentenced to ten years in jail on charges of personally enriching himself during his tenure (Agustín 1990).

Data indicating that citizens associated crime with the PRI do not exist. However, the empirical evidence suggests that before the 2000 tran-



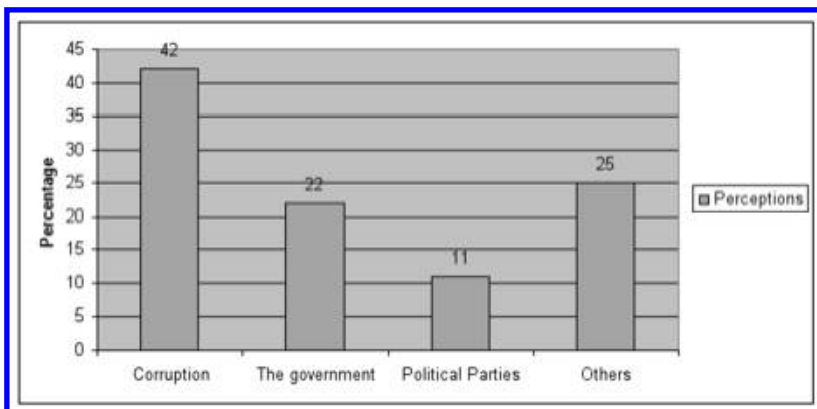


Figure 1: Leading Obstacles to Achieving Democracy in Mexico

Source: Hewlett Foundation/MORI *Internacional*, 1998 (Klesner 2001, 127).

The question asked was: “In your opinion, what has been the major obstacle to democracy in this country?”

sition, voters considered the incumbent party’s anticrime policies inefficient or at least that the PRI government did not perceive crime as a central issue to address. Perceptions of combating crime as being the main task of the government increased sharply from 2 percent in 1995 to almost 20 percent in 2000 (*Banco de Información para la Investigación Aplicada en Ciencias Sociales*, BIIACS, The Information Bank for Applied Research in Social Science, [www.biiacs.cide.edu](http://www.biiacs.cide.edu)). Therefore, the empirical evidence indicates that before the 2000 transition the incumbent party, the PRI, was not successful in developing efficient anticrime policies in Mexico, while, at the same time, Mexican citizens regarded crime as a central issue for the government to face (Klesner 2001, 125). Figure 2 reveals that to Mexicans combating crime, at 31 percent, is almost as important as electing political leaders, at 33 percent.

This association between democracy and citizens’ political demands, i.e., the necessity of efficient anticorruption and anticrime policies, was strengthened after the transition. During his tenure, Fox made battling corruption and crime two priorities of his administration. He attempted to send credible signals of his determination to address people’s concerns—the eradication of corruption and crime from Mexican society.

In relation to anticorruption policies, the vision of the kind of government President Fox aimed to achieve is summarized in the following statement: “The challenge is to forge a good government that is competitive, transparent, honest, participative and proactive, that works better, costs less and generates more benefits to society” (Pérez 2004, 2).

Citizens had high expectations for Fox’s anticorruption plans. They

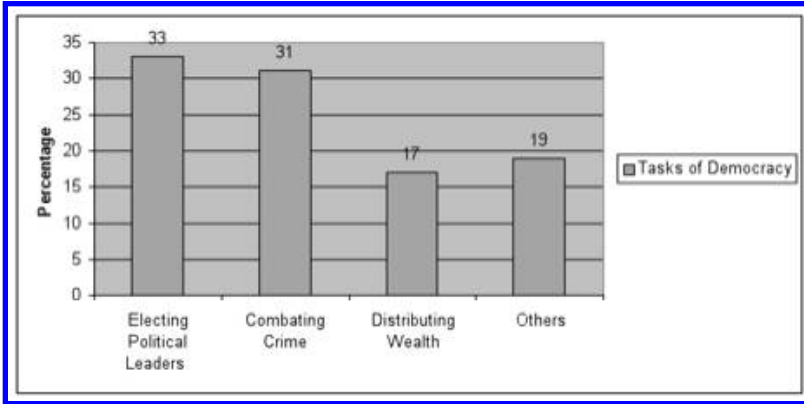


Figure 2: Citizens' Perceptions of the Main Tasks of Democracy in Mexico (1998)

Source: Hewlett Foundation/MORI *Internacional*, 1998 (Camp 2001)

thought the new President was determined to implement reforms in public policy agendas for telecommunications, energy, taxation, and reducing corruption. Fox's anticorruption strategy attempted to implement extensive changes that integrated a range of agencies and initiatives (Morris 2001). It primarily centered around the creation and the work of the *Comisión Intersecretarial para la Transparencia y el Combate a la Corrupción* (Inter-Ministerial Commission for the Transparency and the Combat against Corruption) and the *Programa Nacional para la Transparencia y contra la Corrupción* (National Program for the Transparency and against Corruption). The former was announced during the presidential inauguration and established by presidential accord. The Inter-Ministerial Commission was composed of eighteen secretaries of state, the Attorney General, and five officials from the office of the presidency. Its purposes were to coordinate policies and actions to combat corruption, strengthen transparency in the federal administration, and conduct annual follow-ups on the programs within various agencies (2001, 7). The National Program embodied the overall strategy and approach of the government in battling corruption. It outlined four objectives: (1) prevent corruption and impunity, (2) control and detect corruption, (3) penalize acts of corruption and impunity, and (4) gain the involvement of society. The program delineated a series of measures and strategic policies to be implemented in each agency of the federal administration (9).

After the transition, Fox sent clear signals of his effort to address crime. With this strategy, Fox's government reinforced the relationship

between democracy and anticrime policies. Fox made battling crime one of the most important goals of his administration. Voters thought that crime levels would be reduced. First, he created the *Secretaría de Seguridad Pública*, SSP (Ministry of Public Security) and the *Policía Federal Preventiva*, PFP (Preventive Federal Police) to work with the SSP. Then he transformed the *Policía Judicial Federal* (Federal Judicial Police) into the *Agencia Federal de Investigación* (Federal Agency of Investigation). This agency was presented as a modern and efficient police model that would emulate the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in the United States.

The SSP embodied the overall strategy and approach of the government in addressing crime. It outlined these objectives: (1) to develop specific public security policies and to propose initiatives and reforms to reduce crime, (2) to encourage citizen participation in the federal government's plans focused on reducing crime, (3) to set up and monitor the PFP, (4) to create an efficient and new system for the consolidation of crime prevention in Mexico (Morris 2001, 11).

Fox's government sought to implement more efficient anticrime policies by consolidating the PFP, whose main duties were to (1) guarantee social peace, order, and citizens' integrity; (2) participate and help local authorities in reducing delinquency and crime; (3) monitor the application of the law by the local and federal authorities. Fox sent initiatives to Congress to modify the judicial and security systems significantly with the goal to eradicate crime from Mexican society. These reforms also imposed strict punishments against drug trafficking and kidnapping (Morris 2001, 7).

In a political context, characterized by the emergence of a democratic regime after the 2000 election, public opinion strongly supported the President's anticrime and anticorruption strategies, and citizens began to see the Executive branch in a different way. According to Moreno (2009, 42), the 2000 presidential election served as a critical election, defined as one "in which the depth and intensity of electoral involvement are high, in which more or less profound readjustments occur in the relations of power within the community, and in which new and durable electoral groupings are formed" (Key 1955, 4). After the election, when the PRI lost the presidency for the first time, regime cleavage (PRI vs. anti-PRI) started to fade, allowing for a redefinition of left and right positions around other issues of economic and social content (Moreno 1999, 126; 2006, 43). This study extends Moreno's argument. If Moreno is correct, and the 2000 electoral process worked as a "critical election," the election also likely altered perceptions of the president. More precisely, the 2000 transition was a "determinant political event" that modified how citizens viewed the president. People began to eval-



Figure 3: Levels of Trust in the Mexican Presidents during Their First Year of Tenure

Source: BIIACS <http://biiacs-dspace.cide.edu>. The question asked was: "Do you trust in the President when he announces a new policy?"

uate the president differently and had expectations of greater competence in the next president to manage not only economic but also political issues (Magaloni and Poiré 2004).

Fox's anticorruption campaign and anticrime speech encouraged a modernization process of the federal administration, a significant cultural change in favor of legality, and the creation of a more competitive and professional civil service. Addressing citizens' main concerns in such a short time period was difficult and unlikely; however, they considered Fox to be a different and more determined president. As Figure 3 illustrates, the levels of trust in Vicente Fox are clearly higher than those of Salinas and Zedillo after the first year of each man's tenure as president (Gómez-Vilchis 2008, 37).

Citizens expected the president to fix the country and eliminate political problems such as corruption and crime immediately. The empirical evidence shows that they considered corruption to be the main obstacle to an eventual democratic consolidation (Klesner 2001, 127) and combating crime to be one of the main tasks of democracy. Therefore, after the 2000 transition, the relationship between presidential approval and political issues—that is, perceptions of corruption and crime—became stronger because of citizens' expectations about the president's determination to address these concerns. As a result, I thus developed two hypotheses:

H.1. All else being equal, the effect of citizens' perceptions of crime on presidential approval after the 2000 transition should be stronger than

those during the PRI regime. After the 2000 transition, Mexican citizens had more expectations about the new president's determination to address crime. During the 1980s and 1990s, when the PRI remained in office, crime began to increase sharply, and it is likely that before the 2000 election, citizens perceived the incumbent party's anticrime policies as inefficient or at least that the PRI government did not consider crime to be a central issue. In contrast, the Mexican people believed that one of the main tasks of the new democratically elected government was to combat crime (Klesner 2001, 125) and that the new president could eradicate this problem from Mexican politics.

H.2. All else being equal, the effect of citizens' perceptions of corruption on presidential approval after the 2000 transition should be stronger than those during the PRI regime. After the 2000 democratic transition, Mexican citizens had more expectations about the determination of the new, democratically elected president to address corruption in Mexico. Although Mexican people considered the PRI regime to be a main symbol of corruption, they thought the new president could eradicate this problem from Mexican politics. Citizens considered corruption to be the main obstacle to democracy (Klesner 2001, 127).

### **Data and Method**

The ten national surveys on which this study is based were organized by the Mexican Office of the Presidency (MOP), the presidential pollster in Mexico. This office conducts all public opinion research for the Mexican president. Polls are funded by the federal budget through the Office of the President. Surveys are confidential and for governmental use. However, *Asesoría Técnica de la Presidencia de la República* (Technical Consultancy of the Presidency of the Republic) made them public after Salinas and Zedillo finished their tenures. Data from all surveys are now public and available at the BIIACS. The surveys were conducted by Opinion Profesional S.A. de C.V., a private company specializing in policy polling and focus groups. Field workers were not informed of the client's identity; they identified themselves to respondents only as employees of Opinion Profesional.

In total, the surveys contain more than 21,000 household interviews, and 600 telephone interviews from 1994 to 2005. This period covers three different presidents (Carlos Salinas de Gortari, Ernesto Zedillo—both Priísta presidents—and the Panista Vicente Fox). Households were located for interviews through a multistage, stratified, and probability sampling procedure. At each household, an interview lasting approximately forty minutes was conducted with one respondent, who was se-

lected at random, with an about equal proportion of men and women. One poll was for Salinas' presidency (in 1994); two surveys were for Zedillo's presidency (1995 and 2000); and seven surveys were for Fox's administration (2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005). Three surveys were organized in 2001. All the surveys were conducted by the Technical Consultancy of the Presidency of the Republic.

Government-sponsored surveys can sometimes be criticized for asking questions in ways that elicit responses favorable to the president's political objectives. In the surveys organized by the Mexican Office of the Presidency, however, respondents were offered explicit "pro and con" choices on issues, including the president's performance, citizens' view of the political context (corruption and crime), and their perceptions of the economy and economic problems (unemployment and inflation).

An analysis is conducted here, allowing the measurement of the probability that voters approved of the president before and after the transition. This study employs *logic regressions* (those that use nonlinear regression models specifically designed for binary dependent variables). Because a regression with a binary dependent variable  $Y$  models the probability that  $Y = 1$ , it makes sense to adopt a nonlinear formulation that forces the predicted values to be between 0 and 1 (Stock and Watson 2007, 389). The dependent variable is presidential approval, and it can take two values: (1) if citizens approve the president, (0) if this is not the case. Table 1 presents both the operationalization and the codification of the variables. The key explanatory variables are perceptions of crime and corruption. The analysis also includes a series of control variables that have been widely used in prior presidential approval research (Domínguez and McCann 1995, 39; Magaloni 2006, 165; Moreno 2006, 35; 2009, 279; Villarreal 1999, 136): party identification (id) and citizens' perceptions for economic issues (unemployment and inflation). It is not possible to include variables that measure citizens' prospective view of the economy because this kind of question was not regularly included in the surveys. The study uses citizens' perceptions of poverty as a proxy of perceptions of unemployment in the survey conducted in 1995. In that year, Mexican people were affected by the economic crisis. They lost their jobs and the levels of poverty in Mexico significantly increased.

It is expected that when citizens think that either corruption or crime increases, they will disapprove of the way the president is handling his job. Perceptions of rising corruption and crime are negatively associated with presidential approval. Expectations about unemployment and inflation are similar to those of corruption and crime. Citizens punish the president with a low approval rating when they believe that either unemployment or inflation has increased.

**Table 1.** *Explaining Presidential Approval*

<i>Concept</i>	<i>Question</i>	<i>Operationalization and Codification</i>
Dependent Variable: Presidential Approval	Do you approve the way the president is handling his job?	(0) Disapprove (1) Approve
Independent Variables: Perceptions of Rising Crime	Since Salinas (Zedillo or Fox) is president, do you think that crime has increased or decreased in Mexico?	(0) Decreased (1) No change (2) Increased
Perceptions of Rising Corruption	Since Salinas (Zedillo or Fox) is president, do you think that corruption has increased or decreased in Mexico?	(0) Decreased (1) No change (2) Increased
Perceptions of Rising Unemployment	Since Salinas (Zedillo or Fox) is president, do you think that unemployment has increased or decreased in Mexico?	(0) Decreased (1) No change (2) Increased
Perceptions of Rising Inflation	Since Salinas (Zedillo or Fox) is president, do you think that inflation has increased or decreased in Mexico?	(0) Decreased (1) No change (2) Increased
The Country's Economic Situation	Compared with the last year, do you think that the current economic situation of the country is better or worse?	(0) Worse (1) The same (2) Better
Personal Economic Situation	Do you think your personal economic situation is better or worse than a year ago?	(0) Worse (1) The same (2) Better
Partisanship: Three dummy variables: PRI, PAN, and PRD	Do you consider yourself as <i>Prísta</i> , <i>Panista</i> or <i>Perredista</i> ?	PRI = (1) If the voter is <i>Prísta</i> ; (0) if this is not the case. PAN = (1) If the voter is <i>Panista</i> ; (0) if this is not the case. PRD = (1) If the voter is <i>Perredista</i> ; (0) if this is not the case. <i>Independents</i> and small party supporters are part of the reference group.

Note: Most of the original values of the variables were recoded

**Table 2.** *Effects of Perceptions of Crime and Corruption on Presidential Approval in Mexico (Logit Models)*

	1994	1995	2000	2001
Perceptions of Rising Crime	-.12 (.08)	-.006 (.10)	.44 (.33)	-.36*** (.09)
Perceptions of Rising Corruption	-.15** (.06)	-.18** (.08)	-.26* (.15)	-.40*** (.09)
Perceptions of Rising Unemployment	-.38*** (.08)	-.31*** (.1)	-.56* (.33)	-.55*** (.09)
Perceptions of Rising Inflation	-.35*** (.08)	-1.1*** (.1)	-.83*** (.32)	-.63*** (.09)
The Country's Economic Situation	.67*** (.07)	.08 (.1)	.20 (.22)	.78*** (.11)
Personal Economic Situation	.56*** (.06)	.32*** (.1)	.46* (.25)	.57*** (.11)
PRI	2.16*** (.15)	1.02*** (.11)	1.96*** (.72)	-.50*** (.13)
PAN	.01 (.13)	-.23* (.12)	.85 (.68)	.78*** (.15)
PRD	-.75*** (.14)	-.34** (.16)	-.57 (1.03)	-.63*** (.16)
Constant	-1.9*** (.36)	-1.5*** (.29)	-1.2 (.96)	-1.52*** (.31)
N	4,090	2,425	450	3,249
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.38	.17	.32	.35

## Results

Table 2 shows that before the transition, on the whole, economic issues and perceptions of the economy work as good predictors of presidential approval. Except for the variable The County's Economic Situation (1995 and 2000), all these indicators are highly significant before the 2000 transition. In contrast, after the PRI era, these variables lose some explanatory power. This is true of perceptions of unemployment (2003, 2004, and 2005), inflation (2002), and the personal economic situation (2005). This evidence suggests that, although economic issues affect approval before and after the transition, their effects are stronger before the democratic period than after the PRI era. These findings are somewhat consistent with previous studies. Some scholars (Magaloni 2006; Moreno 2009) have showed that, although perceptions of the economy affect political behavior, sometimes this variable is not the best indica-



**Table 2.** (continued)

	2002	2003	2004	2005
Perceptions of Rising Crime	-.62*** (.10)	-.52*** (.22)	-.42*** (.13)	-.42*** (.16)
Perceptions of Rising Corruption	-.22* (.12)	-.71*** (.15)	-.25** (.13)	-.90*** (.15)
Perceptions of Rising Unemployment	-.41*** (.11)	-.13 (.14)	-.13 (.14)	-.17 (.12)
Perceptions of Rising Inflation	.13 (.11)	-.57*** (.21)	-.23* (.12)	-.64*** (.16)
The Country's Economic Situation	1.2*** (.11)	1.05*** (.13)	1.21*** (.14)	.45*** (.16)
Personal Economic Situation	.18* (.10)	.84*** (.15)	.83*** (.13)	.23 (.15)
PRI	-.38*** (.17)	-.82*** (.21)	-.56*** (.19)	-.45* (.24)
PAN	1.5*** (.23)	1.59*** (.25)	.66*** (.23)	.72*** (.22)
PRD	-.17 (.19)	.17 (.27)	-.51** (.25)	-.62*** (.30)
Constant	-1.71*** (.41)	-1.29** (.65)	-1.26*** (.44)	-1.4** (.64)
N	1,761	1,100	1,166	787
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.38	.40	.39	.29

\* $p < .10$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is presidential approval. The models control for socio-demographic indicators but not presented in the table. Some of them are significant.

Source: *BILACS*

tor to predict Mexican citizens' decisions. Magaloni (2006) finds that even during the PRI era, a weak relationship existed between voters' evaluation of the economy and voting behavior. Moreno (2009) shows that people's perceptions of the country's economic situation had null effects on voting behavior in the 2000 election.

Table 2 also illustrates that political issues are better predictors of presidential approval after the transition than before the democratic period. After 2000, perceptions of crime significantly affect approval. In contrast, during the PRI era, crime has trivial effects when voters evaluate the president. In the models shown in Table 2, there appear to be some sizable differences in the coefficient estimates (the independent variables), but a formal nonlinear Wald test is necessary. The test pre-

**Table 3.** *Test of the Hypotheses Comparing the Logit Models in Table 2, Years: 1994, 1995, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005*

Chi <sup>2</sup>	1308.28
Prob > Chi <sup>2</sup>	.0000

Source: *BIIACS*

sented in the analysis follows the instructions of the Stata References Manual 11 (2009). The null hypothesis tested in Table 3 is that the parameters of the models across the time (1994, 1995, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005) are equal. This means the parameters do not have substantial differences. All the independent variables in the models shown in Table 3 are tested simultaneously. The results of Table 3 show that the coefficients of perceptions of crime are higher and stronger after the transition than before the democratic period, and these differences are statistically significant. This finding offers empirical evidence to support the first hypothesis of this study. As H.1 predicts, in a semi-authoritarian regime, voters do not think that combating crime is one of the main concerns of an authoritarian system. On the contrary, citizens strongly associate combating crime as one of the main tasks of the government in an emerging democracy. Thus, after the transition, perceptions of crime have stronger effects on presidential approval than before the democratic period.

The story of corruption is a little different than that of crime. Perceptions of rising corruption are significant even during the PRI era when citizens evaluate the president. However, the effects of these perceptions are, on the whole, stronger after the transition than before the democratic period. Except in 2000, the coefficients of perceptions of corruption are stronger after the 2000 elections. This finding indicates that corruption was a relevant issue for Mexican people even before the democratic transition. The results suggest that Mexican citizens thought that during the PRI era the president could address this problem even though he was a member of the PRI. Some empirical evidence in Mexican politics gives support for this explanation. Miguel de la Madrid (1982–1988), a Priista president created a plan against corruption through his campaign *Renovación Moral*. His successor, Carlos Salinas, developed a plan for restructuring the economy, providing social programs, and attacking corruption in government and some labor unions. Moreover, Charles Davis and Ronald Langley (1995) find that perceptions of corruption have significant effects on presidential approval during the PRI era. Regardless of the real determination of both Priista presidents to address corruption, the findings of this analysis reveal that corruption was a

**Table 4. Isolating the Effects of Perceptions of Crime on Presidential Approval in Mexico (Logit Models)**

	1994	1995	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Perceptions of Rising Crime	-.74*** (.05)	-.55*** (.06)	-1.01*** (.16)	-1.4*** (.05)	-1.46*** (.07)	-1.98*** (.14)	-1.5*** (.08)	-1.53*** (.11)
Constant	.94*** (.04)	-.32*** (.04)	-.84*** (.18)	.05 (.05)	-.62** (.06)	-1.33*** (.13)	-1.2*** (.09)	-1.01*** (.09)
N	4,495	2,939	500	4,125	2,286	1,444	1,389	1,065
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.04	.02	.07	.15	.18	.13	.19	.15

\*p &lt; .10, \*\* p &lt; .05, \*\*\*p &lt; .01.

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is presidential approval. Source: *BIACS*

**Table 5.** *Test of the Hypotheses Comparing the Logit Models in Table 4, Years: 1994, 1995, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005*

Chi <sup>2</sup>	216.59
Prob > Chi <sup>2</sup>	.0000

Source: *BILACS*

relevant issue even when citizens evaluated the president before the 2000 transition.

The key point for this research is that although people's views about corruption affect approval in both periods, these views have stronger effects after the PRI era. Table 3 indicates that these differences are statistically significant. As H.2 predicts, after the 2000 transition, Mexican people believed that a new president, from a party other than the PRI, would eradicate corruption. Thus, after 2000, perceptions of corruption have become more relevant and have had stronger effects on presidential approval.

The effects of party identification can be explained in two different forms: first, the president's party supporters approve of the Executive's performance. Party supporters consider the president to be one of "their team." Therefore, they approve of the way the president is handling his job. Priistas strongly supported the president before the transition, when the PRI remained in office. In 2001, Panistas began to approve of the president after their party won the presidential election. Second, party identification has less explanatory power to clarify the behavior of the opposition's supporters. Priistas always repudiate Vicente Fox, the first non-Priista president. However, Panistas and Perredistas show less aversion to the president when he is not a member of their team. When the PRI was in power, in 1994 and 2000, the variable PAN was not statistically significant. During the period of analysis, the variable PRD did not work as a good predictor of approval in 2000, 2002, and 2003. These unexpected results may illustrate that in a three-party system partisanship follows two different patterns: the president's party supporters approve of the Executive, and the opposition's party supporters either repudiate or like the president. Aversion to the president by opposition party supporters can be explained by the ideological distance between the Executive and the voters; unfortunately, this methodological problem is not overcome in the current study because questions about ideology were not included in the surveys.

In opposition to Table 2 in which all the independent variables are included, Tables 4 and 6 isolate the effects that perceptions of crime and corruption have on presidential approval, respectively. This strategy

**Table 6. Isolating the Effects of Perceptions of Corruption on Presidential Approval in Mexico (Logit Models)**

	1994	1995	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Perceptions of Rising Corruption	-.51*** (.05)	-.63*** (.05)	-.80*** (.10)	-1.46*** (.05)	-1.17*** (.06)	-1.10*** (.10)	-1.26*** (.08)	-1.66*** (.11)
Constant	.98*** (.04)	-.44*** (.04)	-.60*** (.14)	-.003 (.05)	-.35*** (.06)	-.26*** (.07)	-.92*** (.08)	-1.03*** (.09)
N	4,464	2,895	497	4,029	2,279	1,430	1,393	1,064
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.02	.03	.10	.18	.13	.06	.15	.18

\*p &lt; .10, \*\* p &lt; .05, \*\*\*p &lt; .01.

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is presidential approval. Source: *BIIACS*.

**Table 7.** *Test of the Hypotheses Comparing the Logit Models in Table 6, Years: 1994, 1995, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005*

Chi <sup>2</sup>	227.43
Prob > Chi <sup>2</sup>	.0000

Source: *BILACS*.

allows the study to identify a pattern in the relationship between these two variables and presidential approval before and after the transition. Moreover, it is possible to offer a deeper and more precise analysis. Table 4 clarifies the relationship of approval and perceptions of crime across time. The coefficients are clearly higher and stronger after 2000, in some cases, more than the triple (coefficients of 2003 versus those of 1995). Table 5 illustrates that these differences are significant.

Table 6 illustrates with clarity the relationship between approval and perceptions of corruption across the time. The coefficients are higher and stronger after 2000, in some cases more than the double (coefficients of 2005 vs. those of 1995). Table 7 shows that these differences are significant.

### Conclusion

This research has argued that since the 2000 Mexican transition crime and corruption have become more relevant to Mexican voters. In the first case, voters consider combating crime to be one of main tasks of a democracy. In the second, citizens view corruption as the main obstacle to a democratic consolidation. Thus, after the 2000 election, the turning point of the transition, voters began to evaluate the president in terms of his anticorruption and anticrime policies and performance.

The main theoretical goal of this article is to explain how perceptions of crime and corruption affect presidential approval after a democratic transition. The evidence suggests that citizens have expectations about the government, and the president's behavior to address these concerns is restricted by the political regime. As noted, an authoritarian regime uses manipulation of election results, vote buying, fraud, and clientelism as strategies to remain in office. In contrast, in a democratic system, political leaders attempt to keep voters satisfied by implementing efficient policies because this is the best way to get support. In Mexico, after democratization took place, combating crime and corruption became more important, and the political context encouraged citizens to be more critical of the president when they believed either crime or corruption was getting worse. Although Mexican citizens began to eval-

uate the president in terms of his anticorruption and anticrime policies, in the case of corruption, the empirical evidence shows that this issue was important to citizens even before the transition. The result suggests that Mexican voters thought that during the PRI era the president could address this problem even though he was a member of the PRI. De la Madrid (1982–1988) and Salinas (1988–1994), both *Priísta* presidents, attempted to convince public opinion of their determination to reduce corruption in Mexican politics by implementing anticorruption policies.

This analysis reveals that the effects of citizens' perceptions of both crime and corruption in the democratic period are stronger than those during the PRI semi-authoritarian system. Beyond Mexico, this article makes two theoretical contributions to the study of presidential approval in comparative politics. First, political behavior does not occur in a vacuum. The political context affects the way in which citizens evaluate the president. Second, cases such as Mexico reveal that our understanding about emerging democratic systems should be reevaluated. The findings of this article introduce some important topics in the research agenda of Mexican politics: (1) the impact of presidential approval in the policy-making process, (2) political leaders' responsibility for voters' expectations, and (3) the effects of noninstitutional variables for an eventual democratic consolidation.

Most of the existing roll-call voting models in American politics show that popular presidents are more successful than unpopular executives when they bargain with Congress (Canes-Wrone and de Marchi 2002; Edwards 1976; 1977; 1989). In a new democracy such as Mexico, a popular president may be able to implement the necessary changes to strengthen the emerging democratic regime by affecting the policy-making process. A high presidential approval level may increase the probability of legislative support for the president because he is in a better position to bargain with legislators.

President Fox attempted to address crime and corruption with ambitious plans that implemented extensive changes and integrated a range of agencies and initiatives. His goal was to strengthen a significant cultural change in favor of legality. However, only some sectors of the bureaucratic system were affected by his anticorruption plans, and crime levels did not decrease with the implementation of anticrime policies. Why did Fox fail to reduce crime and corruption? Perhaps future presidents should be aware that big problems such as crime and corruption cannot be addressed in a short-time period. To establish a different and new culture against crime and corruption may take years, and the president should explain this situation to his citizens. Fox's promises increased voters' expectations of his determination and capacity to decrease crime and corruption. However, he did not take into account that,

for the implementation of the new policies, it was necessary to obtain other political actors' support (political parties, legislators, state governors, and civil society). In the future, Mexican presidents should avoid offering "magic" results for the solution to complex problems.

Recent studies have suggested that institutional variables may affect a political transition. Party system, electoral rules, and a healthy equilibrium between the Executive and the Legislative powers can work in favor of a democratic transition (Cox and McCubbins 2001; Morgenstern and Nacif 2002; Shugart and Haggard 2001). These studies have significantly improved our understanding of the relationship between institutional variables and the policy-making process, yet they ignore the effects of nonpolitical variables on an eventual democratic consolidation. The empirical evidence of this research indicates that presidential approval can be as important as any institutional variable for the implementation of new policies and initiatives that strengthen an eventual democratic consolidation. This is the lesson that the Mexican case may offer to the literature of comparative politics.

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